Not a Place On The Map- The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 001 - Interview with Amita Handa

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Participant: Amita Handa (AH)

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AM: What were you up to/doing in Toronto when the first conversations about throwing something like Desh were happening?

AH: I don't remember what I was doing in Toronto. I remember it was like the late 80s (maybe 88,89) and I was dating Ian Rashid's brother at the time and this is how it all gets connected. And at that time, he was organizing Khush. He was involved in Khush and then he started talking about Salaam Bombay. I went to the first Salaam Bombay and I think it was in the 519 Community Church Centres in a small room and there was like some samosas. I remember that but I don't remember too much about the content but I remember it being a kind of small gathering. I think Ian was working out between the lines press and he was talking about organizing this kind of what started to grow into Desh Pardesh. At the time there was also the Toronto South Asian review which was another publication and it was the first time I kind of started hearing about these things. At the time probably in my life I think I had started going to university and I started connecting with the Women's Centre at the UofT campus and I met some, like I think at the time I met this woman Baljit who used to be the head of the women's centre and she's not around anymore. And then there was Sharon Fernandez around that time too. And anyway, I met Anita …what's her name it's going to come to me … another woman. And uh they kind of started talking about their experiences. They were very politicized and I wasn't at the time and they were talking about their experiences of racism and I had always saw my experiences as very individual like oh the people at the school didn't like me and there was something was wrong with me and that's just the way people were and they just weren't very nice. And in these conversations with them they were like no Amita don't you understand what you experienced was racism and I'm like what. And they were like we all went through it too and they kind of started talking about their experiences as well. So that was I think the beginnings of the politicization. Because I went to a very white school in Toronto. Very few people, any people of colour in that school. So then anyway Ian and this thing happened-Desh Pardesh. I remember my first Desh Pardesh was very mind shifting for me because a couple of things happened. For one thing in terms of the music. I can't remember if it was the first or second Desh Pardesh but we did invite Dj Ritu down, and she played on the Rivoli on Queen Street. And it was the first time I had been in this kind of mainstream space and heard South Asian music. And I thought it was so bizarre because I had always been to the Rivoli and it was always the king of the white rock and roll place where you go and you drink and suddenly we took over the same place. And I

remember at the end of the night she played Chalte Chalte which was this song my parents used to listen to from this Pakeezah movie. And I remember thinking that up until then my life had been very divided it was like okay you listen to this South Asian stuff at home and once you leave the house you have to recreate yourself and then you're in the white world. And because there were very few allies at the school I went to. I had these two separate lives the South Asian life and then what happened at school. And I remembered in that moment it all came together and I was like oh my god I never would even think I would hear Chalte Chalte like in this mainstream club space. So that was really pivotal. I remember even Desh Pardesh, like a couple of the people, there was this really incredible--it collapsed so many stereotypes I think I had, not only about ourselves, but even people- so many. I remember, for example, and I can't remember his name right now, but he was a South Asian Punjabi taxi driver from British Columbia and he had flown up, but he was also a poet. He sort of talked a lot about his experiences. He was also older at the time. But being a cab driver tied with this whole idea of Desh Pardesh being away from home and trying to create this new sense of home and some of the experiences of racism. And I remember his things really sticking out to me. And then even Pratibha Parmar and some of her stuff. Sunil Gupta who was a photographer. It was a place where you could really begin to explore this idea of identity, which I think was very important to me at the time. Especially because I grew up in this kind of, like my household was very South Asian. A lot of community and cultural expectations and outside of school there was this whole double life right. So I think it was the first time there was this space to be able to talk about this-to talk about what it means to be South Asian. Then all the challenges that came within that Desh Pardesh community, you'd get this leftist political activist that might be talking about racism but might not have that lgbtq or the anti- homophobia lens to it. So it was a constant kind of challenge and I would say there was probably even amongst the organizers the tension that 'okay is this person political enough or not?', but do we want to connect with people who are in the mainstream and also hear from them but then and also shift them along. Like what's the space going to look like? So in that way it was great and I think we also learned a lot about different South Asian communities all over the world. I remember sometimes like in the films I remember there's this one filmmaker. No someone did a little documentary that settled somewhere in the states but that was somewhere near the Mexican border. And how like the rotis became tortillas (chuckle). Like they were just talking about like this whole fusion that was happening in a lot of this South Asian community that also spoke Spanish. And we talked about like I don't know any Jewish South Asians. And a lot of people didn't even know that there was this community of Jewish South Asians that existed. So it was a lot educating ourselves and of connecting with this diasporic South Asian community that we are. So that was really amazing I think and powerful. And in terms of the music so when DJ Ritu came she and I were actually childhood friends.

This was another interesting story so her mom and my mom were really really good friends. But we hadn't connected in years. I guess we lost touch when we were like 6 or 7 or 8 or something. And here she was kind of invited to Desh Pardesh and we reconnected and she said Amita why don't you guys start something here in Toronto. Because in the UK at the time it was like the big Asian explosion or whatever they were describing it as musically. So there was a lot happening but there was nothing happening here. So she took myself and my friend Vinita and we went to,

um, Gerrard street and she bought us these like 4 bhangra tapes, cassette tapes, and she was like here you go like this is what's in right now. And so then my friend Vinita was like let's put in this proposal to CKLN maybe we'll get like this half hour show once a month. Um and then they gave us this 2 hour slot every week. And we're like we only have these 4 cassettes what are we going to do with 2 hours. So that was a very interesting process because we had very little training we only had this one day two, three hour training and then we find out after two months that we have this show and that we're kind of thrown into CKLN. And then shortly, I think after like a couple of shows Vinita told me that she was going to leave to travel.

AM: And this is Vinita..?

AH: Srivastava, eah. So I was like oh my god like how am I going to run this show? And it was so funny cause the first time we went in there they were like okay, you know, there's that, there's a show before you doing their show and they basically sign off and then that's it you're on. And we didn't even know how to use the mics and we didn't know anything. We were like you can't leave us! And there was this woman Marva Jackson, a black woman who used to do a show and she was like no no no okay I'm going to help you guys. And so she stayed for a while and helped us. Then Vinita says well I'm leaving because she got some internship or something. So I was freaking out and so I'd do these shows and literally like my legs would be shaking. I'm like I have like no control, no bodily motor control. And finally I'm like okay I think I have the hang of this cause, right? 'Cause I figured out how to operate the mic and everything. And then I get this, a couple weeks in, and I'd have this terrible headache after because I'd be so stressed out and my sister calls and she's like how's it going. I'm like it's going really good and she's like you know so there's actually been dead air for the past 20 minutes. And I asked her "What are you talking about?" Cause I'm hearing all the music, but apparently it wasn't going out on the radio so I was like "Oh my god". And it's a Saturday afternoon. There's no one there, everyone's gone. So I run out of the, the uh, the DJ booth and I just start running into the washroom 'cause I'm looking for somebody. And there's some guy taking a piss (laughs) and I'm like "You have to help me! It's dead air!" and he's like "Okay, give me a minute!" and he kind of comes and he's trying to help me (both laugh). And he was some programmer who was leaving so he's [inaudible 11:46] the trials and tribulations. So that's how Masala Mix started and at the time the Masala movie had come out, uh Krishna Srinivas made that movie. And that was another very interesting debate, there were so many debates that were happening at the time. So at that time when he made the movie people were like, oh you're a South Asian artist--like that whole issue around art, right? So you're a South Asian artist so therefore every time you produce or create something, it's representing also the Asians. And, you know, that you did this wrong, you did that wrong, or whatever. And he'd be like, "Well, just because I'm South Asian, why do I always have to? I can't stand--I'm producing a piece of art and I can't be representative of everybody in every single concerning community. Just because I'm South Asian why am I upheld to this standard?" So there'd be debates like that. So that was one of the movies we showed at Desh Pardesh one year. Uhm, so we were trying to come up with a name, and we didn't want to use "Masala" because we were like, "hey, it's over used and, just, you know", but we were tired one day. We came up with so many different names like, um, and we were hungry. We came up with

“Chutney Chicks”, “New Kids on the Kabab” (laughs), “The Samosa Sisters”, and then finally we’re like, okay you know what, forget it. We have a deadline and we have to get this in so we say okay, “Masala Mix”. Um, and when we did the show, it was--there was a lot of, um, like I would say there was a lot of sexism that we encountered ‘cause it’s such a male--it still is--a very male dominated scene. And, um, so like you’d have everything from guys going, “Oh, this is how you turn the CD player on” to um, “Here baby, let me show you how to operate this” and they’d come behind you and be like all touchy-feely. So there was always that and then there was just the fact that it’s such a male dominated industry. Every time you’d walk into that space, you’d always be second guessing yourself and like, “Oh my god, can I perform like them?” And I find a lot of male DJs are into the technical, like it’s the scratching and the technical prowess that comes with that. And we were more like, um, “Okay you know [inaudible 14:16], yeah that song makes us feel happy. Let’s play that”. Like we were much more coming from like a, I guess an emotional base, um, in terms of the music. So there was a lot of that and I think, um, eventually that’s why I just said, “Okay, you know what? I’m just going to do my own thing” because every time I have to work with South Asian male DJs, you either get pushed. They take over or like just all the crap. Like, even to this day, I forget until I once in a while go, “okay yeah, maybe I’ll do something with everybody”. And I’m like “Oh my god, I’m not doing this again!” So, there’s a lot of that.

AM: Yeah, and in those-so in those early days, did you start--just to get a bit of timeline-- did you start the radio show before Desh started or you started that after you started organizing Desh? Can you explain a little about that?

AH: Well, the radio show started, I think it was 1991 or 1992. Actually, Vashti always remembers the exact dates so we’ll have to ask her (laughs), but, um, yeah so it started I would say it was a year or two into Desh Pardesh.

AM: Okay, and you, um, so you kind of attended Salaam Toronto--

AH: Yeah.

AM: --You attended the first Desh and then you got--how did you get involved with organizing with Desh?

AH: How did I get involved with Desh Pardesh. So first I went there as an attendee. And then, there was one year, I think Punam was the, what would been -- what would have been that role called at the time? The--

AM: The Coordinator?

AH: The Coordinator, yeah. She was the Coordinator and myself, and Vinita, we were on the organizing committee. So I was involved that one year and then I got re-involved again at Desh Pardesh, I would say--I think I stayed about two years. There was a few times I was involved. So

one was in that capacity, when I sat on the steering committee when Punam was on, and then there was another time where I was asked to curate a youth component to the festival. So I was involved there. Another time I was involved, another year, to do the Women in Writing component. Another time I was actually on the committee again and that was when Alok was on the committee and [inaudible] was on the committee as well. And I want to say that that's when Steve Pereira was the Coordinator. Yeah.

AM: I think Steve and Punam coordinated together at some point?

AH: And then he was, at some point, on his own.

AM: And then he was, at some point on his own, yeah.

AH: Yeah.

AM: As far as I know, yeah. And so, uh, in terms of that moment in Toronto. if you think about the political moment, if you think about the social moment, why do you think there's a need for something like Desh Pardesh.

AH: Well it's funny because now, when it ended, we all--we were all so sick of Desh Pardesh. We were like, "Oh thank god it ended" and now I'm like "Oh my god, we really need Desh Pardesh" (laughs), but so at the time, you know what? I feel for myself in terms of -- community was so important because there was so many -- like it was funny, I think it was, um, who's that prolific writer, South Asian mainstream writer…

AM: Michael Ondaatje?

AH: Yes! Michael Ondaatje. He wrote this book called Running in the Family or something and we used to joke, like, Punam is like, "more like running from the family". Because a lot us, we were also running from our families in some way because either there was expectations around your sexuality or if you were a woman, "Oh you know what are you doing?", "Oh, that's Besharam", "What are you doing?", "Why'd you talk to that person?" This that and the other. So there was all that regulation of sexuality and gender happening. Or there was just some oppressive things that were happening in the family. So we in some ways, I think a lot of us were looking for community. So I think in that way Desh Pardesh really provided that, which was its strength and probably also it's downfall in the end too because, just because it was an alternative community, it didn't mean it wasn't full of power plays. And we kind of had that naive understanding of community. Okay well, because we were all leftist and we were all going to treat each other like, you know, with love and respect. Sometimes there was a lot of bullying happening and it was based on identity and identity politics. So, um, I think it was both its strength and maybe in the end, it's failure, but, um, I think that sense of community is really important. So it's like "okay you know what, I don't fit in my family right now and everybody's judging me whether it's from a class perspective or what I'm doing--what I want to do career-

wise or whether it's sexuality, or whether it's gender. So now I can find some people where I can take some refuge and it can have some of these discussions. And I think it was such a learning curve too. It's because we used to feed off each other's energy in the debates. So you would see-- So okay, sometimes it would be film and like because there would be different components. So there might be a visual component. Maybe it was Visual Arts. Maybe there was a bunch of scholars and there would be a panel discussing. So you would see an academic component. And maybe there would be musicians that were breaking boundaries around what we thought like it meant to be a South Asian performer. I remember this one woman and she was a, um, what's that big instrument that people play?

AM: Is it an Indian instrument or a -- ?

AH: No

AM: Cello? Or a -- upright bass?

AH: Yeah. It was something like that. It was like a cello or yeah one of those. She played like the Indian--I don't know what she played, but she played something like some South Asian number on this thing and you would never put [inaudible 20:54] We always thought in these boxes. You could only play these things, right? And then we see people do these -- Like break that box or.. So I think in so many ways, um, it kept on giving you possibilities because it's like, oh no you don't have to be in that box and I never even realized I had that box until I saw someone doing something different. Um, I think that was also, there's a need. I think it's also in a lot of the ways the middle-class South Asian community had tended to dominate a lot in terms of mainstream society. So you would not, in terms of political voices, I think it was really important to create that space because it wasn't really there.

AM: In terms of a political voice with a social message, or with—

AH: I shouldn't say that because you know what, now that I'm thinking about it. My father was very political. He was involved in a lot of stuff. So maybe this was more for the second generation. So maybe it was for us who had grown up here, right? Because I think my parents, there were pockets, for sure, of political activist, and I don't want to say that we owned that, because we didn't. There was always people who were politically active and resistors, but this was now rooted in the offspring of those people. Not only that, but then sometimes also -- So that's just Toronto-based, but then connecting with what's going on in BC, there was two, three generations of people who had now settled there. So connecting diasporically. So I would say that there was, to me, I think it fulfilled that idea of community. I didn't not have to have any community just because I wanted to think differently.

AM: Mhm, yeah. That makes a lot of sense. And in terms of, you've talked a little bit about the social aspect, the community. That it provided flawed [inaudible] for sure, but a community, and I'm wondering what it was like to start developing - because I gather that you also were a DJ for

some of the parties along with Vinita and maybe others? Is that right?

AH: So what happened is -- so Vinita and myself, so we kind of, we did Masala Mixx and then I think we actually, even before Masala Mixx, so maybe around the same time, there was a Kush party. And someone was like "hey you guys, can you DJ?" I don't know if they know that we had these four cassette tapes from Gerrard St., but whatever. So it was a small little Kush party and we DJ'ed. From then we would get these requests. We started this night called Natyam Nights and it was like a queer party.

AM: Natyam?

AH: Yeah, um, and that was somewhere on Church St.

AM: And what was that like to have that presence on Church St. because I imagine at that time in Toronto.

AH: Yeah! (laughs) It's a whole other scene…

AM: Yeah.

AH: Well, Church St. was… Well in this case it was, we just kind of- I don't remember. We did Natyam Nights a few rotations, it didn't last. Um, but yeah, it was always that again. So either you're dealing with your own South Asian community and there's the whole sexism or you go into the queer community and it was very white. And I remember going--at the time there was a Woman's bar called, it went through different names, so it was called The Rose, it was called Pope Jones after that. It's now folded, but yeah there was a lot of the, um, "do you guys know this is a queer bar? Like you guys know what this is right? No I don't think you guys know. And then when I DJ, well then I kinda started DJ-ing. So Vinita left the DJ scene and then she kind of moved to New York. Then I started DJ-ing women's, I guess kind of like, queer women's parties, but then I stayed away from the Bollywood at that point. And then I started more doing R&B--R&B and reggae, um, yeah and maybe some house and stuff like that. And, um, and so it was kind of mixed South Asian, black, and white. There wasn't a sense that people were going to dance to Bollywood or bhangra. Maybe you could—No, I don't even think you can sneak in a few (laughs), but anyway, so it was very separated. It was Masala Mixx and then I would DJ the women's club scene and then it was mostly – and then at one point myself, Vashti, and another woman started up a night and it was called "Honey Funk". And it was all-women and it was really good, people loved it. It went on for, I don't know, I want to say a year, but the problem was the bar owner. That was another problem. The club owners were either homophobic or just crazy or whatever. We had to shut that down eventually, but, um, so then it became more R&B, reggae, and not Bollywood stuff. Then, I think after that the Desh Pardesh thing, I DJed again and Vashti – let me just try to remember, no – Zara at the time wanted to start DJing. So she came to me and Vashti, "hey I want to start deejaying", so she kind of entered the scene. And after one of the Desh Pardesh parties she said, "Amita, why don't we start a party?" So that's

when we started “Funky Asia”.

AM: --That’s what I was wondering.--

AH: That’s how Funky Asia started. We did it at Church St at the Red Spot at the time, which has gone through many, many names too. I don’t even know what it’s called now. Anyway, so we DJed there and she also used to help out on Masala Mixx as well. And then at one point I was kind of going back, like, in and out of the city. She kind of took over Funky Asia and then that got big and then that went to, um, The Fly. And then she stopped – that folded. About two years passed and, um, maybe longer, at least two years passed. And I had actually just kind of stopped DJ-ing and then through ASAAP, I came in and out of ASAAP too. So at the beginning of the Desh Pardesh, early nineties, I think Punam used to work—was Punam working there? But I used to hang out with Punam and we were on that organizing committee of Desh Pardesh so we would have these meetings and sometimes at ASAAP too. Later on I got a job there actually, in the 2000s.

AM: At ASAAP?

AH: Yeah, as a – with ASAAP, first I’d just hang out there, then (laughs) I became, I was on the board at one point, and then later I became the Education Prevention Coordinator. So I had to do HIV/AIDS educations to seniors, South Asian seniors. That was very interesting. Anyway, so I did that and then I had to – and through that I met Zavari who was also the – I think he was the MSM Outreach worker there. At the time I think he, I don’t know if he had the role that Ron now has, because I know they created a few positions too. I think Zavari was instrumental in starting those. Um, and then there was Mohammed Khan who worked there. So anyway, they approached me one day and they said, why don’t we start up a South Asian night? Because they said there’s nothing happening, and we know you used to DJ, and I feel like we were out at The Rose – No, the Rivoli again, weirdly enough, and we were watching Lal. She was doing something there. (laughs) I don’t know, anyway, so that’s how we were all in one space. And they go, why don’t we start something? We had our first conversation. So we decided, OK, we’ll try. So we came up with the term “Besharam”

AM: I’m just gonna pause… –

AH: (gasp) So we said OK, let’s give it a try. Let’s try Besharam. So we tried to come up with a name for the longest time. And another friend of mine, Sonya Ansari, who, by the way, you should probably interview as well. She said—I don’t know. So we went through so many names, hours of brainstorming, and then somehow she threw out Besharam. And we thought about how, all the negative connotations that we had while we were growing up, but it was always used for that petty stuff like that petty gossip-y stuff that people used to regulate each other with in the community. It was always also related to your—often times, your sexual behavior too, right? So we thought about, well, what’s the real besharam stuff that’s happening. We said no, let’s use this. So actually our first ad was very political. It was interesting because it was kind of like a

slide show and it reminded me of United Colors of Benetton, or something (laughs) and they would do – because there would be these images of war and poverty, and um, different human rights kind of things and it was interspersed with this dance party and there was this picture of Bush. We tried to do this whole thing. We tried to get across this whole idea of what's Besharam, the concept. So we were nervous because The Fly fits a lot of people and those two were new to promotion and I hadn't DJed in a couple of years. We just kept on promoting. We promoted it for about three months and we thought, you know what, we need to get at least 300 people, or 150, or 200 people. Um, and then 700 people showed up. We were like "Oh my god", like, we were shocked. And then, I think it was because there was no other place where you could hear South Asian music, and dance, and party. Then you got so many different, I mean, over the years I think Besharam went through so many incarnations. I mean, for the first few years there was a huge queer contingent that used to come out and partially because of where the location of the Fly is too, um, and there was a lot of [inaudible] and there was a lot of South Asian Trans people, just a lot of, it was very, very mixed. And then, because there was no other place you could kind of hear South Asian music and it was funny because Zavari kept on going, "OK, we have to make this—I want it"—'cause he's like, "Oh all those South Asian parties" 'cause there were other mainstream parties. But, they'd be very snobby and like "what are you wearing?" and "are you wearing the right colour combination or the right …"

AM: --Mm-hm. The 905 kind of parties?

AH: Sizing you up and down kind of thing. So, and they'd always call themselves "the exclusive blah blah blah". He's like, "well, we're going to call ourselves the inclusive," and so then he'd just like, wherever we'd be, he'd be handing out flyers. He'd be handing out them out to cab drivers (laugh). Then we went to this really weird phase where we would start getting all these South Asian taxi drivers and truck drivers, and then we were getting all this crowd from Brampton. All these boys from Brampton and then, you know, you'd have the, again, the trans crowd, and you'd have the drag performers, and you'd have the Sari Queens. It was so mixed.

AM: So people who were coming in from Brampton and stuff, was it mostly queer people or was it people….

AH: NO! Now it was (claps) everybody, right? Um, and you have young, kind of, urban, street South Asian people who live in the downtown area or you have college students, then you'd have the 905. So at one point it was just like, oh wow, there was a thousand people who were coming to this party. It was in the 900s. We'd always do the count and get 900 people. It was crazy (laughs) and then from there, there began to erupt all these politics. So then there was these guys that would come and they'd be pinching, you know, women's asses, and we're like no, that's not okay. They tended to also be, I would say the homophobes were also the ass pinchers, but, you know, I shouldn't make the assumption. Anyway, so then you had homophobes and then you have the ass pinchers. So at one point we're like, okay you know what, we need to – and ASAAP used to do condom outreach there because they also wanted to outreach to all parts of the community. And then at one point we're like we need a policy so we literally, like I'm not

joking, we'd be like "no ass pinching policy" (laughs) and we'd have it up. At one point, like the Sari Queens—and then we said, OK, you have to have 50% of women in your group because it was a lot of groups of guys, like straight guys, showing up. So then the queer men were like, "well what about us?" So then we were like, no, no. This doesn't apply to you guys. It's just the straight guys who have just too much testosterone happening here. And then we're like no ass pinching, and the Sari Queens were like, "no, but we want our asses pinched" and I'm like OK. (laughing) So it was just like really interesting conglomeration of things going on. Okay so, how do you kind of protect everyone's rights in this space, but at the same time everybody has a different take on what that was. Um, so that happened and then we had to move because the club scene changed a lot when the recession hit. We moved further south on Church St. to Courthouse and we lost a lot of the queer community in that move because a lot of people – it was outside of the gay village and they didn't go. And then we moved again. So we—in the first move we made, we started getting a lot of aunties and uncles. It was very, again, very interesting. And then at one point it was intergenerational because there was this one woman I bumped into, like this older auntie, she's like, "Oh, yeah. You're the Besharam girl. I like Besharam, so does my daughter" and then the daughter was like, "but we go on different nights". She was like, "I go one month and my mom goes the other month". And then one time I met this other girl while I was deejaying and she was like, "my whole family's here," so she was like, say, 19 and then her aunt was there, and her mom was there, cousins were there. So that was interesting. And then, now that we've moved to Rivoli its back to kind of a younger, college, street, kinda crowd.

AM: Mm-hm. Well, so many…

AH: Yeah-

AM: It's such an evolutionary thing and like, I mean, you wrote a book—like your dissertation into—a book commenting on the gendered aspect of this scene. Can you tell me a little bit about what you've witnessed over the many years that you've been DJ-ing because it's not just about the music, right? It's about so much. It's about cultural movement.

AH: Well, I think there's so many layers to it, but in the book what I did was looked at –this is part of my PhD dissertation—so I basically kind of interviewed young South Asian women, mostly between the ages of 15, maybe like 13, 14 to 19 and I basically wanted to look at the whole clash between cultures, I guess, narrative, right? And I think what I wanted to do was like, I realized that a lot of young women were having conflict with their parents. So particularly I wanted to interview them, uh, and a lot of it was around cultural expectations and women being the carriers of culture and what that means. But then I think a lot of it was also, I found the way that literature explained young women's experience was either, "oh no, we don't have any problems" because a lot of the South Asian academics were responding to the racism, right? So it's like, "well we don't have any problem" and "our problems are no different" OR "our problems, you guys need to acknowledge the racism", right and locate all of the problem in that. And then the white academics were like "Oh, look at these youth. If they were only—if their parents only assimilated, they wouldn't have the problem," right? So, I think like, what I decided

to do was to kind of look at young women's experience. We got to talk about the dirty laundry because somehow every time we do it feeds into stereotypes so we don't. So I'm like, no let's talk about the dirty laundry, but let's try to do it within an anti-racist perspective, so that's kind of what I looked at. And I did do a chapter too on the music because I found that kind of where in some ways our—the identities that we forge by living in the west and having our parents being like the first generation immigrants and stuff, um, that a lot of it's through the music and a lot of the young women either were in completely white contexts. And they were like, "oh, you know what, it's (inaudible 30:44) music, but I really found a connection to myself or there were enclaves where it was brown schools. So I kind of looked at that too because I found the women who were in the so-called brown where 80% of them were South Asian, they had a very different —like when you'd ask them about racism, it was a very different interpretation of it. It would be very internal, the Hindus versus the Muslims, or the Indo-Caribbeans and then the Indians from the subcontinent, or like how India dominates and other voices are wiped out. Whereas when you ask the women in an all white context, it was very much in relation to the white, right? So, and their cultural esteem was very different. Their cultural esteem was way higher amongst the women who were in the brown. They're like, "ashamed about my culture"? They didn't get that question. Whereas in the other context (Inaudible 41:45). So, in the music piece, we just talked about the fusion part and like how some people—and that's where the fusion music came in to play. People were blending the east and the west because they're kind of like, "well this speaks to me" or "this is who I am" and "I don't just relate to the music my parents listen to, but I do relate to it, but I also relate to this," and that's what I found when I was doing Masala Mixx like a lot of people in the 90s, like all these underground, all these mostly young boys were making their own music in the basements, making their own fusion. They'd be mixing reggae with an Indian film song, or whatever, right? That was pretty amazing too. Again, a lot of that didn't survive though, I think it was because it was taken over by--a lot of the smaller, independent labels were squashed out. Even the community radio had been pushed out, um, and now Bollywood makes it's own remixes, right? So yeah, but I think a lot of that music is about identity and it's very political because even with a Besharam, I would notice that every time I would try to step out of the mould, so they're like, okay this is a Bollywood night. So I would play Tamil music and it's like, "why are you playing this"? and I'm like, "it's just been one song, I'm sure you can handle it" (laughs) or I play soca, or chutney, and they stand there. I'm like, well, you know you could leave if you want. So, this happens all the time and it's like after a while I see how it tends to dominate, right? Because it's like well then, people stop dancing or they are like, "I'm not coming back". Different groups will dominate, right? So that's always a struggle too and I would say definitely now Besharam has kind of become mostly Bollywood, or Bollywood and Bhangra. We always try to infuse the other stuff, but there's always that politic around it.

AM: Mm-hm. I guess I'm wondering because you've been part of, in various ways, you've been part of the DJ scene –

AH: Yeah.

AM: for quite a while now in that particular, kind of area—

AH: Yup.

AM: Um, I'm wondering, because one thing that's been reflected in some of the interviews is, what the changes have been in identity politics from, let's say, late 80s, early 90s to now and how that plays out in Arts and Culture. And I wonder about this—do you think there's some kind of return to a desire for a purity of music? Like, if I want to hear Bollywood, I want to hear Bollywood, or I don't want – because there's all these conversations now about cultural appropriation, which I think are relevant---

AH: Mm-hm

AM: --but sometimes can be limiting in terms of cultural fusion. Do you find that you encounter that in the scene that you're in?

AH: I don't know. I feel like there's always like a close-mindedness about that. I don't know if that's—I feel like in some ways its always been there. And it's hard, right? So like, when you do a big night, like, when you got 500 people plus coming—and this is what I hate about Besharam sometimes—you do end up catering to the majority and it's very frustrating for me. Sometimes I'm like (Amita **sighs)** okay, you know what I just start another night, keep Besharam, fine, but I want to start another night because I want to play everything. And I don't even just want to play South Asian music either. I'm like I want to play soca, I want to play reggae, I want to play R&B, I want to play Tamil music, I want to play, like, you know, something slow, fast—you know—what I liked about Masala Mixx is I could do that because you're not relegated to just dance for one thing. So you can play any different kind of music. Whereas, when you're at a dance club party, first of all you've got (**clapping indicating the speed of the beat**)

AM: You've got to please people.

AH: and you have to do a fast beat, right?

AM: Yeah, I recognize that we have been talking for a while. I don't want to take too much more of your time.

AH: so maybe (inaudible 46:08)?

AM: Yeah, um, I wanted to get to questions of, um—for you, how did Desh Pardesh shape you as a DJ, as a writer, as a--? I mean, you do a lot of different things in the world but, as a person, also in terms of identity, how did it shape you?

AH: I feel like, you know what it's funny, I've been a lot of (inaudible 46:30) Desh Pardesh lately. Um, because you know now I don't feel like I have that—I feel like the community is so

separated. Everybody's off doing their own, kind of, individual thing. And then, I don't know if Toronto's just become this frenetic energy where everyone's so busy. Like, I'm the same thing and then I'm like, I don't feel like there's that community space in the same way. Where you could debate and you could—like I—okay so it's interesting because I do this equity work, right? And actually South Asians are the largest demographic within TDSB, but still there's no politicization of that and there's no discussion of that. And when we talk about racism or antiracism, and there's a lot of work around, like we were looking at the five demographics within the board that aren't—their graduation rates are much lower, right? Um, so say Black students, Middle Eastern, Latino, and Aboriginal and we're kind of like, okay well where are we failing them as a board. So everything's achievement focused in that way. Um, and like, I know that South Asians, they don't manifest. You could be like, friggin' committing suicide in the morning, or (laughs) trying to commit suicide in the morning, but you're still going to get your A's. It's crazy, like I've worked with students like that. And so a lot of the stuff comes out in the mental health as opposed to achievement, but I think I miss having a community where you can debate and discuss like the politics around that and the politics around how the city's changing, the politics around identity and how these things impact us. And I guess, I think in the 90s it was a very different. There was also a sadness because when I think about back then there was – and maybe we were all younger, but there was a belief in change. There was hope with all the marches and we thought, oh yeah we're going to this because we want change and now its like, you know, x amount of years later and if anything I see things backwards since post 9/11 in terms of the Islamophobia, the racism. Just everybody thinks now that in the name of national security, they can say whatever they want. I think a lot of the independent, small businesses and voices have been pushed out, right, by big companies. So that, I think it's just been a complete shift in the landscape. So, and then not having that community discussion on top of it makes it even harder and maybe it's happening, but I'm not connected to it. But I find that—I would say Desh Pardesh shaped me a lot because, um, in terms of my own politicization and probably in terms of like so many things like I probably wouldn't have done Masala Mixx because I wouldn't have met certain people. I wouldn't have ended up doing, you know Funk Asia, or Desh, the Besharam. It all kind of grew out of Desh Pardesh. Um, politics, a lot of the same discussions that we had back then I feel like it's at a one on one level. Like it's very sad. Anyway, but at least I think like there was some support in that sense of community. And of course you find it within your individual friends right? But in terms of an actual showcasing or an event, are you finding that other people feel that way or not?

AM: Yeah, and I want to ask you what you think it would take to revive something like that? Do you think there was a moment for Desh? Do you think there's also a moment now for something like Desh? Could it happen now?

AH: Yeah it could happen, but we must be more spiritually grounded (laughs). I think the thing is, yeah you'd have to do it and you just don't want to—I think there was some toxicity that happened around Desh too, right. (Inaudible 51:10-51:11) grounded. You'd have to make sure. Because, again when you –even though identity politics is important, there's no end to breaking down the identities right? And, um, at some point you've got to find that collective. The things

that you can also agree on, things that can also move towards creating because if it's always like "oh well you don't understand me because you're not A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H", right? Then where's that common ground to create something new. It starts to become divisive. So how do you keep the integrity of those individual voices, but then create something positive? I think that's the challenge.
AM: Absolutely.

AH: Yeah…

AM: Yeah.

AH: And I don't know if there's an easy answer, or maybe people have learned to mix better. You know I don't know.

AM: Well, I wonder, you know, as kind of a final question, um, and I don't think this conversation is over. I'd like to continue this conversation because I think it's something that, on a personal level and also from listening to so many people, I think it's something a lot of people are craving. It's that kind of community.

AH: Yeah.

AM: Um, you talked a little bit, earlier on about, you know, Desh wasn't void of power dynamics.

AH: Yeah. Yeah.

AM: What do you think the lessons are that you learned in terms of working together as a community to keep something sustained and to work through power dynamics. What kinds of lessons did you learn in terms of community organizing through your experiences with Desh that are important principals to work on and how to work through things?

AH: I think the thing is that bullying is bullying regardless of who it comes from, right? So even though you ---

AM: Sorry just one second…

AH: Sure.

AM: It's just saying that storage is almost full, but I think we'll be okay for this part. Go ahead.

AH: Yeah so I think that the problem when we start—is the anti-oppressive framework, right? Um, so it's complicated isn't it because in some ways you have to allow the voices that haven't been heard, you have to give voice, you have to give space, and yet on the other hand, if we just

get lost in that, if I get lost and just, okay, just say I-I don't know, I occupy an identity where the voices will always be cut off. But if I only get focused and if my only focus stays in that, then I think we an also get lost in that. So, um, the lessons: I think one is that we gotta name out when we see toxicity – like a toxic environment (inaudible 54:10) bullying happening, regardless of what the identity is because I think that, um, though the content and the voice is really important, at some point, then delivery is important too. So if its like, oh it doesn't matter how the person's treating another person because they happen to be the most oppressed person in the room, then its problematic. So I think, um, that for one thing. I don't know, it's funny I went to this Aboriginal (inaudible 54:47-54:53) reconciliation.. the Aboriginal educational departments been doing across the entire board and it was their last one yesterday and I hadn't had a chance to go and I wanted to go. And it was really emotional. People were crying and there was.. And they showed a video of this young student who was 15 who was treated in a horrific way by this teacher. Due to which he refused to stand for the national anthem and he was explaining to her why, but she basically locked him in a room and said, "you know what, you're so lucky. You guys were sent to residential schools because…because of that you're even here in the first place"—whatever. It was really awful, right. So everyone who saw it—people were angry and they were like, "what school is this", and "who was this …(inaudible 54:46)", which I kind of agreed to because you can't just let this stuff always slide, right? They said, "well, we're not about disciplinary action". They said this is about reconciliation and it's about, you know, peace and friendship and if we get stuck in the anger, then we'll never build something new. And it was really interesting because I was feeling so Malcolm X, like I'm sick of this shit (claps for emphasis)(laughs). Sometimes you just think some people aren't going to change unless you kind of force them and it made me just think—infused throughout the entire day there was that constant grounding. They started off with the spiritual inaudible 56:35) and they ended off one and it was like "okay, no, but what's our goal here? Our goal is this path (?)". and it made me think like I guess if you're going to do this kind of work, maybe you have to infuse that into it because they said, you know, we could all hold completely different beliefs in this room, you might be an atheist, agnostic, you might be whatever (56:59 just an amalgamation of another???) but we're all (inaudible 57:04) in a circle so, there's no hierarchy there, but they were saying we're we can all agree on we're all human beings and we have to keep on reminding ourselves because all these things can also divide us. So it was, I don't know, it made me think about that. It made me think about—because sometimes we do feel angry with the injustice, right? And it can kind of swallow you. It was a good reminder to me because at this time of year, I get very angry (inaudible 57:33).

AM: Should I stop?

AH: Sure.

AM: Yeah, go ahead.

AH: It's funny because my father used to say this to me. He used to involved in antiracist work and he started getting more involved with spirituality. One day I was talking about how I was

really angry about something that was happening in OISE and I was like anti-racism—or whatever. I don't remember what the issue was actually. He said, you know what Amita, the left will always self-destruct and I thought he was such a sellout for saying this, right? And he goes, you know what because it's always anti-something, anti –what is it for? Unless we have an inner revolution, meaning you do work in your own head, your own grounding, whatever is not done here is going to spill out, right? But I know the queer politics and–

(Shuffling)

AM: okay sorry, you can go on again…oh no, do you have a charger

(More shuffling)

AH: Yeah no, I was going to say that's another thing too right, the queer politics and a safe place to come out. Because that was definitely a part of the community that it provided for me, but then again, there was a lot of—it was another kind of policing that happened. At the time I still identified as bisexual and then it was like okay, at some point—lesbians we're not going to talk to you if you were bisexual. There was all that kind of stuff that started to happen and—whereas, I think it's really important to talk about notions of privilege and all of the differences with identities. But then I think that its just started to become another place then, where you were shunned or just like hiding from your family and then you're coming here and, I don't know, you're shunned or shamed. So, um, but anyways you were saying something that made me think of that. You were talking about… OH! That other people have said the whole thing around…

AM: people being called out—

AH: Yeah!

AM: In public.ways

AH: yeah

AM: in ways that weren't actually necessarily restorative.

AH: Yeah, "you're not brown enough", right? Say there were mixed race people. Again, it became that essentialist identity thing. You're not something enough. So it became like a deficit model, right?

AM: yeah, and I wonder how we transform that. I think some of the successful ways I've seen that transformed is when people are like, "of course our identities are important, but we're actually issues based. We're actually working—what are the issues that we're working with"

AH: Yes, I agree. I think you're right because then there's a common…

AM: There is.

AH: At least we can all agree on this

AM: Mm-hm, and it recognizes that our identities inform the way that we come into these issues, but that we have a common goal. We forget that we have a common goal and we're fighting each other more than we're fighting the bigger system

AH: I know. I think that happens a lot and that used to sadden me too because I would be thinking, okay, you know what, we don't want the times say, the reform party, whatever. I'm like we don't actually need the right wing to destroy us, we need ourselves. Yeah.

AM: Mm-hm. Okay one final question before we go, um, you know you work with young people and so in this generation coming up now, growing up now, and especially teenagers of colour

AH: It's a disaster (laughs)

AM: Is it? I was going to say, do you see any openings, or possibilities, or exciting new things that are happening in particular in terms of the ways that youth are connecting with Arts and Culture and their identity through that.

AH: No, if it's happening, I don't know. No, um well (coughs) what I do—what's very interesting when I go—when we're doing the equity 101 trainings with the youth, we're all products of this society and if you're not getting a different narrative, then you're just getting the narrative that you see on TV, or the music videos, the billboards. And if nobody in the educational system's distrupting that—so if you're sitting there and your teacher's not disrupting that either and everything from the textbook is completely void of anything to do with your history, culture, or anything. And if its there, it's in a negative way. So, what I noticed, which is very interesting is that, there's so many stereotypes—Oh my god—of like, each other. Like, oh black people are like this, and so we play this game where we put different identities on the –so say if you were going to sit on an airplane and you had to choose between these five people, who would you sit beside? So it would be an Iranian woman, a (inaudible 1:03:18) prisoner, a basketball player, you know (inaudible 1:03:22) . and then we'd be like—I'd be like, okay so what's this image of this Iranian woman that comes to mind? And it's always like "oh she's wearing a hijab and she's quiet, she's shy and why might some people not sit there? "Oh, because she might be a terrorist." And then we flip the photo and its like someone completely different from what they're now expecting right. This Iranian woman, travels in space and she's … and this basketball player who's an Asian woman in a wheelchair who won the gold medal for Canada. So it's interesting because then we're the most diverse we've ever been, but the notions we have about each other are so entrenched in these stereotypes because nobody is disrupting them and it keeps getting reinforced every time through the internet, T.V or whatever. So I think

that the more you can give those –a different perspective at least –the critical thinking skills and be like, “Hey I can make up my own mind but its not necessarily what I’m seeing on TV”, and the tools, the artistic tools, for change. I think we would get so much cause there are when you do provide that it’s amazing some of the stuff you see.

AM: Mm-hm

AH: Yeah

AM: Yeah. Is there any last thing you want to say before we stop recording?

AH: I miss Desh and we should try to find a way to do—even if we did start it small, it just starts with one panel discussion on a particular topic.

AM: mm-hm

AH: Or, maybe a film night and maybe followed by a discussion or something like that. I mean that’s how it started back then. I would totally be interested in being involved

AM: Awesome.

[end 1:05:27]

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 003 – Interview with Anjula Gogia

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Anjula Gogia (AG)

Interview Date: 21/10/2014
Interview Location: Conducted at SAVAC Offices in 401 Richmond in Toronto, ON

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AM: Okay so if you could just start by stating your name, the date, and where we're doing the interview.

AG: My name is Anjula Gogia. I go by Anju. It is Tuesday, October 21 and we are doing the interview at the SAVAC offices 401 Richmond Street.

AM: Perfect. Um so can you describe a little bit what role you had with Desh and during what time frame and in what capacity?

AG: Sure I was trying to remember this um leading up to the interview and it's so long ago it's hard to forget. I wasn't involved in the initial few years of Desh I wasn't living in Toronto at the time. I was living in Vancouver and I remember coming to Desh as an artist and last year was at the Euclid Theatre. What year was that? I can't remember. Oh I could probably remember because I was living in Vancouver. It was probably 1991 or 1992 was when I first heard of Desh and first flew to Toronto for it and was incredibly amazed by it. In 1993 I moved to Toronto and I think that was when I probably started to get involved with Desh. I can't remember. Um, the first few years I actually had a very interesting role. I volunteered to coordinate the book table at Desh Pardesh. And I believe I did it for at least one or two years independently. Meaning I came to the offices and I looked up all the people who were involved in that years festival who had written books and I independently contacted the, um, book publishers and the distributors and got the books in and then I staffed the book table for the festival. So, that gave me a very interesting window into the festival because I was there every single day. So that was in a volunteer capacity. And then in 1995 I joined the Toronto Women's Bookstore as a staff person and became full time in 1996 and as part of my work and at the Toronto Women's Bookstore I arranged for a book table during Desh as well on behalf of (inaudible 2:01) the Women's Bookstore who took over the book table. So again, I did all the ordering. Um, by that time I, being in book selling, I ordered a much broader range of books so we staffed the book table for them the next few years. And I believe I got involved on the board of directors in 1996. That maybe was my first year being involved with the board. Or was it my second? It's so hard to remember. But I was involved in the board for 2 years, is what my memory stirs me. Now you probably have the paper work to show that but I believe it was 1996 to 1998. Um, during those years I also hosted one or two of the programs. I remember hosting a clothing night performance

with Shyam Selvadurai and who was reading at the night Amitav Ghosh was reading that was what stood out. And Shyam and I had a really fun time doing it. That was when it was at the Y, the YMCA on Grovner Street. Um so yeah I had a number of different capacities being a volunteer, doing the book table, which gave me a very interesting window to the festival, um, continuing the book table for a number of years in their different venues like the Y and going to Buddies and being on the board.

AM: And kind of during that time I mean you spoke to Amitav Ghosh being part of it. What were some of the sort of highlights for you as someone who was already, I'm guessing as someone sort of working in the literary world in some way.

AG: As of 1996 I was working in the literary world working at the Toronto Women's Bookstore. Some of the highlights for me, oh my gosh there were so many it is so hard to recount them. I think at first it was finding the queer South Asian space. When I started coming as a participant in the early 90s, it was the amazement of having a program that was not just about queer south Asian, I identified as a lesbian then, but a politicized South Asian space. Having grown up in Montreal and Ottawa my whole life, having grown up in a strong south Asian sort of like family that you know revered certain cultures and customs, but a very deep politicized upbringing. To find a politicized south Asian space was the most incredible thing. I mean I can recount various people like Sunera Thobani, who I remember speaking at the Euclid theatre and she just blew me away with like I mean and she still does right? 20 years later. But the way that she spoke about politics, about class, about south Asian issues, in a way that you wouldn't get anywhere else and that was the thing that was always so special about Desh. It wasn't just a south Asian cultural space or a south Asian artistic space. I mean there's many of those all over the country. It was a south Asian, political, artistic space. And the way it blended the art with the activism, with the literary, with the dance, with the music, was outstanding. There remains to this day nothing that could ever replicate that. And so some of the highlights were Sunera Thobani. I mean I made a very dear friend Anu Rima Bannerjee) who um performed at the Euclid Theatre. She does (inaudible) dance. And she performed there and it was incredible the way she merged her dance practice into a political dance practice and a feminist dance practice. Um… Agha Shahid Ali who was a beautiful poet Kashmiri poet who was living in the states. He did readings and workshops when it was at the Y so it must have been, I don't remember the year, maybe1995 96. I can't remember but his poetry blew everyone away and his workshops were packed and it was just so much energy around him. I remember selling out of all his books that year. Um you know Shani moved to reading it was just so many people who were part of the festival that it was more of a combined thing and it was you know being at the book table like people like flocked to get the books. I had so many affairs during it and as part of it you know like that was one of my major relationships came out during Desh and ended during Desh like 2 years later. I mean it was such a sexualized space it was such a politicized space, it was such a fun space, it was such a drama ridden space, you know? Um it was really special there was a project that I got very involved with that came out of Desh called "Rewriting the Script" which was a video that was um a video focusing on families of South Asian queers. And that video came out of a workshop that took place at Desh Pardesh for parents and family members of South Asian queers and out of that

workshop came the genesis of an idea to create a video and so you know I wasn't part of that workshop. Deena Lad, (Dila Sharia?), Farzana Doctor, Arif Noorani, (Ena doua?), 7:03) no I don't think she was part of it but them I know for sure were part of that workshop and then they formed a group called the Friday night collective which I joined and it took us 5 years of long hard work but we created a video called rewriting the script that is now on DVD and YouTube which was the first full length video that served as a support tool for families. And we interviewed probably about 10 to 11 different families of south Asian queers like mothers and aunts and uncles and fathers and um it was an amazing experience so that came out of Desh like that was very much a part of Desh Pardesh, that video. And we stuck with it for 5 very long unpaid years. We met week after week after week to put this together on a volunteer basis. So there were so many highlights there were a lot of difficult moments too being on the board those last two years. There were a lot of difficult issues that came up. There were a lot of very long meetings that were very, very, very exhausting and a lot of tensions that came out of that time as well. So it was an amazing space but it was also a very difficult space to be in at times too. It was a lot of hard work and a lot of heartache at times as well.

AM: Mhm, yeah I can imagine I mean working together for that long of a period of time as well like…

AG: Yeah and there's a lot of politics and we you know this was a group that felt so passionately about their politics. This was also in the midst of the real serious politics issues that were coming up, right? Like bisexuals weren't really well regarded, they were ostracized in certain lesbian and gay communities, right? And the whole issue around trans issues was really young then. There was a lot of divisiveness there as a lot of anxiety, there was a lot of earnestness around anti oppression politics that was very difficult to negotiate. Um, you know you had at times like a lot of the more experienced members got burned out say in the early 90s of Desh so they distanced themselves. So, you had the younger group of people, I mean, I'm probably not describing that well enough. It wasn't just the younger group but, you know, in hind sight after all this time I could see that I may have done things differently now than I would have then, you know? And I think other people would probably feel the same way. Um, there were a lot of issues that came up then that are looked at differently now. Like queer issues now are very different than they were then. Bisexuals and trans folks are very much a part of the community where they weren't necessarily 20 years ago. So I think there's been a lot of movement and a lot of change since that time.

AM: Can you talk a little bit more about the kind of intervention that Desh made into, let's say, um I mean it was sort of a time of multiculturalism emerging as a government rhetoric? Can you talk a little bit about that? Because you mentioned identity politics.

AG: I think what Desh really did was put the spotlight on it not being multicultural but anti critical anti racism and I think that was a key difference. Because a lot of the festivals, so I grew up going to the, you know, Indian festivals at various community centers or temples. Um I grew up in a middle class, Hindu, Punjabi family and um you know they were always devoid of

anything political there were dances there was music there was um food but there was never anything about, you know, racism. There was never anything about South Asians who were treated badly. They were by the system, by the government; there was always a celebration of "we are Indians". And it was also a very nationalistic celebration. So I went to the Indian celebrations and what Desh did was it really smashed a lot of these nationalist, patriotic, multicultural ways of looking at things. I came, government funded, government sponsored but a lot of people in the community also bought into that. And what Desh did was really expanded it beyond a notion of we are Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan to say we are south Asians. And that was very, very critical for that time because a lot of communities were and still are, I would say, working within their own little community grouping and this was a festival that said we are not just Indians, we are not just middle class Indians, in fact, we are working class, we are middle class, we are upper class, and if we are upper class or middle class we are going to be critical of what that means. If we are straight we are going to be critical of the heterosexism that occurs within the south Asian community and we are not going to just celebrate ourselves in fancy dresses and songs. And you know doing Bollywood numbers we are going to be critical of what the relationship is between the state and the communities and I think that was very, very important. And we were the only ones I can imagine who were doing that. People were coming to Desh from all over north America it was certainly not just a Toronto thing or Canadian thing. People were coming from everywhere because you know if you are political if you do want to go against the grain, you are often isolated. So people would come to Desh to find a home there. To see that you're not just crazy in being queer, in being critical, in being wanting to work across different boundaries and different issues. So, that was a very big difference. We definitely challenged the state on a lot of different things. Um yeah I think I probably said it all.

AM: I wanted to pick up a little bit on what you were talking about on like a lot of what you were talking about in terms of you know a lot like you talked about yourself coming from kind of a family in which critical dialogue of this sort wasn't necessarily happening. Um I haven't heard much from people yet in terms of intergenerationality of participation. Who came to the festival?

AG: It wasn't just young people. There were definitely a lot of people in late teens 20s and 30s. I don't think we saw enough of people in the older generation like I would say 60s or 70s. Probably just a smattering from what I could remember. But broadly speaking it was people in their late teens, mainly 20s, 30s, and probably 40s at the time who were involved. And the festival like the programming we did try to ensure that there was a variety of different ages represented. I don't know if that was the most important thing. I was on the festival programming committee for a few years. I don't remember age being at the top of our priority but we were attentive to it for sure in the program.

AM: Yeah I guess I ask that partly because I'm wondering about. I mean, what people, who were involved in organizing or were working as staff with Desh. Would their families come for example?

AG: Um yeah.

AM: Like parents.

AG: It depended on the families and the parents I think people who… yeah I think parents would come for sure. Um, you wouldn't see a whole sea of parents but yeah there were definitely parents there of the different participants who came. Like the different festival people who were performing would come. Yeah.

AM: Okay, can you talk a little bit about the role of the overall political climate? Um, what role that played both in birthing Desh? Like in the fact that Desh could exist but also that there was a need for it.

AG: Well the birthing is harder for me because I wasn't involved in the birthing process. That was a different generation or different group of people who were involved in the birthing of it. Um, but clearly there was a void in, again, critical south Asian spaces, right? And I think it was born out of the political activism of those early leaders like (Pudam Koshla? 15:15) being one of them. Um and I can't. I know Hussain Amarshi was involved, he's now with Mogrel Media. Um, what I can remember at that time was that there was just a real void and I think that void actually exists now. I think you could birth Desh now. It would be hard to do it in Toronto. Well maybe it wouldn't be so hard to do it in Toronto. There's probably a next generation of people who would do it who aren't jaded by the past. Um, but it was a real I think burgeoning of artists and activist who came together and saw a need to put this together and it started small. I can't remember how it started but I'm sure it wasn't a big festival it may have been just one or two nights and slowly grew form there but from what I recall it was probably a space within the different councils and art funders to fund something like this. I don't remember the trajectory of funding. When I got involved uh the funding was already in place. But certainly the councils were very receptive to Desh's work. Um sorry what was your question again? The birthing and the…

AM: And and even just generally like throughout Desh's existence and the times when you were involved, the overall political climate whether it be large scale governmental politics or in the art world in…

AG: Well I wasn't that involved in the art world I was more involved in the literary word so I could speak to the literary community where as… in the 90s there were, you know, not that many writers of color who were being profiled within the Canadian mainstream spectrum. Like you had people like Michael Ondaatje um who was known, you know, internationally. People like Anita Desai who was known. Salman Rushdie, of course but I can't say that South Asian writers had broke the mainstream in a way that I think they have now. You know like people like Deon Brand and Wayson Choy and Judy Fong Bates amongst many, many others are more, uh, much more common names than you would have heard 20 years ago. So I think 20 years ago at least in a literary world there was a real need to profile writers of color because writers of color were not being profiled so the South Asian writers were not given any kind of place. Like the book

reviews the reading series the um you know bookstores that were profiles writers were mainly profiling white writers. I think you can also see a parallel movement to how Desh was born and progressed when you look at the feminist movement around that time. So the 80s in particular um was a time when issues around race were coming to a head and anti oppression politics were coming to the forefront all across north America. Um you know the women's movement, which had been primarily a white woman's movement, at least in the mainstream. There were always aboriginal women and women of color who were fighting for change but they never got any recognition. So, for example, in the 80s you saw two, in Toronto, you say several different flash points for issues around anti-racist politics in the women's movement. One was the I.W.D. Women's March, which I was not involved with but I know that became a flash point. We saw issues around women's press in the 80s which, um got called and serious issues around voice around cultural appropriation and as a result split in two and also the women's bookstore where I worked had a lot of um had a lot of struggles around issues around women of color and Sharon Fernandez who was involved in the women's book store, was one of the early founders of Desh Pardesh, too. So you can see real linkages. Like people like Sharon Fernandez who was quite uh and one was (Wanai Kawa? 19:05) who were two of the women of color who were very, very involved in bringing women of color and their issues and their books and their politics to the forefront of the Toronto Women's Bookstore. Sharon was also doing that at Desh Pardesh. So it opened up a space that wasn't there before and it opened up issues that were being discussed in the feminist movement as well, which were really coming to the fore in the 80s and mid 80s, which was when Desh was birthed. So issues around anti oppression, bringing issues around class, around sexuality, all that was happening in the feminist movement. Probably in the queer communities as well so that's how Desh became born. I think it was born in Toronto in a very particular way because you had a critical mass of organizers who could do that, who had that vision and had that energy. Um, I don't know that it could have been created in Montreal or in Vancouver because you did not have a critical mass of south Asian activists, of, you know, who were there to put this together. Um, and from what I heard from people in the states organizing and issues around this were looked at differently in the states. I think it could have only happened in Toronto and that's why it did. I hope that makes sense.

AM: Yeah, it totally does. I mean from what I can tell from conversations and also from a bit of research into how, um, these kinds of festivals blossomed elsewhere, it seems like this inspired actually a festival in new york and it actually, like there were (Yeah) different (yeah) but there (yeah) was sort of a ripple effect (yeah that would make sense) from what I can tell. I actually spoke to someone who is doing; she did her PhD about um sort of like how identity based arts. (Okay) Grassroots, like starting from grassroots, art organizations and it was really interesting because (yeah) she was talking about like how she came to Toronto, even though she was focusing on new york, she came to Toronto. I think she came years ago to talk to some people who were involved with Desh (yeah) actually (yeah). Yeah, so, for sure political context that makes sense. Um, and in terms of, uh, so, you've talked about kind of it being a space, um, for queer south Asians where there wasn't one in that same way before, um, a space for feminist organizing in a certain way. How did all of that, um, can you describe a little bit what, how that played out in terms of um methods for organizing? So, like a feminist way of organizing or a

way that was anti oppressive like what were the kinds of things that would take place in Desh that made it that?

AG: You mean apart from the programming itself?

AM: Yeah kind of like the internal organization.

AG: I mean, definitely there was, it was a very tricky thing because you had a board of directors that was overseeing the staff extensively but you also had a festival committee that was putting together the programming. So, um, the board, which was elected at the festival, I mean, it functioned as a board that needed to function for financial oversight and theoretically management oversight but it tried to be working in a collective process as well, which came out of the feminist movement. Um, which was very difficult. Um, we tried to get a board that was diverse. Um, so that was always an issue when it came to election time or nominations to try and make sure there was a diversity so that it wasn't just all men per say, that it was all just straight women, right? That there had to be queers, there had to be women, there had to be men, there had to be you know representation from different sectors like not just artists or not just activist. So I think we tried to have a feminist anti oppression model of inclusivity in terms of board members themselves. I mean by the end it was very hard to get board members because it was so much work and people had been burning out and because of the infighting. Um I think in terms of the programming committee definitely um issues of representation were really key in those programming decisions and we tried to have a programming committee that was also, again, you know, inclusive. So we couldn't just have all um, when we were looking at programming decision we had to make sure there was, that there were people from different South Asian backgrounds, right? You couldn't just have all Indians which was you know the predominant group you couldn't just have all Sri Lankans which um you know you couldn't just have you, you had to have that range we have to try and insure that there were Indo Caribbeans that were also represented. So issues around representation were really key in those programming decisions. There were workshops um financially like things I believe that most of the festival was sliding scale. Right like, you know, we had to of course raise money through ticket revenues but we had to ensure that we didn't exclude people that didn't have the money to come, right? Um we tried to billet people, right, we also had to make sure we were paying the artists as well. Like, that was very important so that it was respectful of artists and writers, right? So we weren't asking people to come for free and do their work for free. It was about respecting artist work as well. Um, in terms of the staff I think there were certainty, when I was on the board, there were, there were, tensions over the years from the various staff around the relationship between the board and the staff and the role of management between the board and the staff and I think we tried to operate in feminist and anti oppressive ways and I think that became quite difficult. And I think you know I do remember some very clear tensions in between who were the real managers, right, of Desh like who's responsible for these things is it and the financial oversight as well. So those things were very, very difficult from my recollection. I mean it's been 15 years, but yeah. I mean I also have experience working with this magic feminist bookstore with a feminist anti racist perspective so I have a very different a very particular experience in that, too. Um and it's

hard. Yeah and the tension between the board and the staff it certainly was difficult over the years. Because the board has a vision the staff has a vision the staff are doing the work the staff are never getting paid enough. They're always working long hours. There were lots of issues. So.

AM: Yeah actually prior to working here I worked at an organization in Montreal which was, I mean, attentively, collectively ran and working on consensus decision making and anti oppressive framework but also ultimately they were bosses so its something that's very hard to get around.

AG: It's a real tension that doesn't work. Yeah it's a real tension that doesn't work actually. I could spend hours talking about that it's one of the reasons I left the Women's Bookstore, because of some of those tensions. It's a very difficult tension to deal with.

AM: Maybe that will lead a little bit into, I'm, I'm interested in the kind of like what happens when something becomes more and more institutionalized. So Desh did.

AG: Yes

AM: Can you talk about that a little bit?

AG: Yeah I mean part of the issue is that you know we became very reliant on funders, right, and so it became institutionalized. The festival became, um, of a certain size like it was 5 nights of programming. Um it had a certain cache. It had a certain responsibility within the community. Um and you know it's very difficult for arts organizations when they rely so much on funding it's a real, it's a real catch 22 right? Where you want to pay the artists, so you want to raise the money, so you want to write the grants, and then you get, you know, the staff get burnt out because they're writing so many grants and grant reports. So, um, sometimes you lose sight of your programing and that original vision and you lose sometimes your volunteer capacity right so that when you are working on a much more grassroots level there's a lot of people working for free and busting their butts but once you start to become more institutionalized, um, the biggest possibilities of losing some of that energy and some of that ability for people to just do what they need to do, you know? I don't know if I'm explaining that well enough. Um and then you have certain expectations because you've been around for so long and people expect things of you. Um and then sometimes there's a distance between the audience members who were involved before and what they expect of the board and the staff and the programming committees without realizing the difficulties that are within there, right? And then you get bigger, right, and then once you get bigger as an organization there's more staff, there's more issues, there's more programming decision, there's more funders to be responsible for, and there's more stresses put on you as a result. And I think that's one of the difficulties of becoming more institutionalized, too. Those stresses are there as opposed to be being a more grass roots organization.

AM: Mhm, yeah that makes a lot of sense.

AG: There was a big issue that came up. Um, do you remember, do you know, do you remember in your archive research when it was at the Y? Was it 1994?

AM: Um it was at the Y. So it went Euclid theater and then the Y and then (So I was trying to remember) I think it was early to mid 90s it was at the Y.

AG: At the Y. I don't know if you've come across this in your research or in your interviews. There was a big brouhaha about membership decisions. It became a real divisive issue. Um, about, I believe about who would be nominated as members of the organizations, which would effect who would be on the board.

AM: Conflict around identify and membership?

AG: I think so. Does, have you, does that sound familiar?

AM: It does and that is fascinating because we are currently going through something.

AG: Oh really but what was the issue I'm trying to remember it like a conflict about having membership open to people who are South Asian, right, that was the issue?

AM: Or, or opening it beyond that. Whether it was okay to open it. I read minutes from one AGM, which seemed to indicate some tension around that.

AG: Yeah, it was hugely divisive. It was a hugely divisive issue and I believe that was the issue that it was.

AM: And was this sort…

AG: And I think the concern actually now was that the people who were on the side of opening it to non South Asians. I think people felt like they were not people who had been involved in Desh for a long time and who had not committed to it's anti racist queer politics. And I think that was the concern amongst those of us that wanted to keep it restricted to south Asians. That we were afraid of losing, well, of keeping it as a South Asian festival and of course people self identity as South Asian and we would be open to people who were mixed race and would definitely be included in the memberships and categories but the worry was it being taken over and not being, you know, this queer political activist artists' space that we wanted to maintain, I guess. That was I think some of the issues.

AM: That's from what I could read I mean you can only get so much from the archive but it was around identity and I'm, I don't know if you can answer this but I'm wondering, was the push because people wanted to open it up to other people of color or people wanted to open it up to white people?

AG: I think it would have been to anyone. I don't think you could have. No, I don't think it was about opening it up to people of color. I think it was about opening it up to white people also, I think, but it's been a long time. It's been a really long time.

AM: And kind of on an identity topic again in terms of queer identified and non queer identified and people maybe identified as lesbian and gay at that time or bisexual um was that something like did Desh specifically (31:15) identify itself as a queer festival (yes) because..

AG: I thought it did. I mean, if you look at the old programming posters and stuff it may not have said queer but it was very clear in our programming that we had to have queer issues represented and queer writers and um queer performers and queer artists there so with the workshops and I mean, I remember yeah, I thought it was. I thought it all was but I wasn't involved with every year of it. Um, I cant remember if there was discussion in the later years about, no, it couldn't because there was always queer people involved on the staff and on the board. (Mhm) maybe I'm wrong.

AM: I mean that's been my impression but it wasn't in any of the materials. It's not, there's a line about the mandate that says I can't remember the exact line but sort of mentions different queers and people of color and like working class people (yeah) and this kind of thing but I wasn't sure, um, yeah I guess I'm just curious if that ever changed or (No) No?

AG: No not as far as I know no (That was throughout) yeah that was throughout.

AM: And specifically with you having been involved in terms of like um the books and also working with writers, um how do you, do you feel like and how do you feel it kind of shaped you in terms of your work, um, and your…

AG: Well to be honest I think it had a real, I think it actually effected my life quite a bit when I got involved. When I first moved to Toronto, I was in university I was pursuing a path of doing English and international relations and I thought I would do human rights work or English work and then I got involved in Desh and I got involved in the books. And I never see myself, I mean I always loved books but I'd never seen myself working in the book industry but um I realized in those two years where I organized those book tables how much I loved it, right? Like how much I loved working with book and how much I loved working with books that reflected critical issues so not just you know like Canadian literature or you know mainstream literature it was critical writing. Um and being engaged in literary production and being engaged in the act of selling because I was selling I was actually it's interesting because throughout all my years of staffing the book table which was the least um six years that I can remember I was probably at the festival more than most people. Because I was there day and night setting up and I was there for every single evening and I actually worked the festival a lot. Um and so I got to see all of it um and I got to be involved in all of it but so anyways those first two years made me realized okay there's a whole other world of critical writing and critical production and that probably segwayed into my interest working in the Women's Bookstore which was supposed to be a one

year gig which ended up being a 10 year sort of life career path and then co managing it, um, and has lead my life into, um, it's continued in my own, I mean, I'm a book seller now. I've been involved in the determined the rare production for now about 20 years. I'd say my early years at Desh were probably very formative as part of that. And working at the feminist Women's Bookstore we did a ton of stuff in terms of critical writing and critical production so it followed on my work at Desh and what I did there.

AM: And if you could kind of look back and think about lessons learned whether it's about, um, you know, your work or about working with a group of people can you talk a little bit about that. It could be one, it could be many, but some lessons learned.

AG: I think it was about, I mean there were a lot of tensions I remember. Some very, very stressful months being on the board like the tensions between board and staff that became very high. And the lack of clarity around um power roles, right? So I think one of the the big lessons was you know what the relationship is between a board and staff members in an arts organization, in a progressive arts organization, right? And those are very difficult tensions to negotiate because you've got the staff who are working very hard but you've also got board members who are responsible for the oversight, right, what that, there's often tension between that, to be honest. There's very few progressive feminist arts organization that haven't had tension between board and staff. I'm not a fan of collective methods of organizing and this also comes directly from my experience at the Women's Bookstore. That was not a collective at the time, it was there but people thought it was a collective and it wasn't and um I'm not a fan of collective models because I think realistically what happens is you've got people who have very particular skills in areas and they should do that and I personally feel like you should have clear roles of authority and clear delineations of authority. Um, I think one of the (36:33) difficulties with the board and staff with Desh was that there was the tension who's got the authority, right, and that will happen. Um, that was certainly one of my lessons I think there was a lot of being overwrought about identity politics that happened that, in retrospect, I think didn't need to happen. Um I think in some ways you know when the tensions became so much and the politics and the drama became so much and Desh eventually folded. I think those of us knew what we were missing but we really lost a lot when we lost Desh and there's been nothing to, you know, like, you know, we would go to Masala and the whatever that is and the other South Asian festival at harbor front and in a lot of ways they're, they're not empty but you don't have that critical space anymore right and we really lost a lot when we lost Desh and I think in retrospect could we have kept it going? I don't now the funding was changing so much there was not enough people to recruit for board members. There was so much infighting, there was so much tension there was so much burn out so I think we could have done things differently to mitigate against that, um, you know there were people who were having an affair that and torrid breakups and people were jealous and that all came into play like that was definitely part of the mix that was going on. There were people who shouldn't have been involved on the board and the staff that did get involved in the board and the staff because they didn't have what it took to do those rolls, you know, and I'll be honest about saying that. Um and…

AM: When you said you they didn't have what it took did you mean politically or political?

AG: I mean, yeah, other, um, oh I'm not going to say that.

AM: No, that's fine, I, I yeah I wasn't asking in terms of getting…

AG: No, no, I know but yeah you still see people so you don't want to say too much that is why you can listen to the interview that's the whole point.

AM: Um, so, one thing I kind of wanted to go back to is, um, we haven't fully talked about this but I'm wondering what the relationship was between Desh and other sort of um, uh, grassroots um, I think especially of color organizations and groups?

AG: I think Desh had a really good reputation with other, um, artists of color and other grassroots organizations. A lot of people looked at Desh as a model festival from what I can recall and I remember people from other communities saying I wish we had Desh in whatever community so there were relationships that are, I think, were being built with other grassroots organizations um, and other partnerships. Like probably other festival programs that were done, you know, being co sponsored or co organized with different grassroots groups I remember that being part of our work as programmers or as board members to maintain those relationships to cultivate those relationships but it was always a South Asian festival, right, so we didn't want to expand it I remember there were probably years where we thought, oh we should include, you know, we may have had other artists who were from different cultural communities in the programs I can't write remember but we may have.

AM: From what I've looked at not, I haven't seen any so far but it's definitely possible there were a lot of years of programming.

AG: Yeah but I remember there being good solid relationships with other queer groups. Like, we moved into Buddies which was a queer space and that was a really important move for Desh because it meant that we were working within the queer community within a queer space right with their support as well so that was a great move for us.

AM: And it seems like Desh also shaped Buddies in a way because I know there was some conflict around racism around Buddies.

AG: Probably.

AM: At some point, and it doesn't surprise me, but even what Buddies does now. Like I mean I performed at Buddies, there's a different kind of program they're much more um (Yeah, yeah).

AG: So bringing a queer South Asian festival to Buddies, I can't remember what buddies was like in the late 90s but probably like a lot of others spaces, you know, more white in terms of its programing so yeah Desh was very important to have it there for sure (Mhm).

AM: I'm going to ask you one big kind of sort of abstract questions um given your experience with Desh (41:08) and being a part of it for so long. What do you think, now, in 2014 um, is the kind of what role do you think art and literature has to play in social movements and pushes for social change? It's a huge question.

AG: It's a huge role right? It is a huge role I mean writing changes our lives. It still does even with like media and tablets and all that kind of stuff but writing I mean it is where I spent my whole life doing is, you know, creative writing poetry. It changes you. Like Dionne Brand's work has moved so many people and changed like, I just launched Dionne Brand's book *Love Enough* and um at District Eleven a couple weeks back and there was a woman who came to me there who was um, not that young, maybe 10 years younger than me and she said that she um I had, this is my fourth or fifth book launch for Deon Banks. I launched many of her books while at the Women's Bookstore and this one while working at another story so this woman came to me she um came to me she was very shy she felt very out of place and she said, "You know, I'm not sort of in this school sort of scene but I really want her to come to this launch because I came to the launch for what was all long for 10 years ago and it changed my life it literally changed my life, you know". She had had a fiancé, she was working wherever, and she said "I got separated I changed what I was doing and it changed my life". And I think this is what it does and certainly running a feminist bookstore for 10 years, um, it's the power of words and literature to make you realize there's another way of being in this world and I mean that's what Desh did. I think for myself coming from the very mainstream somewhat conservative South Asian community that was very deep politicized. Coming to Desh um, really changed me in terms of seeing I don't have to accept what the government is saying, I don't have to accept what my community is saying. Like I don't have to accept the heterosexism in the community, right, like the pressure of marriage like there is another way. I mean I've got a male [partner now but at the time I was only dating women. I was self identified as a lesbian and Desh gave me the strength to be who I was at that time um, in a way that I probably wouldn't have otherwise, you probably would have felt a bit crazy, lesbian South Asian you know, um you definitely would have because the whole community is saying no, get married to a man and you're nothing if you do that. Whereas at Desh you think I can be who I am and I'm not crazy for that and I think that's what writing and arts and literature does it pushes you to think differently. It pushes you to be the best person you can be and it pushes you to want to change the world because you don't accept the world as it is, you know, you don't accept that things are all honkey dorey that's what Desh did it was a window a spotlight into um critically examining the world right? Um but it was also a space for beautiful art right? Like again Agha Shahid Ali his poetry he is a queer poet he died many years ago um, but his poetry was beautiful like as a form you could look at it as a form and it was a beautiful form of poetry. Um his language was beautiful you could look at someone like Shyam Selvadurai who read and his early part of his career and Funny Boy was really well received at Desh and it was his community um and he's a great novelist right he's very accepted in the main

stream now someone like Amitav Ghrosh is extremely well respected but like had really fascinating issues to talk about so Desh was not just a way to change the world but it was a way to show that art is beautiful and that art can change the world too and you can bring art together with politics. Um yeah so and fun I mean one of the things you asked me early on what was my highlight of Desh and I forgot to say the parties like the dances. Um the Desh dances were legendary for bringing together queers and straight south Asian with like Desi music because the only time you could dance to Desi music was at bloody weddings and here was Desh and you could flirt with the dykes and the butches and the femmes on the dance floor and um you can be in the sea of brown queers dancing and flirting and necking and the rest of that and there's no other space to do that and the music was good I mean like I miss those dances. I'm not the only one who misses those dances. Whoof there are people who miss those dances. Yeah, those were fantastic dances. Um, yeah.

AM: I've definitely heard that.

AG: Oh those dances, yeah.

AM: I wish.

AG: Yeah.

AM: The only thing I think that we have now

AG: Is Besharam at Samita's but it's drinks from what I've heard.

AM: But it's not exclusively South Asian but where there's often like one or two South Asian DJs is um.

AG: it's not cherry bomb right?

AM: No no no no it's fully fully I'm blanking on the name right now.

AG: It's queer woman?

AM: Yeah.

AG: I used to know all these things but

AM: It's so funny I got to it all the time but

AG: Where is it?

AM: They just moved from that place on Bloor um shoot what is it called

AG: Not the steady

AM: No no it will come to me. Bloor and Ossington-ish, it will come to me.

AG: Yeah because I want to know what that is I've been out of the, it's not the butch femme salon thing it's not that

AM: It's a mostly people of color um it's like queer straight mix but definitely lots of queer people go I'm going to look on my Facebook right afterwards and tell you. Um is there anything else you wish we would have talked about because I had some questions and then we talk but I will

AG: Um no I think I covered a lot of it actually. I miss it but a lot of people miss it. I mean it's been so many people that I've talked to over the years that said, "Let's do a Desh again lets do a one night Desh and we all think yes but who's going to do it right and I've certainly thought I mean I've programmed how many literary events over my last 20 years in the book selling industry but um I've never done only a South Asian literary event have, I have, I, no I've certainly launched a number of South Asian authors or readings um and I've read so many books. I know, you know I still read books like Kamila Shamsie who's one of my favorite writers. She's a Pakistani writer and I think, "Damn, there should be Desh just so she can come out" because her books are so incredible, right? So I still come across these things and um I mean maybe eventually and there had been. I think people did an event two years ago or three years ago, Desh Remembered. There have been sort of one offs here and there but I think it would be so wonderful if people did like even a two day or three day not just a one night but a two or three day festival like a Desh festival. I really wish someone would do that and I would get involved in that probably programming some of that.

AM: I mean maybe that could be maybe this project should play some kind of role and make that happen. I would love that.

AG: Maybe SAVAC could do that right as part of the grant as kind of finality. Not just a one time thing that was what was so wonderful like because you know one night you're busy you've got kids you cant go but then there's the next night you know and that was what was so fun about Desh was that it was several, serveral days not just one day.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 004 – Interview with Anthony Mohamed

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Anthony Mohamed (ANT)

Interview Date: 24/06/2015
Interview Location: Conducted at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, ON

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AM: So Anthony if you could actually just start by explaining a little of your involvement with ASAAP cause I gather you were involved with Khush and ASAAP and (inaudible) but tell me a little bit about what ASAAP did and does and how you were involved.

ANT: Sure, so ASAAP started I believe in 1989 and they had a summer coordinator who was hired, Kaushalya Bannerji, and at the end of it they were looking for a full time coordinator and because I had been in involved in south asian LGBT organizing as well as a lot of the education around HIV/AIDS, I actually applied for that position and I was hired as the first full time coordinator in early 1990. And that role eventually became the first exec of director role for ASAAP and I stayed there between the years 1990 and 1993. So it was a lot of formative years, we were very much a fledging organization with one staff person and limited funding. Most of our funding at that time came from the city of Toronto and in fact I remember clearly writing the first, one of the first grant applications on my mother's typewriter in her bedroom because we had no office space etc. In fact we were apply to get money for an office space and it was Toronto public health that funded us first.

[00:02:22]

AM: So could you rewind a bit a tell me, kind of broadly, a bit about that moment in Toronto' history, but in the history for queer people in Toronto around HIV in particular.

ANT: Sure, I'd even go back a little bit further to start with. I mean, when you think about the 1940s and 1950s, like the 1940s in North America the war was going on in Europe. Women especially were coming to take jobs that were traditionally assigned to men, and as a result there was a lot of women organizing that was going on, and a lot more women's independence you know. For example, wearing pants and cutting your hair short was something that was common. And then the 1950s as a result of that type of new movement or mass migration from rural areas or farming communities into the urban areas led to a lot of people being in one place at the same time. And covert organizing kind of started within the broader LGBT communities in the major cities - you know New York, San Francisco, and at that time Montreal more than Toronto. Alright, um. When we're thinking about Canada, however, these were extremely covert. Most people were closeted, all that kind of stuff. With the impact of the Black civil rights movement in

the US and the subsequently the women's equality movement that were all inter-related, i think people found strength in saying it's ok to organize and of course taking us up to the 60s- the stonewall riots kind of was the triggering point for the North American movement. But also at the same time, you know there was openness in Canada- Pierre Trudeau's famous line "state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation" - those types of things. It really laid the ground work for people to say it's ok to organize and it's ok to be yourself. And so taking us forward, there were all of a sudden a bunch of new groups in Ontario that were coming together. The UofT homophile association, for example locally- that started in 1969. There was the community homophile association of Toronto. There was LOOT. I can't remember what LOOT stands for, but it was a lesbians organizing something of Toronto. And there was TAG which was Toronto Area Gays which eventually turned into TAGL - Toronto Area Gays and Lesbians. But when we started getting into the 80s, the early 80s, what reflective of Toronto's immigration patters- all of a sudden you had people of specific communities, both ethnic or religious, or gender specific, that were starting to organize on their own. And throughout the 80s, especially the mid 80s, you saw a proliferation of groups that were specific to communities and they served a particular purpose that many of those groups don't exist anymore because the need isn't as great. People are much more integrated in terms of visibility, but at the time you rarely saw people of colour, for example, on many of the leadership of the LGBTQ communities- we were not represented. Alright, so, there was Toronto Rainbow Alliance for the Deaf, Gay Asians Toronto, there was Lesbians of Colour, there was HOLA for Latin American or Spanish speaking peoples, there was Zami which I was a member of and ZAMI was a group for Blacks and West Indians in Toronto. I was also a member of Khush which was reaching out to South Asian lesbians and gays. So it was kind of interesting, being from Trinidad, Zami kind of fulfilled a cultural need for me to relate to other queer people of Caribbean origins and Khush kind of met that need for me to reconnect with my heritage of South Asia. Not me specifically, but my family line. At the same time, LYPS was formed, that was lesbian youth- I can't remember what the PS stands for but it was a lesbian youth group and LGYT, which was lesbian and gay youth of Toronto. So I was a member of a whole bunch of these groups, and pride has grown so much over these years from the early mid 80s to what it is now. In those days, it was very much picnic behind the 519 community centre and because I was involved in multiple groups, I remember going from table to table and working each of those tables. You know, you kind of just change your t-shirt and run to the next table. And then there was the protest march on Yonge street. And we had a lot to protest about- we had no legal protections. Even in the province of Ontario, sexual orientation wasn't added and certainly gender identity was a discussion that was way below the surface. It wasn't anything that was there. The Indigenous groups also started to organize as well. So two-spirited peoples of First Nations started to organize and then I noticed a whole bunch of southern and European groups started to assert their identities in terms of culture and that was excellent because it created such a wonderful spectrum within the community and representation of diversity. So there was a Portuguese group, there was an Italian, Polish, Ukrainian group that had come up, and often we would do things in partnership. I can remember we had a Polish South Asian night at Woody's one time and we had polish sausages with roti [laughing]. Things like that kind of happened, so the big start - although the Stonewall riots were the kind of major trigger point to modern LGBT rights movement, certainly the bathhouse raids by the city of Toronto police

services in 1991- that was kind of the trigger for the Canadian rights movement. And that night I wasn't out, but I was watching this all on television cause I was living right here in Toronto at the time with my family and I remembered a bunch of people showed up- probably hundreds of people showed up on the corner of Yonge and Wellesley to protest. And that to me was- there was something very powerful about that and that image that allowed my own coming out process to kind of take speed. And then in later on after a lot of organizing and a lot of discussion builds up and passed in 1987 and that's when they added sexual orientation to the Ontario human rights code. But in the early 80s, I was in high school and I remember Olivia Chow was the school trustee at the time and she was looking for students who were LGBT who might be willing to speak to the Toronto District School Board to try to get sexual orientation as a protected grounds within the school boards rights and responsibilities handbook. And myself and two others students were the ones who were selected to go forward, so it was quite wonderful that I had this word of my family as well as my teachers and then my school trustee, and a lot of my political organizing was as as result of those types of requests.

[00:11:11]

ANT: Alright. And then of course being part of the first groups especially Lesbian and Gay Toronto allowed me to learn the political process- so a lot of when we bring it up to the 1990s and this is where it gets into ASAAP, so HIV had started showing its face in the community and almost everyone who was doing queer rights work at the time all of a sudden doing AIDS work. We formed cure teams, we started protesting, we didn't know exactly what to do cause we weren't sure if condoms were effect or whether it was the right thing to do. There was a lot of stigma, people were pointing at each other especially within the gay mens community. They were pointing at each other, saying 'oh, he's got it ' or 'hey, he doesn't have it' all of this kind of stuff. And we were hearing these horrible rumours from the states of so many people dying and seeing the horrible pictures of people losing weight or their cheeks being sunken in and it was a very tough time, alright. It created a lot of divisions. I wouldn't say as a result of that, but around this time because the focus had changed in terms of queer organizing. A lot of the groups that were developed for specific communities. They did decide to close. Many of them still exist, but many of them don't. Or what they did was they migrated. So for example, Gay Asians Toronto became Asian Community and Services and Khush was pretty much responsible for starting ASAAP, right. So, what happened was a gentlemen came to the AIDS committee of Toronto, looking for HIV AIDs services that was language specific, and unfortunately they didn't have the capacity to do so. And so they contacted Khush members, saying 'do we have any members who speak this language and might be able to help out' and we were able to assist, but it underlined there was a gap in HIV AIDs services for south asian people. And as a result we formed something called the South Asian AIDS Coalition, so it was SAAC, and then the name eventually changed to ASAAP and the focus was very much on prevention as well as being a referral service. We knew we didn't have the capacity to provide all the care that was required. However, what we could do was help them navigate the various HIV AIDS services that were already in existence. Around that time to–there was some real achievements within the LGBT community. So police started having a dialogue, for example, and a pretty solid dialogue and it's

lead to the really good relationship we have with the police, generally, in terms of the community. Of course, there is still a lot of work to be done on that but at least they were willing to talk, whereas before we were often on opposite sides of the fence. Alright, so the community was on one side and the police were on another side and they were seen as the bad guys. Alright, the city started to declare support for PRIDE and LGBT arts events. For example, and there was advancements being made in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. First one being TT but there was homeopathy, Chinese medicine, complementary therapy etc, that were really giving people a myriad of options all of a sudden that didn't exist before. Of course, it took some time before the treatment regimes that we see now were worked out and now the face of AIDS has changed dramatically, right. It's gone from outright, complete death sentence, which it was, to a long term chronic illness, which is controlled and managed.

[00:16:01]

ANT: So, South Asian people- sorry- lets go back to the 1990s where things was happening. So because of all the support we were seeing from other areas, both the mainstream LGBT community as well as the mainstream broader society, but it allowed for certain things to flourish. So one of Khush's events was an event called Salam Toronto. And it was based on a film that was called "Salam Bombay" and we created this Salam Toronto, and it was basically an arts festival that happened on one evening at the 5.19. I remember we hung cloth, we bought a bunch of very cheap saris (laughing), they were all like ten dollars and we hung them all over the place and it was just an idea of getting colour and some paisleys into the space. We played music, we served culturally appropriate food and we highlighted some of the artists from within the community. Well it was that small timely event that grew into Desh Pardesh which became a five day festival and it was quite significant when it grew that way but of course there were so many key individuals that were responsible for that- people who had connections to the arts community to actual funders. People like myself who had more connections on the political side, we were able to get political support for these types of things by asking people for endorsements. We were asking for potential government funds.

[00:17:52]

ANT: And so because of that collective-ness of organized people from a bunch of different sectors, we were able to create this and it became- although it started out as a queer festival, it very much broader than that very quickly. I think there was a hunger within the south asian for not only contemporary art but contemporary and progress art and that's the form that Desh Pardesh provided. Also around that time, Bhangra was taking off in the UK, like tremendous. And it was a real- even though many of us were not Punjabi, there was a real galvanizing force that Bhangra had- all of a sudden it was cool to be brown where before it was embarrassing. I remember clearly throwing away my roti and curry in school and going and buying mac and cheese, right, because you didn't want people to think that you smelled like curry all the time. All the time, it's so funny because everyone wants curry and roti (laughing). But at the time, it was a very tough thing and there was some horrible racists incidents that were occurring in Canada. I

remember a Sikh man was pushed into the subway just for wearing a turban, like I mean, there was a lot of that kind of stuff. "Paki go home" was heard regularly, because Pakistan is way over here on the map and Trinidad is way over here on the map (laughing) and I was like "where are they telling me to go back to? I don't get it?" (laughing) I don't understand the hate. Of course, as a result of that in some ways Im grateful for going through those experiences because it helped me to ask the right questions so I could go home and ask my parents. I said "why are they telling me back to Pakistan, I've never been to Pakistan." But my parents were able to explain about being indentured laborship to the Caribbean and how south asian people ended up in the Caribbean and that's where my great great great great grand-parents came from and so that's our connections to the east and it really allowed me to explore those things.
[00:20:24] And of the things that I loved about Desh is that also it was such a forum, not only to explore contemporary art, but from a historical perspective and there was one event at the opening night that I remember clearly. I can't remember which year, but it was something- a play reading called "Beyond the Kala Pani" Indians bring brought by the British from Calcutta and Chennai over to East Africa, South Africa, Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad, and then throughout the Caribbean and it was very powerful for me to see that this is where my ancestors- these are where my ancestors ended up, not only in the Caribbean but to Canada, right. Because at the time, Pierre Elliot Trudeau started opening the doors to immigration from the Caribbean and my dad who was trying to decide where to go, and quiet frankly kind of frightened him because of the french- he wasn't sure he'd learn it but he chose Toronto because it was an up and coming city at the time. At the time of course Montreal was the largest in Canada whereas Toronto was just starting to establish its feet.

[00:21:46]

ANT: So, today, coming up to today's South Asians both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ are involved in many many mainstream organizing, both in the arts and in the broader queer communities, right. So there's not that same sense of need for all the separate spaces. I'm not saying that it's not necessary, it's certainly necessary on some days, especially when we wanna discuss issues that are community specific, but there doesn't seem that same sense of urgency or the same invisibility that we had during those days, right. We were invisible, we were ignored, I don't sense that as much anymore, right. That said, of course racism still exist, so does sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism etc all the isms still exist. And the anti-religious bias to the Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus etc. (coughing) That still very much alive. I think the primary issues that are affecting us right now are women's equality and transgender- involving the transgender community and ensuring that people have access to (coughing)-excuse- people have access to appropriate health care and forms for expression, right. And again, that's what Salaam Toronto and Desh did for us and although it was sad to see it leave, it was nice to see us south asians being represented in mainstream festivals as well.

[00:23:51]

ANT: Alright so I could go to something in harbour front or something at one of the universities and almost ensure that I will see brown people on stage at some point and that's great. But not only brown people, but people of many different backgrounds. So, internationally educated professions- I still think there is some work to do on that level on integrating people, because many of us came in waves, and we came from so many different parts of the world- some are english speaking, some are not. Some are of one particular thing, some are not, right, and people of all abilities. So it's about how we integrate and how we care for both immigrant refugee populations, and of course it starts with recognition of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples and recognizing that we're in a colonized land.

[00:24:52]

ANT: I think something that's very important especially within the South Asian communities as we move forward in this dialogue is merging both the family and heritage connections – family connections to heritage and connections to the deeply spiritual part of the community. I think that has to merge and it's something that in some ways has been lost because when we look at the current LGBTQ communities – often there's so much resistance to matters of faith, and validly so in some ways. I mean people have been hurt by their mosques, temples, churches, right. So it's sometimes very hard for people to understand that within the south asian community at least, that there is an area that's quite important and recently I've been working a lot with members of the aboriginal communities and you know when you look at the medicine wheel- looking a emotional, spiritual, the mental and the physical, it's very important that we follow those examples and the (beeping) -sorry about that- (coughing) (on the phone)

AM: I can just edit out that

[00:26:33]

ANT: I guess what I'm saying is that there's a certain amount of historical knowledge about the importance of merging all aspects of our identity, and that's not just specific to the aboriginal communities, it's also specific to many communities around the world, including south asian people. The other major challenge that I see is defining the current LGBTQ rights dialogue with multiple identities. Alright, which many of us have, for example, a few years back with Queers Against Israeli Apartheid and PRIDE, there was so much divisiveness and hurt that was being thrown and it was sad that we had to reach that level of division within the community and not have a more mature discussion about it. However, communities do - the various communities have seem to moved on, so it's those days I think that this is where the arts community for example can play a key role in creating spaces for dialogue and forums for expression that don't necessary create divisiveness but creates an understanding of the other points of views.

[00:28:06]

ANT: So, even with all these current challenges that we have that I mentioned, I still that there's a lot to be proud of and lots to celebrate and we've come a long way and lets not- A) lets not take it for granted, and lets not become complacent but let's also celebrate and take some time to hug each other and to show love to each other when we can.

[00:28:41]

AM: Thank you

ANT: Ok

AM: Do you mind if I ask one or two…

ANT: Keep asking, I'm not sure i covered everything

AM: Well you really covered a perspective that I think that I've been seeking out, so I think that's great, and it was a really - it's really wonderful that you started earlier because we can look back to even the 80s or the 70s but so much precedes that, so that's really great. When you were talking about- when you were called Paki and you had these conversations with your family kind of sparked this curiosity in my mind- what were your parents' generations' interaction with like Khush- did you see an intergenerational aspect within those groups?

ANT: Only some, like there were a few members of Khush who would bring their parents and that was fantastic whenever they were present it was wonderful. I have to say my mother came to a Lesbian Gay Youth of Toronto meeting and both my parents came to a number of Khush events following, but later- but it was always nice to have the intergenerational aspect. Actually, I have a good experience on that when I was working at ASAAP- we went to York University for the South Asian Students Association conference, and I was working the table there and we had both needle cleaning kits as well as condoms on the table and dental dams of course and all of that and the older folks that were at the conference had no trouble taking any of it. The younger folks- they were terrified their parents were there (laughing)- but not only that but it would be an acknowledgement that they were sexually active and/or using drugs, right. So there was a real strange thing- so even though the majority of people at the conference were students- South Asian students- the majority of the people that came to our table to do with AIDS and remember this was the early 90s- AIDS still had a very heavy stigma. I mean still does today but it's not as much as it was then, right. The early 90s- it was taboo to talk about sex or drug use within the communities- it still is to some degree and there were other taboo subjects. The treatment of women, or , etc- but certainly the religious clashes within the community- those types of things that do occur. So, going back to that story, I was very impressed with realizing that if we're going to reach the youth, we've got to be able to change the broader community's thinking about sex and sexuality, especially. And I think a lot of that work has been done, to be honest. We're a lot more open as a community. When you see modern arts, and I think the arts world is to be thank to a large degree, right, for allowing things like- movies like "A Touch of Pink" or other films

and visuals that have occurred. I remember I was just flipping the TV and Omni-television had done a documentary, Im not sure who actually did the documentary, but it was a documentary about LGBT refugees from all around the world and subsequently I saw that same documentary translated and dubbed and subtitled into a whole bunch of languages that Omni televisions- some times I flip it and the same documentary would be in Polish, sometimes I flip it and the same documentary would be in Urdu and it's like "this is great" you know. So many people are learning about things they may not have the opportunity to be exposed to before, so I think arts can play a really valid role and a really fantastic role in moving discussions forward. And I've travelled a lot and to be quite frank, Canada can wonderful to place, right. Yes, we have our challenges and yes there are laws and policies and practices that need to be changed but at least we live in a place where we can say "let's change this" or "lets have a discussion about changing this" whereas a lot of places and a lot of people around the world don't have that luxury.

AM: And maybe one other question I'm sort of thinking about- kind of the feeling of what that would have been like. So I try to place myself in that period of time and I try to imagine you- obviously things are different now, I can go to queer events where there are lots of people of colour and its very diverse. But at that time, I have gathered that going to a gay bar for example, you might be the only brown person in there. What was it like to all of a sudden have something like -I mean obviously Khush but then Desh and Salam Toronto- and to have these- what did it feel like?

[00:34:40]

ANT: Oh my goodness, they were like breaths of fresh air, you know what I mean. You really felt isolated, and not only isolated but you were also often the target of racists comments or actions, right. And it was very disconcerting and in terms of self esteem you know, it could really lower your self esteem. I'm not saying those issues don't exist any more, they certainly do for a lot of brown in spaces. However, for me, and I mean of course I mean I'm older now, right, so it's - there's a certain confidence that comes with age that at the time I was quite young, right, so I mean that was a major factor in all of this as well. The- what was it like. You know, walking into Desh and seeing a group of brown people who were also LGBTQ, it was like wow I'm home. It felt like this is great, you know. I can actually talk with these people who have a similar background and a similar experience as me- same thing with Lesbian and Gay Youth of Toronto and with the Zami. All three of them fulfilled a great need for me. And then finding places- spiritual places like MCC , you know, when I called- I was heavily involved in the youth group in my church and when I came out the pastor had asked me to stop coming to the church so it was a really painful time and you know I was in my early teens. I didn't actually have the language to- I didn't know what to say, right. So i just stopped going. So I remember calling MCC if they had a youth group pray and they didn't have a youth group but they directed me to Lesbian and Gay Youth Toronto. And it was great, you know, to be able to go there and to see young people who were many of the- none of them were in my specific high school- but many of them were going through the same questions that were going through in my mind and we could have that dialogue together. So, it fulfilled the need for me at the time. I'm hoping that young

people today still have forums where they can go to- I mean i'm glad that for example Black queer youth exist as part of supporting our youth (unsure) but the- I wonder if young people from other communities are getting the same support they need. And not only younger folks, but as the population ages, I'm quite concerned about older LGBTQ and how isolated people sometimes feel and quite frankly lonely. Alright, that's what it comes down to, it's loneliness. Sometimes your mobility is limited and you can't go places you could go before. I'm grateful for places like the Sunshine Centre for Seniors that has their pride picnic on the island or that the city of Toronto (inaudible) House that did a fantastic program on LGBTQ services for older folks, right. And the Pride Seniors Network has been doing this work for almost 20 years now and I've been a member since they start. And part of it is because it's related to my work, my current work. However, the other part of it is that I want those services there when I need them, right (laugh). So i'm preparing so that- because hopefully I'll reach that age and I'll be able to celebrate Pride when I'm 70 and 80 and do things and be part of the community. I am a little bit concerned because, like for example, this wee I've been observing younger LGBT folks and many of them don't have a connection to this past and as a result I wonder- cause you know, when I was their age, everything we did was political. Going to a gay dance was political, alright. Now, they're just going to a gay dance to dance, which is what we aimed for and I'm really grateful for that but I really hope they will recognize that there was a lot of sweat, blood, and tears that went into their- this fresh space that they're all a part of. And i'm hoping they themselves will not only remember but use the strength from that time to get them through and to help others get through any of their challenges that they're going through, because they probably have new challenges that we didn't even deal with or that I don't even know about because I'm not part of that generation, so.

[00:39:40]

AM: Well, thank you so much

ANT: Alright

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 005 – Interview with Arif Noorani

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Arif Noorani (AN)

Interview Date: 25/07/2014
Interview Location: Conducted at SAVAC Offices in 401 Richmond in Toronto, ON

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AM: Um..so Arif I gather that you had a few different roles at Desh, so um…maybe if you could just tell me in order to have a bit of context, what were all of the different ways that you were involved with Desh over the years?

AN: I was at active with Desh in the mid-90s um…at first was involved in the board of directors–through that we kind of [inaudible] it's when Desh really built up it's board, I think before that there was a coordinator and some community consultation but we were trying to kind of formalize Desh as an organization that carried out activities throughout the year and reached out communities and did outreach work; so I was on the board form 93-95 and then for two years I was one of the coordinators of the festival from 95-97.

AM: And Arif can you tell me a little bit about… before we get into a lot of the context behind Desh and everything, can you tell me a bit about what you had been up to leading up to your involvement? 'Cause I gather you that you had CKLN experience and I don't know if you were doing that before or after and you had done video work, and I'm just wondering about yeah, what you were up to leading into it?

AN: I think since I was a teenager I was always sort of socially committed to activism work to try and change the world, so I was involved with NDP politics and film people and Amnesty International as a high school student and as soon I hit university I sort of got involved with everything. So it was the height of um.. growing identity politics it was sort of the last vestiges of the you know kind of strong left presence in North America um…you know coming after the disillusioned Soviet Union so there was still a strong left movement, so I was involved in such a range from everything from involvement against the first Gulf War in 1990 to um…being involved with the Lesbian/Gay community through the student movement as well as Queer Nation had formed in the early 90s so I was on the periphery of that

AM: Can you describe a bit about what that was?

AN: Yeah Queer Nation was a group that uh…came together in the late 80s/early 90s and it was a kind of direct action group that wanted to assert Lesbian/Gay presence everywhere so they were do things like they would do a kiss in at the loose moose um…a bar [inaudible] because that owner had kicked out a pair of lesbians weeks before so they would go and do that. It was influenced a little by the act up, in terms of public displays of um…uh…asserting yourself in a public way of fighting for Gay/Lesbian rights, against homophobic policies, but doing it in a colorful/playful ways through postering and propaganda and direct action, and so yeah it was quite an interesting, invigorating group to be involved with. I was also involved at CKLN for three or four years, I was assistant news director, I had a weekly show, I brought out young activists, CKLN was a real home for us and brought together so many aspects of the city in terms of people from different ethnic/racial communities, Gays and Lesbians. It was also a very big music station, so it brought all types of musical genres in a real kind of hub for um.. people to come together.. um and then but I also was one of the founder of the Toronto Coalition Against Racism which is a group that formed after attacks that were taking place against Tamil community and in the early 90s, Toronto goes through waves of immigration and Canada goes through waves of immigration. In the early 90s there were a lot of people fleeing the Sri Lankan War which was devastating for so many people and there were attacks in Toronto against um.. you know people in that community so we formed a broad based coalition that included everyone from anarchists like anti-racist action to you know people involved in doing um.. anti-racism work with the city of Toronto, a whole bunch of groups so we formed that coalition and we mainly coalesced around immigration reform um.. it was a climate at that time to that the government was starting to clamp down on immigration and we've seen that continue in the last twenty years, I think the levels of immigration in this country are a small fraction of what they were back then, so we felt that this country needed to be open to the world, that's what made this country…you know um.. interesting and vibrant so we worked around immigrant and refugee rights as well as combined forces with people who were protesting police violence, so various communities, the gay and lesbian community was also active around um…legal issues and policing because of a law that had been passed that would make it easy to arrest sex workers and all that. So we worked with a whole bunch of groups, so I did that for many years and then I worked in kind of popular education when I finished university and then I slowly move into being involved with Desh—it was appealing because it was starting to become a confluence of all things movements, so like Desh started—it was rooted in the arts activists world, but also was tied to the feminist movement in Toronto, to um the Gay & Lesbian community, in fact Desh was very much a Queer organization that was open to everyone. It was a place that you could go and make connections in a way that you couldn't in the organized movements outside of Desh because it helped you connect to your historical roots, to cultural issues, to family stuff, to you know…as south Asians growing up, you know have torn relationships with our families for different reason especially if we're Queer and Desh was a place to build those connections and to build that confidence and to be able to shape who we were in more fully complex ways.

AM: So can you tell me a bit about what the importance was of Desh in that socio-political moment, like what was the atmosphere like in Toronto at that time? whether in terms of being a queer man in Toronto, being a brown person in Toronto, what was the atmosphere like and why was that important?

AN: It was very heady and energized and it was like a livewire, right uh..Desh really sort of was this exciting place to be um…because the connections you formed were um…there were natural connections you formed with people…um it also was….it brought to together all the struggles and challenges people were dealing with; through the organization named it right? and um.. yeah it was exciting times. At the same time, the other side to it too, so you know passionate that lead to also like disagreements on um…around organizing, but uh…yeah

AM: In terms of um.. let's say…let's maybe focus specifically on um.. the political climate, so um…NDP was in power, and then actually probably around the time that you got involved Mike Harris comes into power in the mid 90s, so can you tell me a little bit about that?

AN: The backdrop of it was that the NDP was a flash in the pan, what followed was I think two successive of elections of Mike Harris and his main agenda was to dismantle the Ontario welfare state, so that meant funding for arts and women's groups I remember they got rid of employment equity at that time. All these things that took years to build up, Harris came in, not only was in power, but rode a wave of people who voted him in and there's also the rise of the reform party in the west, um…and then as I mentioned there was a backlash towards newer immigrant communities that was happening. There was a political context that owes lots to rebel against and to deal with and it was a hostile climate for many people. It was the still the you know the drug cocktail had not yet been invented for people with HIV and AIDS so that was devastating for people in the Queer community um.. and so Desh and all the groups that its overlapped with—it was a place to be where you could actually channel some of that energy and some of that anger and express it through art or through activism or through community mobilization. It was really important I think for so many people where they could do that work Desh was also affected by that climate I think over the years it became increasingly difficult because of funding issues to keep the organization as robust as it was—we were lucky in Toronto in the early 90s that the arts council believed in funding groups but as they went through reduced funding and the government reduce of the funding sources, that became really challenging.

AM: So you know when you're kind of talking about Desh inserting itself into this socio-political context, could kind of describe what you would say the mandate of Desh was? Like in your own words?

AN: I think one of the key mandates of Desh was to give a space to people who were creating art, who were creative, for creative expression on an emerging south Asian identity—Desh was very much about this kind of larger South Asian identity, whereas I think before that many people were like "I'm Ismaili from East Africa" or I'm from the Caribbean, that was still important. Part of what it was trying to say we have some common histories here, we have some common experiences here growing up in the west. Desh was also a big home in the 90s for people who immigrated in the 70s, a lot of us were coming of age in this new world and trying find our place in it. So I think Desh was a place to give voice to that, so it was through film and through video and through visual arts, through poetry through theatre, but also through community building. I think in many ways it was a community building organization to help people connect with each other to find common causes. To form relationships and partnerships, uh…and so I think it's mandate really in the end was this kind of community building space. I think what made Desh different than what else was going on, was it's blending of arts with activism and a lot of people came to Desh 'cause they wanted to express themselves through some art form weather its through writing, or painting, or photography. It was a place which embraced that and said that is a form of activism right? That art, that reflects the context, the political context that we're in that speaks to larger issues, that's not afraid to poke that some of the tensions, that exists not just in the mainstream, but within the communities. Desh was proudly embracing of that, it was not necessarily a dogmatic organization with some mandated mission statement that would hammer you over the head it was a place that you could come and express yourself in so many different ways.

AM: Yeah I like that you kind of touched on that just now because I was thinking about the other community organizing that you were talking about that you did and I'm curious if there was any not so much backlash, but if you had any responses from other people you were organizing with who didn't necessarily understand the fusion of art and activism 'cause that's not always…it hasn't always been understood in the west as going hand-in-hand and some times more you know like, from the basic community organizing they don't necessarily want to work in the arts, I'm wondering if there was any kind of like with the other groups you're involved with if people had trouble understanding what Desh was about, or what it embraced quite well?

AN: I would say I think once I started moving into being involved with Desh, I sort of got less involved in the other groups 'cause you're right they existed some times in their own realm they were sometimes literally going after changing government policy, but there were a lot of groups at that time that had that blend. When I was working at Desh we shared the office with the Latin American Artists Network and Fresh Arts, Fresh Arts worked with Afro-Canadian young people and using art to talk about politics. There was a common understanding that arts and culture and community and activism could work in different ways and also the Euclid was around in the early 90s and that was the home for early festivals and that was a place that brought film and documentary, but with a kind of.. embedded in that was a critique of contemporary society and a lot of festivals came out of that like Race to the Screen came out of that showed there and that's why there are people like Richard Fung and other artists from different communities who feel equally a part of Desh as well as people who are also South Asian, so there was that community approach in Toronto, but you're absolutely right there was a whole layer of activism and organization that didn't necessarily overlap because their approach was more straightforward around societal change. Can I say something else about Desh? What I actually found really refreshing and inspiring, when I got involved that Desh was never about just being against something like activism of the 90s where you're protesting or trying to change something, Desh was about being for something, about being for pluralistic South Asian community and embracing who we are and that was so unique at the time.

AM: Yeah and I guess kind of following off of that last question, I'm wondering how Desh interacted with feminist organizing, and obviously there were feminists organizing within Desh, but how did it kind of work along with other organization and Fresh Arts and these other kinds of groups? What were the kinds of alliances or working together that happened?

AN: I've been thinking about that question and I mean, the first answer to that is that Desh was fully informed by feminism, fully informed by diasporic identity, and anti-racism, fully informed by queerness, but I'm struggling to think of tons of examples where Desh worked hand-in hand with other groups. I think there were some, I think in many ways, it some ways it was an inward looking organization, it looked to connect South Asians of various backgrounds, you know I'm curious about the external facing and connections we made 'cause I'm struggling to remember, have you got a lot of people?...

AM: A little bit like people have said there was some work done with um…different…um… aboriginal groups in Toronto and I think exactly what you were saying it was informed by all this organizing and was born out of a movement right? So that's kind of what…

AN: There's examples I can remember…to be honest I didn't feel they were always so organic so I know when I was involved with Desh we tried to do things throughout the year as well, so one of our board members organized something with the national action committee and the status of women around the women's conference in Beijing so I had people who went to that from first aboriginal first nation backgrounds from different backgrounds to talk about that experience and women organizing around the world. When I got involved with Desh I was involved with the Toronto coalition against racism so we did a joint panel at the festival around immigration…um you know we shared offices with Fresh arts and often shared resources and worked together. Oh one thing that we did actually do, for a couple years we organized a mini festival outside of Desh which was aimed at young people who were artists and performers from all backgrounds, so anyone could be part of it. So we had an event at the Theatre Centre that was aimed at the broader arts community, so that was an example where we were working hand-in –hand.

AM: What was the youth initiative called?

AN: One year we called it Ethnic City to play on ethnicity and the other we called it the Desh mini-fest and it was the Theatre Centre so that was one of the attempts. I remember when I was involved we did youth workshops, going after young people but through the schools so we did a media literacy workshops at some of the suburban high schools so I remember I gave those um… and I'm trying to think of other examples, those are the ones that come to mind. I think it was very much about the building of this community

AM: And now that you kind of started talking a bit about your role as a coordinator and within Desh internally, I would love to hear a bit more about, you were there kind of in the early stages of when Desh was becoming a little more formalized as an organization like in terms of the structure and how those roles got determined, were you modeling it after anything in particular or did that flow kind of organically?

AN: I would say it flowed organically, a lot of us were in our twenties kind of trying to figure all of this out. I think the structure moved towards Desh not just being a festival but a year-round place where we do programming throughout the year where we have a more active board of directors. You know our board was twelve-thirteen-fourteen people. They kind of oversaw decision making about the organization in terms of priorities…um…and yeah still keeping the heart and sole which was the festival, but trying to see what else could we do with the organization in terms of outreach and reaching out to more people right? Not just folks in downtown Toronto, we tried to reached out to young people in the suburbs, do collaborations with other groups.

AM: This is kind of out of curiosity, and for moving into future ideas of how to do outreach, what were some of the strategies that you used to outreach in the suburbs for example?

AN: The main one was getting access to the high schools, so to um…we did workshops there, I don't think we fully went further, we could have, I think 'cause that's where you see, that's where you see the growing population of south Asians was living and that's something that could've gone further than it did.

AM: Um…So Arif if you could kind of describe a bit, your background, is in…you have a varied background. You have a background in journalism, you have a background in radio journalism specifically, and videography and all of these different thing…and then in terms of the Toronto arts and culture scene can you describe to me a little bit about the Toronto arts and culture scene from your perspective?

AN: I think Desh was a place where people were allowed to nourish and flourish in their art making and many of the people connected to the organization went on to either make films or work in television um…or make TV or write books, a lot of emerging writers were given a home at Desh and then it was a launching pad for them or given more visibility um…so I think Desh helped influenced the larger cultural scene in terms of what got made and what was out there… um and giving kind of voice um…to that very range of experiences…um I think also at the time Desh was very much one of the um…of one of the five more vibrant arts organizations in the city there was lots of overlap so people were involved with you know inside out or other festivals would come to Desh as well so um…yeah I think those are kind of the two ways it might've

AM: So kind of looking back and maybe taking a trip down memory lane, can you describe some of the highlights, both highlights and challenges during your time with Desh?

AN: I think it was a place for um…a place where people were…it was an organization that people shaped their identity through, and to build those connections and to see that their experiences weren't they weren't alone. That there was common histories and um…experiences whether it's with family, or community or religion or immigration, you know I think it was a coming of age of 70s immigrant population and lots of the kids who were born around that time. I think it was a place where people formed social bonds, let's not forget that Desh was a fun social place too, through dances and events that were organizations. I think lots of people have connections that go back twenty-five-thirty years. I think that's a big highlight. I think there's lots of just great experiences that people had in terms of the kind of connection to contemporary cultural productions, ideas that people were exposed to, the debates and conversations that were all going on at the time.

AM: And in terms of challenges?

AN: I think um…another positive, I think Desh helped people develop a more nuanced understanding of what South Asian identity is and that it's ever-evolving and that it's something that is not static, it evolves that culture evolves um… and I think it gave people that, we wouldn't have it otherwise. I think some of the challenges, I think with that headyness of identity politics also came with it, passion around all those issues, so I think some times there tended to be kind of a hierarchy of oppression and sort of playing off who was more oppressed and that I think you know created some times tensions and throughout that period everyone has there own story of what that mean, it depends where you're situated so I think the passion was really important to keeping Desh relevant and alive, but I think it was also at a time where it was heyday of identity politics and I think some times that could fuel um…individual passions and lead to some times friction.

AM: I think that's still something that carries on into today, I think sometimes people call it the oppression olympics.

AN: Right, that's a nice term I've not heard of that. We used to call it the hierarchy of oppression, but yes the oppression olympics very much came into play, and it wasn't only Desh. It was other social movements at the time, it was part of the downfall of identity politics, I think why it's not so…it went through a phase…I think eventually when you try to outdo each other in terms of who was more oppressed and who held more power, you end up becoming more inward looking rather than outward looking and I think some times that was one of the problems.

AM: Yeah that make complete sense, you know kind of on that topic, I'm wondering well first of all I'm wondering when did you stop being involved with Desh? Or when did you stop working there or being involved in the internal mechanisms?

AN: 1997

AM: Were you kind of around for the later years of Desh? Why do you think Desh eventually folded?

AN: I think there are probably a few reasons, I think one thing that happened was the organizations Desh was involved with also folded, right? Over the time, so I think um…I think one of the big reason the change to funding and government policy that kept an organization like that alive 'cause Desh would fly in people from all over the world and bring them to the festival and it was an expensive organization for that time but we were able to do this because of funding support and as that diminished the ability to do that also diminished and then you don't have a pool of money to run an organization that that is a big draw. People loved coming to the festival 'cause they would meet people from across the United States, Canada, England and Desh covered all of that they paid for it. I think that's one reason was the victim of that, I think if that had not changed you might still see the organization around. I don't think it stopped existing because of inviting or lack of community need or desire, I think it was a structural calamity of it's time. I think if you look at groups in the 90s so many of them folded, some stuck around, but they were the ones who were able to capitalize and shift into getting private sector funding. So I think of Inside out, Inside out was very much similar to Desh in how it was organized and that confluence of arts and activism. But I think what happened with Inside out is it targeted the gay community for money and I was involved with Inside out sorry I forgot to mention, I was a programmer for Inside out from 97-2000. What I saw was they were not afraid to go after that money, and made no bones about it, and I think as you know now it's a multi-million dollar organization like it has so much money that CTV is a sponsor of it. Desh didn't do that, nor I don't think could do that. It was still so grassroots and people felt invested in it and owned it and it wasn't able to make that transition and there weren't many people pushing for it either. I don't think we had the skills or capabilities to go in that direction.

AM: Kind as a second to last question, what kinds of lessons did you learn about community organization through the various places that you were involved?

AN: I think you know some of what I took away, how we work together is very important. So we were talking about Oppression Olympics, I think it's really important not to play that sort of tug of war with people and to be open to working with a broad sector of folks from all racial backgrounds but what you should focus on is common causes. It's important to be empathetic, not to see the world from only your perspective but to also be able to see it from someone else's and to acknowledge to validate that people come with different life stories and histories, I think more openness to that, more bridge building in a way. I think during the 90s, we talked about bridge building, but it was still within a smaller group, and what I takeaway from that is that I think bridge building across um…demographics and backgrounds…um…and yeah that allies can come from all different places.

AM: And so Arif as kind of a final closing question, can you tell me how you would describe the ways in which Desh shaped you as you know you're an artist, a journalist, you're a producer, a cultural producer, um…radio producer, and also a human being in the world? How do you think Desh shaped you?

AN: I think how it shaped me, it pulled me more into the world of culture and culture making. And so to see the world in more nuanced ways, more creative ways. To think about the varied um…think about the complexity of how…look at how complex the world is, and to see through different lenses. I know it feels a bit contradictory to what I said before, talking about more empathy, Desh was very much a place that you know I remember being a part of the committee where we picked the poets that would be at the festival, and so to get into that world and think about poetry and how it can say so much with so little or to look at film and you know the story telling that can happen through film that is so creative and imaginative. So I take that with me in the work I do, that creativity and artistic expression and still having an understanding of the larger context can work and you can create beautiful art also that has meaning. And I think that influences all that I do and how I think about the world.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 006 – Submission from Cameron Bailey

Participant: Cameron Bailey

Interview Date: 07/05/2014
Interview Location: Audio file recorded by Cameron Bailey in London, UK.

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Hello Anna, this is Cameron Bailey, it is Saturday May the 7th I am in London and sending you answers to your questions about Desh Pardesh. First I am glad that you are doing this research, and capturing this history. It's not done often enough and I'm glad you're interested and putting in the work, so thank you for that.

First question is about what compelled me to cover Desh in the first instance. Um, I think it was a couple of things that I was interesting in the work itself. I had been a part of a number of different... coming together of different people who saw a need for change in the art scene in the- for me it was the late 1980s and early 1990s and around issues of access and inclusion primarily for people of colour, because we knew that that work was being made, we knew that there were institutions that funded and supported and exhibited art in Canada. And those institutions for the most part (were) not accessible to artists of colour as they were to white artists, and often not even set up to be able to recognize a lot of the art that artists of colour were making. So I was one of many many many people in Toronto and elsewhere around the country who were trying to make some change there.

So when Desh formed I was interested in it from that perspective. I saw the need for this kind of work to be made and to be written about and talked about in ways that made sense to the artists and the institutions that were exhibiting it themselves.

[00:02:12]

I tried as much as possible to write about the work of South Asian artists from the perspectives of the artists themselves, as much as I could get close to that and less from the perspective of "this is sort of interesting, outside kind of perspective" that's being introduced into the mainstream art world. I was trying as much as possible to sort of break down the ideas of mainstream and outsider.

I had been involved in something called "Full Screen" which was a grouping of Black and Asian and Latino artists who were again trying to find common ground. We all had specific issues that we were dealing with but we felt there was something in common that we could articulate by doing that together. So while I was also part of the Black Video Network, which was specific to Black art, "Full Screen" was very much a kind of group, communal response, addressing common concerns about exclusion, racism, and just a kind of lack of understanding about traditions outside of white, western art history. I hope that answers that question.

Lets go to number 2. [pause] What was my framework for engaging with Desh, and what changes have I seen in terms of artists of colour are covered in the media since then? You know, the framework of diversity is, I think, going back to what I was just saying, inadequate to really, you know, express where the artist and where the art is coming from. It's not simply about a reaction to a mainstream, a white mainstream, a male mainstream. It's not simply that, and that doesn't do the work justice. And I think the great thing about Desh was that it got beyond that. It never felt like it was just a kind of reaction against something. It felt like it was creating something new, and that I think was the most inspiring about it. It felt that it was very much about what Toronto was creating and that was new.

[00:04:57]

I mean, you know, people- a lot of people now are- have written about the music culture that has come out of Toronto that is very distinct and unique to Toronto. Drawing on Caribbean musics, drawing on an approach to African American hip hop, that's drawing on traditions that come from many different parts of the world and creating something new. And we're seeing that in artists like the Weeknd and many others.

But I think what Desh was interested in many years ago was something similar. It wasn't simply recreating, you know, the art traditions that came out of South Asia. IT wasn't about duplicating what came out of London or New York or other places that were homes to large numbers of people from the South Asian diaspora. It was about creating something that was distinct to the Canadian context, distinct to even Toronto in many ways, that took all those different influences from you know, Bombay and Colombo, and London and Bradford and New York and Los Angeles, and many other places and brought them all together.

And that was exciting cause it felt new and it felt like something that couldn't be produced anywhere else. That quote about, you know, both multi-culti minstrelsy and fossil nostalgia for something more rewarding- you know, hard to recall exactly what I meant by something more rewarding but I can tell you is what I meant by what I saw Desh avoiding.

And so, what that meant at the time was that there were some artists by the early 90s certainly who had learned to do the multiculturalism artist of colour dance and when they needed funding for certain kinds of things, there were a kind of work that institutions liked because it seemed quote unquote "authentic" in its cultural origins and distant enough from mainstream western art, but recognizable to it. So it became a kind of performance. Masks that you would put on, and what was more interesting to me was when artists of colour shed those masks, didn't perform what establishment institutions might want from by creating something new, even if it was hard to recognize at first, or difficult, or in between, or hybrid, you know- challenged both the so called 'original culture' that the artist was drawing on and the host culture in the Canadian art world.

[00:08:02]

And that just made things more complicated, and I like that a lot of the art I saw at Desh was complicated and fossil nostalgia that is really just something that I think all immigrant communities and sometimes many migrant artists can fall victim to- which is to valorize the

quote unquote 'original culture' and art of the homeland. And again, most of the artists at Desh showed and presented weren't so interested in that. And it was exciting at the time as well.

Last question- What changed over the years in terms of politics, critical engagement? You know, I have mixed feelings about the eventual evolution of Desh to the point where it didn't exist as that entity anymore. I like what it turned into. I like the space that was opened up for particularly artists of South Asian background, who were doing really interesting work in Canada now that seems again to have such a wide range of inspiration and to have created something entirely unique, that's not something you would find in Mumbai or in the UK or anywhere else, but feels very distinct to its roots. And I think Desh gave birth to in a way.

So that evolution produces artists even if Desh kind of fell away at a certain point. I am vaguely aware that there were some critical and political arguments and debates that happened within the Desh organizers, and I'm sure some of that, as it always is, had to do just with personal disagreements as well. I don't really know that much about that, so I can't comment on it. But I did come to know, you know, some of the SAVAC people largely through Rachel Kalpana James, who taught me a lot about contemporary South Asian art in Canada especially.

And I know that some of that built on what Desh had been doing years earlier, and taken it to I think a really interesting place. While, you know, my early exposure to contemporary South Asian art in Canada was through people like Srinivas Krishna and Ali Kazmi and others. It was largely through Rachel and her colleagues and peers and friends that I kind of got a second education, I would say, in that work. And it was really helpful to me and, you know, now what I always like to see is when various artists of colour are learning from each other, talking to each other, finding common ground, finding where things are different and distinct and need to be addressed differently and working together whenever that makes senses.

[00:11:28]

I always think that one of the most inspiring things about the Toronto context is that its different from many places. I think that's all I have to say- that's a lot. I hope it's useful, and thanks for asking me to contribute to this. I really appreciate it. It's good to go back to that time. Alright, goodbye.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 009 – Interview with Dunstan Egbert

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Dunstan Egbert (DE)

Interview Date: 07/05/2014
Interview Location: Conducted at Starbucks in Toronto, ON

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AM: Ok, so I was hoping we could start just by talking about the early days of your involvement. I actually thought that you had first been involved with ASAAP and not Desh but now I'm getting that you started by being involved with Desh is that right?

DE: Mmh, no. I did involved with ASAAP- no this- actually same time involved in both.... I started volunteering at ASAAP then went to ASAAP board first and then came to- been performing at ASAAP and Desh at the same time and then went to Desh board after.

[00:01:25]

AM: Ok so maybe we can start by talking about your involvement with ASAAP a little bit and I would love to hear about what HIV/AIDS organizing looked like at that time. So early 90s, mid 90s. Can you just tell me a bit about the landscape?

DE: Ok, so at that time when I'm volunteering at ASAAP only two staff, or three staff altogether. One half of this room-SAVAC office, less than half- they had three desks and that's all they had and everybody's part time job (two part time and one full time) ED, that's all they had, and [inaudible]. As you can imagine at the time not people are like coming out HIV positive and they come out as the clients, so it's not like they had a huge client base either. So, mostly outreach work; that's what they did; that's what I volunteered with doing outreach prevention work and outreach work

[00:02:30]

AM: And in terms of other HIV AIDS organizations at the time, what else was happening and what was the need for ASAAP about?

DE: So, what happened at that time is only AIDS committee of Toronto existed at the time and it's before my time but why I heard ASAAP exists is because one South Asian guy went to PWA (People with AIDS) organization for some help and they couldn't help him because of the language barrier and he couldn't have certain food restrictions and that stuff because of that and he died. And that sparked the whole thing and then of course the Khush members started

organizing out of their house as a bunch of them got together said they're gonna start this and applied for the first funding and that somehow got funding they had Anthony Mohamed- I don't know if they speak to you. He is the first ED of ASAAP and go from there.

[00:03:30]

AM: And so at the time when you were involved, what were the kinds of activities that ASAAP was doing?

DE: That time when I was involved- we do outreach work. Like I am a volunteer and at the time we actually doing volunteering work at like a high schools and doing workshops and giving out condoms in gay pride and Desh Pardesh and like, so Desh Pardesh had always ASAAP to give out condoms and talk about safe sex and it's kind of a taboo thing and as a Tamil man- a Tamil gay man you come out at that time its really hard to go to Tamil communities and talk about it - that's what I mostly did. Because of my language I just want to go to that community and that's what most of my work is. I remember those days people actually spit on my face and rip my flyers and throw it away and all that stuff happens. But you know the same people who did that then fast forward like 5 or 10 years, 6 or 7 years later, we sat on the same service provider organization and now they're all positive about all that stuff. You know what I mean, so it's just what tells you and what you do doesn't matter what happen it's always that's it. Education, right?

[00:05:00]

AM: Mhmm mhmm, and I gather that you were partly responsible for coordinating the Tamil specific outreach and education piece of things, or where you...

DE: Ok, so what had happened was that's fast forwarding a couple of years later. This is in 2005, 2004. What happens is there is a need for the Tamil- but we're doing outreach in bathhouses and stuff and we found a lot of Tamil men come right after work to bathhouse and then they're all married and just come and they go to their wives. So we found this trend is like way too many man doing that so we Arif at the time identified this issue and I'm volunteering at the time- was on the the board? no- I'm volunteering at the time and we started- we applied for this project and I went into start the project for Tamil men. I worked for [inaudible[all the time; I'll take this project as part time work just to start it off and some other Tamil gay man can take it away but when we started it the problem is I think that Tamil gay men always in the bathhouses and stuff. We didn't know how to bring them under one group- that we- I chatted with another friend named Vijay and we started as a group Snehithan and that kind of took off from there, that group.

[00:06:33]

AM: And what does Snehithan mean ?

DE: Snehithan means friend. I think they already had that type of thing in Madras and same name they call it Snehithan. I don't know, different name but they has the same connotations to the dosti. So we, that came up with Snehithan. and it's kind of come out of [inaudible] as well and actually involved, I'm actively involved with Snehithan and we keep the Tamil men together and in a way Snehithan grew in numbers and they wanted a separate group so that's how it came out. Because all these men who's going there- some are end up coming to a group so we get them the information that they need and stuffs is much easier to talk to than the bathhouse setting. Bathhouse setting- you give a flyer, talk to them, give a condom - that's all you can do because they're there for a purpose and you're not there to be a cock-block basically (laughing). You just want to do the job leave right?

[00:07:36]

AM: And so what kinds of you know- can you comment a little big on the changes you've seen over the time you've been with ASAAP in terms of awareness and education?

ED: Oh ASAAP, like I said- half of this office, everybody is part time. Now, I should know the numbers because I'm on the board right now- probably like 8 or 9 of them, one ED. So it grew much bigger- the PHA program at that time also grew bigger so people with -how do you call them, PHA?- I forgot, people with AIDS program I think (what does it stand for I have no idea). So HIV separate program. So our clients kind of grew so much we have three people for that group- so before part time. So think about how much that grew out. There are women's programs support and we're trying to start a men's program. So it's just all that work is really grew up to be this big organization in a way. And even the support program before we had only one education officer, they called at that time who do outreach at high schools and schools and do workshops and everything. Now, that's split into three programs: women, and men, there's a tamil portion and a gay men portion and the regular portion. So three people working for that. And that volunteer program we never had it and I remember the first time the volunteer coordinator and that grew up and now we have a full time program. So it's kind of in a way the programs grow up- its a big organization. This year, we said we are a half a million dollar organization, which is we build 500,000 funding so I told them in the AGM we gonna be (laughing) one million dollar organization sooner or later (laughing)

[00:09:35]

AM: And so in terms of the funding actually is that something that feels secure and is- has been- what has that been like over time?

DE: See, HIV it's not a death sentence anymore, right? When it was a death sentence, the funding also went for like white organizations like ACT and PWA. We had no specific agencies and they- government always want numbers. How many clients you have? How many things you have- then gives it. So the tricky part of the whole thing about outreach work is- outreach you get more clients, more clients and you get more funding. See if they not give you more money, we

cannot do more outreach, we cannot do more outreach, we cannot get more clients. It's just a struggle we've all been through and I think ASAAP also have every other- nonprofit agencies have this good and bad days about- like bad board, good ED, bad ED, good board and it just somehow sometimes don't grow in a way but it just grew somehow slowly slowly. It's like a growth at the end but it is like how will dip and increase- so what's your?

AM: In terms of consistent funding...

DE: Now, because it's not a death sentence, now the funding kind of changed so in 2017 they're defunding now with all the new government changes, like it is changing but how can we sustain it that's the board and ED supposed to do that work, again. Because it is going to be different, it's mostly going to be very much in the outreach world and that's where the funding will be I think. But somehow, ASAAP was lucky enough because we did good work and our clients grew and everything and so funding is kind of sustained all these years. I don't think we had a hard time with that.

[00:11:37]

AM: And I was curious when you're talking about the- you know you have the women's group and the gay men's group- is there any transgender outreach through ASAAP?

DE: Right, we do have trans clients and there's not -numbers again- not enough numbers to have a group and that's where the next focus should be right? There's like a lot of new- and also there's also no Arabic speaking community at all to do calls? also-and maybe I shouldn't say that here. But there should be a growth to the agency, I think that's where they should focus on. One is trans, one is this thing and also I think that addiction-drug addition also part of a I think thing that we can do with. That's where I think they should grow as agency- I don't know what will be after that but I think (inaudible). I'm also joined ASAAP board after 20 years later again, so there's like a big gap.

[00:12:40]

AM: Ok so, you were first involved in 95 and you were involved as a volunteer?

DE: Volunteer in 94, 95 I become a board member

AM: And then you were a board member for

DE: 95 yeah, two terms I guess two year two year two terms- or three terms I don't remember. But I completed my terms.

AM: And then you weren't there for a while and you came back? Is that right?

DE: Then after that I came back as a worker- the Town Project took off so I came to work in that project and then there are two other people came after me to work and they couldn't find another gay man to work on the job so I came back again to work for a while and that's a time me and ____ worked together because she's an education out-worker ___ ? And I just don't want to work there right, I just came there to do the work. Then somebody else came over so I left. And then after that- I always involved with ASAAP as a volunteer always.

[00:13:36]

AM: So going back in time again, Im into nonlinear stories. So going back in time again, can you tell me a little about the sort of sociopolitical moment- so the moment ASAAP was emerging, Khush, Desh, the confluence of all these things. What did that moment look like in Toronto in terms of- why were all those things emerging?

DE: I think 90s is very much identity politics style, right. So the identity politics is popping up everywhere and they had arts organization for every single group like the Black Hearts organization, there's Latin American organization, South Asian arts organization- same way, we HIV AIDS also had the same thing. We had AIDS committee of Toronto, and PWA and then Black CAP so I think first ethno-specific agency is ASAAP and after that Black CAP came which is for Black community and then ACAS for Asian community and then now there's so many other things that came up (laughs) so it's all kind of popped up because of the identity politics so 90s identity politics is very vibrant and most of the activists also pushed for identity politics and identifying you as a South Asian for me to come from England and Sri Lanka and in England we're all Asians. And come here you're South Asians it's like what is this now ? It is harder for you to adjust to, and you come to South Asian organization everybody speaks Hindi and everybody is whatever and it's like oh what is this now? I don't identify, right? So that also part of struggle you go through when - in a way that's a part of the good and that's a part somehow made all these organizations come up. Because we also kind of stuck in a group- it's Toronto politics of exactly the same-that's why we have so many religions of (Indian religions and Greek religion?)- all that stuff came out of identity politics. I'm not an activist, I'm an accountant. I'm a numbers guy. I always worked in social things as volunteer and helped in all the stuff but I'm comfortable with numbers. I love numbers. I love doing taxes. I'm not one of those guys shy about it; I love it! I love the corporation pay money. I love everything about it. Nothing about it I hate. I do think as a identity politics time, I think I do think that we need to as every single group shouldn't be pushed into a corner because I'm not a socialist- I'm not a word person. So like I don't think people put in the corner because they're somebody. So the identity politics kind of helped us all grow into so many different organizations. I think that's amazing I thought. And then one time it just kind of vanishing away. I know I'm going back in (inaudible) it's kind of vanishing away. I think that's what the need is - the need is over. People kind of find their group maybe and that's kind of done. Maybe that's the end of things, right? So identity politics also changed all the time and at that time identifying as South Asian became really important and within South Asian theres big group of South Indian versus North indians and Pakistanis versus Bangladeshis- it's just all the things exist. Suddenly they all have their own

thing. I think that's what the great part of all these organizations is that all these groups popped out.

[00:17:35]

AM: So you think that we're now in a moment where we don't require that kind of-

DE: I don 't know because I'm not - now in a position of sitting a board and trying to make big decisions and trying to change- get funding, trying to change the program in a way with my experience and stuff. I'm trying to trigger this into-according to the needs. I'm not in the frontline to find out the need, right. And before, when 90s I was in the frontline trying to find out what the peoples need. Ok, we need a trans workshop and trying to create the trans group actually contacted- I know a lot of men at that time going to Snehithan? and they don't know what to do so we grouped them together, brought experts and doctors...- that kind of a need at that time, right. So now I think this all exist this- there's (inaudible) programs actually exist for trans people so I think that's kind of (inaudible) in way but I don't know whether that's sustainable or thats kind of everybody's kind of been through that process now, they probably don't need- I have no idea because a frontline worker anymore. I'm trying to sit in the board- somebody give me the report saying ok this is the need ok lets find out what we can do for that. So in a way, what I'm finding out is like most of the need assistance not giving us is ok- this identity politics, so, even somebody trying to revamp Desh a while ago and did not come through. I always wonder why that is. Maybe the young kids don't need that identity politics and identity artwork and identity things anymore. We don't know, because they're trying to be that one group of people and even though I remember when I started it, we only called it gay and lesbian organization. And we add the bi, and when we add the bi it's a huge politics to add a bi and then to a trans become- so its when grew up to the point and people said oh forget everything and put it as a queer. It just is so many things that- that's an example of identity politics, right. I remember in university we just adding a bi we stayed all night discussing whether adding a bi is important thing- are they really gay or lesbian. Now, when you think about it, how stupid you can be, right. But that's now identity politics becomes so strong, because you belong in a group and belong in a gay group or lesbian group. Now you put them together and its totally different people, right. Fine we work together, and now you add the bi people- who are these people, right? It's just ah- identity politics, that's how it worked, right.

[00:20:30]

AM: I would almost say that- I mean I think identity politics still exist but it looks totally different- or not totally different, but it looks quite different so maybe it's sort of like uniting along brown lines. We're brown people who experience certain kinds of things and that kind of identity politics, which also has its own issues right. It's almost like things evolve with the times-

DE: I think that's what the thing -that's a great point you brought. It's what I'm talking to people about right now, also. The Snehithan _____ is coming up we wanna do something about it and

we had lots of immigrant Tamil boys coming to the group at the time so their need is very different. They dont even know what's a gay village is, they don't know what the bathhouse is, they don't even know what real gay things are, so we show them that world and we introduce them to that world and introduce to the bars and the scene and all that stuff in safe and proper environment way. So now the new immigrant- the new generation kids, they're not immigrants, right. So they're born here, so their identity politics is very different, right. So the identity politic is very different, so now they- my cousin came out as lesbian. She's born here, raised here, you know- her parents came in 70s. So it's just their identity politics is very different. And they try to fit into this box of things and I want them do it and that's why I told- people how are working on this [inaudible] proj- I say listen this is we need. We properly need accommodating stuff for the first generation kids more than the immigrant kids because South Indian kids coming in much less statistically compared to before so the Sri Lankan war going on like India- Pakistan war going, Bangladesh, so in 70s the flood of people coming in the new immigrant need is different and now it's very different. Their kids have a very different lifestyle, different needs and they're not accepted by the white society and they're also stuck in this world so that's where they probably need the support, you're right. (inaudible)

[00:22:45]

AM: That was a lot more fleshed out... I was trying to- So tell me a little bit about - and you can go back and forth between talking about ASAAP and Desh and Khush, but tell me about your experiences with Desh and what you did with Desh and what you thought it all.

DE: Ok, so as a gay man, when I came out I- when the university part of the gay group I involved in starting the group as well- so kind of empowering. We had a lot of South Asians coming in. Then I involved in Khush, went to Khush meetings and stuff and from there I met [inaudible] who involved in Desh (laugh) so we - then I met Sudharshan- Sudharshan is the choreographer I was dancing at that time so I danced in this piece and then his performance came to Desh soon after my performance happening all this stuff and then they asked me to be on the board because they found out that I'm a finance background (laugh) they want somebody with economic background.

[00:23:50]

AM: They must have been like what a dancer and an accountant !

DE: (laughing) we want him now ! And that's how I got involved with Desh. But ASAAP- at the same time I'm involved with ASAAP already, I'm sitting in the board and ASAAP is going to transition I told you that half a room. We found our first office in 20 Carlton, we moving to the new office all the (inaudible) I was there for that change as well. So when I was in Desh at that time that's a -how can I call it- Desh glory days. Desh glory days are like everything going well, fundings are great, you know, people are trying to get into Desh performance. It's just a big performance to somehow they accept me or not, you know what I mean. And also as you know

I'm into politics also heavy so again lesbian politics is heavy and the so because it's kind of came out of the gay and lesbian organization is that strong represent is there so they're kind of holding onto their thing and others coming in considered as (long inaudible sentence). It is kind of like a thing at that time happening, but I loved Desh. I think I loved Desh more than ASAAP at that time even though I'm actively involved in HIV AIDS thing I felt for cause- I'm also a dancer right- so I kind of, good to find out other South Asian dances and go to see their performance and talk about dance and living the life of thing is that you can never get it back. That gave you the empowerment- ok now we can do- we had a stage, right. We had a stage to do a performance, a political performance which is like accepted by people also, right. And I don't know anywhere else that happened. People came from Australia, like you know what I mean. People flew in from like places I never expected for them to come and these are like South Asians living in these countries and they flew in just to perform. And I felt like- before Desh I wouldn't even came out. I probably married to some woman and settled in, right because Desh gave me the empowerment to come out in public and be this gay man and (inaudible) and do all this stuff and not compared to- even with no Desh- one of those South Asian man who's probably married and settled in. My family is from a strong Catholic background. It's just not that easy- still not easy. But the thing is without Desh I would not have done it. Desh gave me that energy, right because you see all these men and women who struggled before you, right. Compared to them, your life seems much easier. And they paved the path and we started walking in and we thought about ok we should pave the path for the rest as well. And without them, it's just not that easy.

[00:27:05]

AM: And you say Desh, and you say Desh was the thing, not Khush

DE: What happened to me Khush is Khush is also walked in, I did not identify with Khush so much. For me, identifying with Khush is kind of a struggle. I did not know about Hindi movies, I did not know anything about - because they all spoke in Hindi most of the time in their meeting and I felt I shouldn't ask them to speak in English because this is a comfortable space they're coming to speak. Like, who am I now coming in- you know I'm a Catholic guilt- you just take it out, right? So for us we kinda - me and Sudharshan is the only Tamil people at that time and Shyam? also came to a couple of meetings. He's hardly involved in Khush as well. We all kind of involved in Desh because here we found other lesbians and other Tamil- we kind of have a group going and I think that helped us with that

[00:28:05]

AM: So Desh was a bit more kind of like there were people from all parts of South Asian diasporas?

DE: So ya, what happened with Khush is also men's organization- it's not women really not involved in it. So identity politics also very different... see I don't want to criticize Khush because there's a need for Khush as well at that time. There's no Khush, no Desh, no ASAAP, no nothing

and that's what I involved with- Khush handled all that thing. It is important to have that. I think I identified more myself with Desh and because of Sudarshan and because of people who involved in - Tanya and all these people here, Kaspar? All these people. We all hang out together and somehow we all come from- like I come from war background and war background means lot of like beaten up by army and all that stuff. You come from all that hurt and things and Desh healed me more and it's not a class conscious- it just healed me more. People came with all these kinds of problems and issues and we kind of hug together and healed each other. A lot of people came from sexual abuse and a lot people came from different problems and a lot people come from no family support and it just kind of we hug together and hug each other and supported each other. I think that's the great part of it. Still to this day I always tell people nothing like a Desh days. Everybody will tell you that who involved with Desh. I think Desh days were glory days and we enjoyed so much. I did my drag performance there and everybody (laughs)- I'm not a big good drag queen. Because of the Desh fundraising we need money for Desh for all to heal I'll do it (laughing together) and I did perform it this white gay clubs and stuff just to get money for Desh and we did well I think at the time, right. That's a community we had. We had our own struggle, of course, like any other organization. We had our own identity politics, but I think trans is not vibrant at that time. It's just only few are popping up, it's not even an issue. I think even bi an issue, I think about trans is not an issue that time. So it's kind of interesting but we- at least there's a community there. There's also have a little split up group and you know, as always I guess, but it's nothing like Desh days. I always tell people, even my cousins who come out recently and said I wish you guys had Desh. It's something- like at least you have something to feel and without Desh I don't think I will come out (laugh)

[00:31:10]

AM: And so, I'm- several people have said that working- was that feeling coming from explicit conversation like in- let say in meeting times. Was there space to actually talk about personal things or was it the kind of social bonding that happened outside of meetings and outside this kind of thing?

DE: My involvement is mostly dance, right. So I dance we had gay pieces and others came from Montreal and they did the full gay piece and it's just so nice to see that. As a dance you always dance with these women, you know, very _____ and this thing and that thing and suddenly broke all those into pieces and now you have this environment. It's just amazing. Outside those performances, like in the meeting -

[00:32:01]

AM: Can I ask you a quick question about that -

DE: Sure

AM: Are you a Bharatanatyam dancer?

DE: Yes

AM: Ok, and so you were dancing- are you also a choreographer?

DE: No

AM: Ok, so you were dancing some of -

DE: Sudarshan's piece, yea

AM: Can you tell me a bit about the first piece that you did there, cause just I've seen just like flyers for some of them but tell me just a little bit about what some of the stories were that you were telling through dance

DE: I think one of the piece he did about basically about shade-ism - So how shade-ism in Bharatanatyam community is a big deal, so we put the make up like make up all the way here, u can see underneath all the dark skin and how you smile about it and how you go about it. I'm trying to make that into a film right now (laughing) so I'm working with him. So that piece did well, especially the time of identity politics, right, so it did well. That's one of the piece and another piece he did with [inaudible], which is one gay male couple and one female lesbian couple and with a whole sexual piece (laugh). So that also did well at Desh, I remember Desh, ya.

[00:33:15]

AM: Did you dance in that one?

DE: Yes, and then he did another piece called - it's called "Water"- I don't know if he performed at Desh. But also other artists came and did a lot of pieces which is -

AM: When you were speaking about the artist from Montreal, was that like [inaudib;e] ? Or which company was-

DE: Oh, what's his name again? Long time ago. He did a lot of trans pieces and I forgot about his name

AM: It's not [inaudible]?

DE: No, Arif or- I can ask Sudharshan, because he's, he's amazing, he broke the ASAAP pattern of painting everything gender specific, right. Like we had the dance-

AM: The Desh part?

DE: The dance- because Desh at that time was gender specific. Lesbians and gay and then trait and then the bi is a problem and it's always a problem in Desh at that time- I know why. So this guy came from Montreal and I loved it because he broke all the pattern of what gender is and whenever his performance come, I felt he's really great. I think whatever he did is amazing. I forgot his name, but I'll get you (snaps fingers) name. Probably Sudharshan should remember because we also went together and performed in their stage there in Montreal when he doing it, so I should get his name. Otherwise I can flip out some magazines in the back (laugh). So he he's one of those people somebody should interview, because he's not involved in Desh in a way that we all did. We had a community. He came from Montreal, performed, and went back. And they did not have that support in Montreal. The Montreal South Asian community is very small and because I always went and we performed and hanged out with him and stuff, and the artists and stuff is always very small- I remember his friend. I'll ask Sudharshan, Sudharshan should know the name. And when he did those performances, I caught even here people didn't like what he was doing. Even Desh as a politics and they won't like it because he's bending the whole gender into like five different pieces and I loved it. I loved the fact that he did it. And because he's always very critical of Desh and very different man- I think you should speak with him. Probably very outside perspective you can get.

[00:35:58]

AM: That would be great, yeah. And so what was it like for you as, you know, to be a Bharatiyam dancer trained for a long time and you probably had been in certain kinds of performances and certain kinds of dance. What was that like for you to have the opportunity to explore other sides of yourself through dance?

DE: Well, yeah. I met Sudharshan. Sudharshan asked me dance and I danced. And that's how it came about. I kind of stopped- I was dancing in England with my aunt who's a dance teacher too- she was a famous dance teacher there. And after that I came to Canada, I said I'm not going to do this anymore because I'm not enjoying this 'Krishna is coming' and that and this standing and then come come come and never came. And you stand in the corner and cry forever, right (laughing) and it's like whole performance done by you like oh god what are you doing (laugh). So, at the end of the day I thought ok I'm not going to do this . Then I found Sudharshan, so, Sudharshan's guru was [inaudible] and I met her like that- lucky enough to meet her. And she is I think one of the pioneers of contemporary Bharatanatyam and I- whatever work I saw her work is amazing. I think what Sudharshan did with Bharatanatyam is great and I think what he continues to do is great. I'm pushing him a bit- he's great. Because Bharatanatyam shouldn't be Bharatanatyam, it should be contemporized like ballet contemporized and dancing with him is very empowering- very empowering to create characters came out of sexuality and colour and all that. It just very empowering you know, it's just very learning experience also. When you go through the character at the end, you identify about yourself- what you thought and thought about life and how you perceive things and you - I grew as a person also. And every time there's a performance people come out and say things and you're like oh god like I'm glad I did that because that represented that community or represented this person and I think it's great.

AM: And it terms of like- you mentioned the dancer who came from Montreal- So in terms of dance highlights or other highlights in the festival for you in terms of performance or art that you saw. Can you think of- I know it was a while ago but

DE: Ya I think the person I talked about from Pakistan- unfortunately she passed away. (maybe: Jahanara?) and Natasha - and they both did a performance together. They both Kathak dancers and I'm Bharatiyam background. For me to - I'm also new to the country, of course. I'm not exposed to Kathak as much from Sri Lanka and in England I always danced with Bharatiyam. So I came here- seeing those two women performing- unbelievable. I think she/they were best Kathak dance ever and Natasha still doing work- I saw her film the other day. Amazing. I think that's what the highlight for me because I did not think- they broke the whole Kathak piece. After that I did so many Kathak pieces and didn't realize what they did at that time was mind blowing to break all the tradition of Kathak into something else. I think they're great and that's my mind blowing performance. There was a lot of theatre work also- one of the film they- somebody did about child abuse and stuff. I think that's also created a lot of this (inaudible) and that they, not only me half the audience felt that way and that's kind of an eye opening for me. Ok, i'm not the only person and we all kind of hung out together that night. We all cried and we all in one room and we all drank together, did drugs together, and I was like oh this is great. And that was the part, the second. And as a performer, I think that's the most important thing as a person for- because after that I did go find therapy and I did improve myself and yes, that. Otherwise I stuck in a world of that time in life and I couldn't get out of and that movie kind of helped me ok everybody else is too- not just me

[00:40:54]

AM: Was it the Michelle Mohabeer film?

DE: I forgot it (laugh)

AM: Was it set in the Caribbean?

DE: Uh, I think so, yeah.

AM: I mean there was a couple ?

DE: There are two- one is about somebody from- somebody is back from Vancouver brought this film and I remember about child abuse also. And I think half the audience started crying and we all walked out of- some walked out of it . They had a social work therapist right there to do work with them. Because I thought my issue is bigger and then I hear other people's stuff and I think oh shoot like you were nothing (laugh)

[00:41:38]

AM: Well that's the kind of thing- when I hear that and that kind of thing doesn't happen now

DE: No

AM: That was groundbreaking at that time but its-

DE: It's still happening, right

AM: Well of course (inaudible), but like I mean in terms of having spaces where that can be talked about.

DE: Yeah..

AM: It's still, I would say, as taboo as it was in a certain way-

DE: True, true

AM: Or it's just a new kind of taboo cause I don't go to things now where it's like oh we can all watch something together - almost because it was talked about and then it almost feels to be like there was a backlash of like 'oh we don't want to like trigger each other, we don't want to upset each other so lets not" whereas like that leaves a lot us alone to deal with it ourselves. So i think there could be a real revival of like- how to do it. How to do it in a way that is- cause that can be really liberating-

DE: Yeah, I think that's what I always feel as a person. I think there's no space for that - there's no space that. Like my parents are oldest in their family, so my cousins are much younger and when my cousin recently coming out and I'm thinking 'god you don't have that space' and when it's really seeing somebody going things- because you also like you know - you're out of your [inaudible], you settled in life, you're just different stage of life, right. We don't think what the youngsters really still have that actual issue and it's a real eye opener, at least for me seeing my cousin come out and she going through depression and even tho my uncle and aunt are pretty open and but she still has to struggle through that, right. And see that I realize we need a space like this to have some type of group or some type of performance to trigger these things and trigger the talk at least. We always had discussions after the movies and performance and that discussions (long inaudible)- even they talk a lot. But i'm not a talker and for me to listen to all this conversation, all this men and women talking is great. I learned lot out of that and made me who I am today. And I think they need a space like that for youngsters- especially youth to come and talk . I think there's no space. I know Sherbourne Health centre does a good job and I know others- but it's not South Asian specific and even sex and sexuality South Asian specific is very different. All my life experiences of twenty- now twenty five years of involved with this thing with South Asians, they like to talk in private themselves, more than white group, you know they wont talk. Even me I don't talk. Now I talk, I guess, but me like I hardly talk. When I brought all these men together in a group, we talked about sex and sexuality openly and hairy bodies and fat

bodies and all. We had body talks like now I don't even know these kids how body conscious- they don't even know where they have the support. They don't even talk (about this?), they don't even know they have this support- we don't know. I think it- places like ASAAP exist but they have a focus of something. There's no other agencies for South Asian to have this and I don't know the new generation kids need - this is like always ask this question, I don't know what they need as a need. I just don't see it. Like, for me now I'm in a position of life, like I just want somebody to give me a report like this thing ok lets find a way to do it. But i'm not a frontline worker anymore and I don't know how to do this. We tried to do a queer junction, once in a long time ago- me and Amita.

[00:45:30]

AM: Queer junction ?

DE: Yeah, so we said ok lets start something called Queer Junction to see whether there's any need. Lot of people signed up

AM: What was that ?

DE: We did - what did we- we just brought some some emerging actors to perform at Buddies and it's a whole day performance- it's packed the .. a lot of people showed up - more than I thought because they also just go and they come back type of thing. But we didn't think it as a Desh, we thought of it as a we need a queer performance space for them to come out and talk about things and stuff. So it did well- a lot of people signed up and we emailed and tried to set up a group, nobody really showed up. So that's when I realized, maybe I am pushing it so much, maybe there's no need with the youngsters, right (laughing).

[00:46:18]

AM: I don't know, I think there is a need but I think that the motivation and what motivation looks like is really different today than what it was when you doing that kind of frontline work and even from when I- the kind of stuff I've been doing. Like it's almost like I'm middle generation and I think you know, related to as you said a lot of people who are born here and who grow up here and who have immigrant parents who have access to all kinds of social media, all kinds of things at their fingertips but still have the same issues, you know. So, it's like how do- I don't know. I don't know what the answer is but when you're saying 'maybe it's just me pushing it' like pretty much everyone I've spoken to has said there does feel like a need for some of these things. How do we do it and what does that look like ? It sounds like people do still feel like theres a need for like South Asian specific or like, you know, or maybe it's like young people of colour or - what does that kind of look like ?

DE: I honestly when talking to youngsters lately a lot and I'm also trying to do this 10th year anniversary event and so I'm trying to involve the next generation. I'm trying to talk to them and what's happening there.

AM: Sorry the 10th anniversary of-

DE: 10th anniversary of Snehithan like my- So I'm trying to figure out what to do and can we transition to something else. And I feel like there's a need. I really honestly feel like there's a need and I feel like need is scattered everywhere and nobody's kind of doing it together. Only to organize and do in SAVAC, or ASAAP, right. And these are only two organizations -politically at least to do it. And there are a lot of South Asian organizations there. And funding is like full of money government have and everybody grab it, right. It's- I think somebody wrote the funding and somebody did this thing and will happen- it will happen. I can start a Queer Junction one day and I'm not there because I'm not a full time working in this industry, right. I can sit in a board and help you but I cannot help in the frontline work. That's a need I didn't have at that time too- like I said- let's start it. I thought some of the volunteers would come because I'm not a writer, I'm a numbers person. Give me a budget for that performance and budget for this. I'm not a writer. And so I didn't how to apply for funding. I'm not a funding person. I think there a bunch of artists should coming together including people like me who are lawyers and doctors- I mean accountants to give the other background so that will bring something back. For that, I think there should be something initiated. I don't know whether it should come from youngsters because it's their need. I feel uncomfortable telling them oh you should do this today and lets do shit- even that's the reason why I walked out of Snehithan- let's see what they want and I really don't want to get involved. Let me see what happen- I will help. I'll go to all the meetings, try to go to all the events, but I don't want to show my influence so much, you know what I mean. There are a lot of things like Rainbow Railroad going on, like other things going on. I'd rather involve myself in other things because I don't know what the need is, right. Because I'm very much settled in my life and I have a boyfriend and I'm getting married next year (laugh) you know what I mean. All the stuff is happening, my life is very different. For me- to like even my cousin come out- for ask for help. We talk, hang out all this stuff. But their need is very different. I just don't know how as a person I can sit in the board and do all this stuff for you but I just don't know how to do the frontline work (laugh).

[00:50:22]

AM: So given that you're saying 'oh I don't know what the need is but I feel that there's something that needs to happen. If you were to give some advice, depending it is what they want to do about how to do it. Like about how- the things to keep in mind so whether it's about how to get along with each other or how to work through issues together. Is there any kinds of lessons that you have taken, because you have a wealth of experience with Desh, with ASAAP, with Khush, like all of the organizing you've done and as a dancer too. In terms of organizing, are there lessons you've taken from that that you would then say- that you would give to young people?

DE: I think every group come together, there's always a partisan of people, right. They kind of find each other as little cliques and that cliques sometimes not like each other in some kind of way. But we always have to think about what our bigger purpose is at the end, right. And even Desh at that time the lesbians and gay men did not really get along. Their motives are kind of in a different manner and the parties and the hangout and all the stuff. And the politics also the same way- so in a group when we we're always gonna have a different type of group, we're always gonna have a different things and someone in the group or they have to know the ultimate mandate why we are here for and they have to work together. And that's a thing. And then what you also realize is what the group's strength is- let them do what they're good at. And trust them with it. And if not trust them with every group, at the end it's gonna be a huge problem and chaos. I think every single group has their own strengths and the will it well because they have their own clique and that's a reason they click, they have some commonality of some thing, right. And that commonality of something is their strength and we let them do that thing and we trust them with it. And when they all come together, great things comes about, I think. Just my opinion (laugh). How do we start this, I think I'm not on Facebook because my employer sometimes goes and snoops around so I just wiped out of Facebook even though that was like 2000s, before everybody else on it. But I think there's a lot of social media stuff. I am on Twitter but I'm not on anything else. I think there's a way to create groups from there, like there are lots of small groups pop out. I think even if a group pops out somewhere - what happens with the social media I find is everybody put a face on- you can be somebody else very easy. So the identity politics becomes two layers. One is who you be in social media and who you really are. It can be this way like you maybe underpresenting yourself or overpresenting yourself and when you come in real life and talk to people you become- you don't know how to represent yourself as a person. I think that itself it's like -create problems. So in a social media group can be a good group, but I think in person with people come together as different artists- even if you say one theatre worker, one dancer, and one thing. They're going to do a performance together, that will create something somewhere. One film artist and one theatre worker and then dancer and they want to do - and one visual artist- and they want to do a performance together. Morning, some type of thing in a gallery. After that same gallery convert into a performance piece. We did have that in 90s. We did have bookstores convert into performance area and we always went to the book store, read the books, we had coffees, somebody get reading and some poetry went down- never happens anymore. I don't know if it's still happening in New York but at that time I know New York also happens because I went to New York. Even in Toronto, we have different bookstores. We go read books, we hang out, poetry and we- just great things. The small spaces brought the big spaces together. Desh did not start as a big performance at Buddies, it just started as some small performance somewhere. I think that small performance is what we need I think. Even now I think now there's South Asian theatre group or I think they can collaborate together- one big performance that may create stuff. But are they gonna keep everything politically that's where the problem comes in, right. Sat on the board different different times- some board is better political, some board is not political and that's kind of throw the balance in and out and that's what happened with Desh at the end too, right. Because I was... you talk about something else... I always want to talk about this as one of the thing. I was called in to come and look at the books at the end of Desh, and I came and I realized none of the board is anyone with finance

background because everybody is an artist. And they did not- they changed the accountant because of their identity politics. I don't know why they changed the accountant; the accountant we had was great because somebody who know non-profit and this is a whole point of changing $100 versus somebody who know the work is more important, in my mind. And finance is core of the business. You cannot take that out, as an artist. I always tell every artist when I do our budget and stuff , remember ths is your budget. You cannot go over this, right. This is your thing you have to work with. I give it to you mean I'm doing this, just not a fun it's just for you to keep it up. Everyday, look at it- did I overspend or underspend. Otherwise, you'll always be a poor artist. And don't complain to me why I'm starting art? - you know what I mean. It's the same thing because go to any agency and we always have a budget and we always have to stick to it- you know I'm doing accountant talk. At that time when I came to Desh, to at the end of Desh- last day basically come and open the book and what I can do to help the Desh. I couldn't help, they did not even open the CRA letter for so many months. And the owed the CRA $22,000 or something.

[00:57:04]

AM: They owed $22,000 ?

DE: To something

AM: CRA ?

DE: CRA , right. Because the payroll tax credit they didn't do right. They did not do the GST rebates. It's [inaudible] when you get it back and the payroll tax - you cannot pay your coordinators with- this is the simple things because they're artists they not think of it. They really not have somebody in the board too. So any group, we have what we put together. They need to have variety, to have an accountant, they need to have a lawyer to talk about law stuff and they need to have different types of artist because otherwise none of them will grow into something. I think that's my- because learning from Desh also, when I come and open and said oh you cannot much. That's what I said and I walked out - I remember which Fatima- the other Fatima, I guess- I forgot their last names- The other Fatima was an ED at that time- she was a friend of mine. So we came into- I came in to help her out and I was like this is crazy. How can you not open up your CRA letters? CRA letters are like the government, you know what I mean. You cannot not open them. And that's exactly what I'm talking about with a group- you need anything to be done you need different different people coming together to grow something together. We cannot have one mind, one political thing, one type of mind because what happened at Desh has become more political in a way. They just start isolate the other minds, so you become so political to the point that you isolating other mind. No, you should keep everything together; that give you the balance. And that's what they forgot to do at the end of the day.

[00:58:59]

AM: But do you think it's not possible to remain very true to your politics or-

DE: You can remain to the politics- that that's what I'm talking about. Every time I think like for example, I'm gonna bring up completely something else. Supreme court judges- Supreme judges are made out of mostly political affluents. Every political power somehow put their party there so they can pass their policies through law, right. The same way the board sits. So you need to have a balance- you need balance from everybody else. You need somebody to tell you you're not doing accounting right or you're not doing the law right- these are the two most important thing. In any boat- Desh, ASAAP- we always make sure we have at least one finance person and one lawyer person or two lawyer person and two finance persons sitting there- are we doing right, are we doing right, are we doing right. Right, and that's something very important- and also the crowd is everybody else- it's social workers in my group, for example, right. Most of them are social workers. And most of them at Desh is artists. I'm artist too at that time but I'm also just accountant so we just kind of helped through that, right. And that's what they need- that's what they every-. When you break that balance, when its everybody becomes one minded, like you need a different mind to like point you out and bring you around and say 'oh you're flying away with your thoughts' right. You cannot- it's just hard to see the other side what I'm missing, right.

[01:00:42]

AM: And do you feel like Desh had that balance at some point ?

DE: Desh did have that balance at that point and I remember Desh had that balance for a long time- very long time. I know Mike Harris came in and Mike Harris is the biggest part of Desh closing down, maybe. And everybody blamed Mike Harris too. I personally believe Desh could have survived if they had a balance. Because, as at the last day of Desh, I came in, I looked at the books myself- I don't know which room is the same- fourth floor somewhere. I came and looked at the books. At that time SAVAC had a smaller office than us and I came and look at the books and I said to myself this is crazy. Im also not involved for a while and I come back and say this is crazy. I got to all the performances- or part of the performances but I involved in all probably all part of this selecting committee and all this stuff, but not part of Desh in the board level, right. And I come and look at the books and this is crazy. Basically said to them this is crazy and I couldn't tell people either for a long time. I'm like, I don't want Desh to have a bad name but that's what happened. And I think- anyways, that's what I felt.

[01:02:03]

AM: So you're kind of saying it was a combination of like hard financial times and - because you know Mike Harris was in but also by-

DE: Like American Art community also part of the same room where Desh was at - they closed it down. And the Black community had their own ____ and that's also closed it down. So it's not only Desh. Everybody else closed down as well. Where the identity politics came out in a way

that Mike Harris came and kind of folded in. But my point is- places like ASAAP also exist and we also grew in a way right. But I find it like you need to have the balance then you could've survived, right. Like 22,000 going into a thing, which is part of the project fund, part of the salary- you could have paid that regularly, have no problem, right. Even if your funding is smaller, you have a small event and run with it until the government change. And the liberal government come and you probably got enough funding to run with it, so. And also now, most of Desh artists are in Ontario Arts Council and Canada Arts Council. They're sitting there, like approving funds. I know them all, right, so. If Desh is still exist, they could have approved fund no problem, because they grew out of Desh and become the person who they are, right. Lot of big artists came out- Shyam Selvadurai, Michael Ondaatje when he came here it's not a big deal, right. They are huge- there are lots of singers, a lot of movie- look at Ian, his movie is in all this (inaudible). Desh produced a lot of good artists, but also folded because of didn't grow. But we also scared, I think most of Desh was scared. If we grew into big then others gonna come in and take over and it's gonna be-maybe it's gonna be a straight org. At that time, I'm not worried about that- I'm worried about what the need is, right.

[01:04:14]

AM: So people were worried about it becoming too mainstream?

DE: Could be mainstream; I knew people were worried about it. I can talk about it now- ya they were worried about it. I think at that time those changes were happening because of popularity comes. It's like TIFF- when it started TIFF was only four dollars and twenty five cents ($4.25). 40 years later now- I don't know, 25 years later- it's like 25 bucks and every single major star comes in. It's become less and less progressive movies compared to the mainstream movies, right. Same thing, Desh is going to grow into that thing so people are scared of the transition- they stopped. They stopped including the other people in. But I think sometime transition is inevitable. You cannot do anything about it. That part of being famous. That's part of being a growth- and in growing to something. But it's a big South Asian organization, right. Still you probably had a pocket of things for all these people to deal with, so now you add another pocket. As long as they know how to manage it, they could've done a good job. I think that's what happened at the end. And then they're scared of the growth, scared of the next step because they're growing so big. So one day festival turned into two day festival turned to week festival, right. So just one evening thing turns into whole week festival and people- you can see gay- Church street packed with South Asians coming from all over the country. Like it's just world, I mean. And Trikone started after Desh- everything started after Desh. From there actually- they met there said lets start something there.

[01:06:03]

AM: And for you, like do you still dance?

DE: Oh no (laugh) - yah I do- I'm trying to do this film project with Sudharshan. He- uh recently I kind of went for practice for - he wanted an older teacher for director so went and danced for a while. I do like film more than dancing. I like to make my little short films compared to dance so much. Because I'm not a big choreographer- if somebody ask me to dance I dance it (laugh). I'm not a choreographic-talented person. So I- he asked me to come and dance recently so I went and danced for a while. And then the project didn't take off and in a way I'm so happy because of my body cannot do all- like half of the stuff (laughing). So, yeah. So this project is interesting. I'm excited about bringing- because I think I honestly feel like dance films are very important because dance films are staged in certain part of time and the big dance groups- and I look at their dance forms and it's amazing. For example, Jahanara? passed a way (inaudible), you know. Her dance has gone with her and I think that's something we have to keep before the choreographers- somebody do research to see what they can do with dance also. I think film can be a good artifact to keep, so that's what I'm trying to work on.

[01:07:35]

AM: So the main project you're working on is the one with Sudarshan?

DE: One of Sudharshan, yes. So there's whole project. I don't want to dance anymore, I just want other people to dance. I just want to be sit on this side and make film out of it.

AM: Ok, I can't wait to see it.

DE: Let's see what happens with that (laugh)

[01:07:49]

AM: Is there anything else that I didn't ask you about that you were hoping to talk about - about Desh or any of this stuff?

DE: Only wanna talk about how its closed down and yeah- I think something not many people wanna talk about it so I should talk about it. That's the only thing I prepared to come and talk about it, because that's something bothered me a lot also, yeah. And I hope there's another Desh comes up and hope theres more thing for the youth to have. They really don't have anything. I think a whole generation of people without one and they need one- they need a-. It's a support program, right. It's a support program that people don't think it is. And now, all this money exists in arts councils, but I know that. But I'm not an artist to apply for it (laughing).

[01:08:43]

AM: Well maybe somebody will get good idea from listening to you talk (laughing)

DE: (laughing) They should. I think they - I think the youngsters should do it too. Lets see what happens with all this groups. I heard there are a lot of things going on in the city; let's see what happens. I'm also not actively involved in all this. Like, I don't need that need- like I don't go to meeting and stuff. Let's see.

AM: Ok.

DE: Alright.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 012 – Interview with Heidi McKenzie

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Heidi McKenzie (HM)

Interview Date: 22/09/2014
Interview Location: Conducted at VTape in 401 Richmond in Toronto, ON

____

AM: Ok so if you could start by stating your name, the date, and where we're doing the interview.

HM: Sure, um, my name is Heidi McKenzie. It's uh September 21st, 2014 and we're in the 401 Richmond building in Vtape Audio Recording on the 4th floor.

AM: Very precise, that's awesome! Can you describe your involvement with Desh, sort of the timeframe and in what capacity you were involved?

HM: Sure. I became aware of Desh in the Fall of 1994 and applied for and ended up getting the job as the Administrative Coordinator for the Festival Fall of 1994 and I worked for I guess about a year. Was it one year or two years? Hmm. One or two years (laughs). I think a year, just over a year.

AM: And that was in the capacity of a coordinator, or…?

HM: Yes. So at the time, it was a two-staff organization and there was a program coordinator and an admin coordinator. And I was working with Steve Pereira.

AM: Actually Steve is someone who I would love to get in touch with at some point. I've been trying to get a hold of Steve.

HM: Do you have his coordinates? I mean, I don't even know where he is…

AM: I do, but I don't think he's in Canada at the moment as far as I know…

HM: No, I don't think so.

AM: Ok so if you could talk a little bit about the role that you think the political climate of the time played in Desh's existence, so, both in terms of the birth of Desh, and kind of its, how it evolved over time. What do you think the political climate did to that?

HM: The political climate. Um, ok well I think it's a very interesting time (I hope I'm not being too broad) but I do think it's a very interesting time to be revisiting Desh now because I really feel and it's not just a feeling, there's a lot of evidence out there I think that in 2014 – it's almost like a pendulum swing to where we were in the mid-1990s, in terms of a sense of identity politics, and you know, right-wing governments, budget cuts and (laughing) all that stuff that was going on then so…I mean, I was really personally connected to the organization because I had just completed a Master's degree in cultural policy and race relations and I went to England to do that, and I was interested in studying, um…because I was really, in my undergraduate at U of T, I was in Arts Management, Arts Policy (I'm giving you the big picture, but) multiculturalism was really just starting to express itself in arts policy and at the time artists of colour (visible minority was actually the term used in the early 90s) so vis min artists were um generally shuffled into community arts and folk arts programs in granting, at both the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council. And I was just shocked and appalled, as were many people, and I wanted to see how that happened and how the antecedents of that came about and I went and looked at what was happening in France arts policy, and Britain's arts policy and so I was really interested…I was politicized, personally interested in issues of race and issues in arts policy, so um when I came back to Toronto and there was an opportunity to work with an organization that was ~ oh my gosh, I'm forgetting all of my terminology, but like vertically integrated in terms of its mandate. That's not the term, what is the term we used to use? Do you know what I'm talking about?

AM: Vertically integrated in terms of its mandate…

HM: Basically South Asians working with South Asians for South Asians.

AM: Mm. You don't mean just like identity-based organizations, you mean something more…a technical term?

HM: Yeah, there was some other word we used to use I guess, I can't remember. Maybe it'll come to me. Because that was definitely what was happening in the UK, and not so much in France (laughs), as you might imagine. So, I was very excited to get involved….

AM: You mean that type of organizing was happening in the UK?

HM: Yes?

AM: Ok. And how do you think that sort of challenged that model of all visible minority or person of colour artist organizations being slotted into kind of like, folk arts or...

HM: Community arts.

AM: Yeah community arts. How do you think Desh challenged that?

HM: Uhm, I think. I mean I think Desh challenged it just by being. You know? By being who they were, and by showcasing very high calibre, contemporary and traditional arts. I think Desh had a really big role to play in educating the public at large, and it's own membership. I think when I was there that the festival in the spring of '95, was possibly at the height of it's membership, and you might know more than me having done the research.

AM: That seems about right, based on what I've been researching.

HM: Right. I mean I think at one time we had 5000 people on our mailing list.

AM: Wow.

HM: I know, hard to believe right?

AM: Amazing.

HM: I think young people in particular, people in their 20s were really excited to find a collective voice. To breakthrough this sort of... It really did feel like, yeah. It felt. It's interesting I mean I wasn't an artist at the time. Me being an artist is a recent thing, it's only been about 5 or 6 years. So I mean, I didn't ever intend to be an artist, I always intended to work as an arts administrator. Uhm. And uh, I dunno. And also I am trained classically in Western music and Western art, so, hmm. I don't know. There was just all this stuff going on. And what I'm starting to see, I mean a few months ago I went to a party/art opening at the AGO and I met an Asian artist, I think South-East Asian of Chinese decent and it was really interesting because he had trained as a classical Western Opera singer, and he has completely, turned on that and put it aside because he is so politicized about his sense of race and identity politics that he can't even imagine practicing that art form. And I just said, "Wow, that's really interesting." You know what I mean? And I think that there was that same kind of verve and zeal that was happening in the 90s.

AM: hm. Yeah, I could definitely see that. I'm really curious about what you're saying about the kind of distinction between community arts and what Desh was doing because, uhm, definitely SAVAC still gets referred to a community arts organization, sometimes just based on the fact that what we're doing is about South Asian Visual Arts. And I'm wondering, I'm wondering what you think.. This is kind of a broad questions but what do you think the distinction is? What was the distinction for you between… Like do you see Desh as being party a community arts organization or did you see it as something fully distinct from that?

HM: I'm trying to remember, I wish I still kept business cards, what our tagline was. Do you know what it was? (laughing) It was really great.

AM: It was really great. There were a few different ones. It kind of evolved over time.

HM: It was like, you know, Desh Pardesh, South Asian International Arts/Artists Service Organization for Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Transexual. Right? Something like that. It was really long (Laughing).

AM: Yeah. It was really long. And I mean, I just wonder were there uhm… Was it something that was seen as a sort of like community arts initiative. Or was it seen as a, almost reaction to that pigeon holing?

HM: (pause)

AM: It doesn't have to be one or the other.

HM: No I know and I think it depends on how people perceive community arts. It's such a vague and nebulous kind of term. I think. (pause) I mean that's interesting that you say that SAVAC is still considered community arts. I mean SAVAC obviously serves a community, but… and actually I haven't read SAVAC's mandate lately but I mean… For me. Like Mississauga Potters for example, that's very community arts based. And they don't have say excellence in arts as part of their mandate. For me, that's sort-of how community arts plays out, is that there's sort of a amateur versus excellence in calibre and I've always felt that Desh Perdesh was outside of the amateur and more in the excellence in the arts. And so for me, I never really thought of it as a community arts initiative.

AM: Mhm. Yeah that makes sense. That does make sense. Uhm, can you name some of the highlights from your time with Desh?

HM: Highlights?

AM: Mhm.

HM: (sigh)

AM: (laughs)

HM: ok, I don't know. Jeez. Highlights.

AM: I know it was a while ago

HM: It was a while ago. I mean I dunno do they have to be good highlights or bad highlights? (laughing)

AM: There's room for both. Like one of the questions was also about challenges that you saw. But if you can combine them.. We can.. Yeah.

HM: Ok well let me talk about a challenge and maybe that will trigger my memory to talk about something more positive. Uhm but I was thinking about while coming to speak to you that I think one of the hardest things that I found was, well there were many challenges. So we were working with the board, at the time I remember there was 9 people on the board, and every person was from a different ethnic constituency. So that was really hard. But it was a challenge. Uhm. Because everybody was wanting to put their own agenda forward. Because, as you know, the South Asian community is incredibly diverse. Uhm, so there that was one challenge. Another challenge was that myself personally, I'm mixed-race and so, you know, I… It's interesting I'm questioning these things and these ideas now at this time, 20 years later, and I guess I was challenged at the time at Desh Pardesh because people stood up in public forum of the festival and told me I didn't have a right to be there. Because you know, my mom was white. And out of ignorance they assumed that because my name was McKenzie that actually McKenzie comes from my father's side, he's South Asian and you know… that kind of moot. Anyway, so. Personally it was a challenge and so like a specific anecdote with Desh that happened that I felt very strongly that we should program Johanna Das with Ritesh Das. I don't know if you know her, I don't even know if they're still, around. I think Ritesh might be I don't know if Johanna is. And she, is or was a Bharatanatyam dancer and had had studied for I believe 10 or 15 years, certainly more than 10 years with a masters done in India and was really considered and expert in her field. And married to a South Asian man who's a tabla player Ritesh Das who had a tabla school at the time. And ah… I just got a huge amount of backlash for even suggesting that she be involved in the festival because she's white. And uhm, I found it… I mean looking back with the perspective of wisdom. I think, I still think that I should have perhaps held my ground. Uhm, because I feel that there were an awful lot of young people and an awful lot of people who are born in Canada, like myself, who really didn't have a lot of experience of their own culture or the broader diasporic South Asian culture and had a lot to learn from other people who have had deep experience with it. But there was this really, like blinders kind of thing, that was skin deep. Going on. So there was a lot of that. And that was challenging, but it was also really exciting. So now that does trigger highlights, positive highlights. Which you know, we were one of the first organizations to give Rohinton Mistry platform within the South Asian community **(15:00)** in the greater Toronto area and that was really exciting. Another highlight was a spin off of one of the things we did at Desh was working with, because we were working largely with the LGBT community we did uh, I'm sure I'm not remembering the right terminology but like "safe circles" and created spaces at the 519 community centre for women to come together because an awful lot of the women in Desh Pardesh who were artists who were lesbians had experienced sexual abuse, and quite often incest, and so… and I remember being invited to be there and it was such a privilege, I consider that to be like a highlight, for me to be there, to be involved in that kind of programming that really felt like it was making a difference. And then I can tell you quite honestly, I'm thinking, in my mind, around the room, there might have been 20-25 women involved. And, I haven't really stayed friends with any of them but you know, I recognize and know and am acquaintance with many of them, and a number of those women have subsequently gone on to marry men and have families and obviously heal a part of themselves, like really go through deep transformation. You know (laughing) obviously. From obviously identifying as

lesbian to, one would say at least identifying as bi-sexual if they're in same-sex relationships. If people think about Desh as an arts organization but really it had much broader implications, because of that specific mandate.

AM: Can you talk a bit more about that? A bit sort of about, both in terms of sexuality like creating a space where diverse sexualities were really celebrated, but also in terms of other identity markers or experiences of life like how, how did Desh kind of provide that atmosphere where it was ok to be who you are, or did it?

HM: No it certainly did, it absolutely did and it attracted people like myself and people like my husband and people like Hussain Amarshi. I mean, a lot of people on your list, I remember when you first sent your list, there's an awful lot of people that are not, like do not identify with the LGBT community but who are so proactively activist in terms of equal rights for all that it attracted this sort of liberal progressive kind of person, to the organization, and that was great. That was really great. And we were in the minority (laughing) right, so that was fine.

AM: When you say we you mean, people that didn't identify as LGBTQ?

HM: That's right. And actually… Yes, I'm going to put this on for the record. At the time I identified as bi-sexual, I mean I don't know I've been with the same partner for over 20 years so it's kind of a moot point for me but I was at the time, identifying as bi-sexual so I did feel very included in the group, in that sense.

AM: I found it really fascinating actually to look at, just you know identity markers and identity politics and identity-based politics have changed. Like there are still there's still I think a resurgence of a certain kind of identity politic because of a response to conservative policy and stuff like this but conversations about bi-sexuality don't happen in the same way anymore for instance, so it's just such an interesting, I found it like so interesting to go back. And I kind of came of age during a time when queerness was what was talked about.

HM: Right

AM: And so I noticed just in some note that it was sort of like there was a bit of a tension like do we include bisexuals, what does it mean to… I don't know whether that was during your time or not but do we have separate groups for bisexuals or are they allowed to come to the Gay or Lesbian caucuses I think they were called at the time, I'm just wondering if that was something that you ran into?

HM: Well I know that one of the things that I think, I don't know if it was directly but certainly indirectly associated with my involvement with Desh Pardesh was that I was invited to contribute to an anthology of stories "South Asian Bisexual Women". I don't know if you came across that book? I have it.

AM: I would love to borrow it if…

HM: Yeah. So there's a book – that woman's. I can't even remember who published it. The women's group, whatever that publisher was. They went under a couple of years ago.

AM: The Toronto Women's Bookstore.

HM: Yeah the Toronto Women's Bookstore. Yeah, put it together. I can try and find that for you, remind me.

AM: Sure, that would be great.

(20:00)

HM: So you know, you're right. It's not at all, it's not the same. It's kind of strange actually, I don't know, the landscape right now.

AM: Very strange, and I mean one of the things that I'm really glad that you brought up that the political, like it's a very interesting time to be doing this project. Which is partly why Indu applied for the grant. Because we are in a time austerity again and in a time of like Conservative government and financial cuts to arts organizations cuts to identity based organizations and so what was so inspiring in terms of reading about Desh and talking to people was just that you know in that time, and kind of leading up to that time and through that time there was so much motivation to keep going and keep hustling for funding and this kind of a thing and it's, I mean we're in that moment now again. And it's um. Yeah and so you were, you said 94, sorry go on…

HM: but I would have to say equally important to that pendulum swing was this notion that, was the fact that everybody was struggling to be uhm, to assert their almost validity as South Asian artists practicing you know, and having the right to practice on the main stage and this whole period of give-or-take 15 years in between then and now, where the whole emphasis was to uhm, try and be seen as equal, as opposed to different, or other than. I just feel it was very different, and now coming back, I was, I think it's relevant. I was involved last year in producing "The State of Blackness" the representation of Black Artists in Canada conference and…

AM: I heard great things about it.

HM: Yeah. So it was recently all of the panels and talks are online now.

AM: Great

HM: Yeah, and there is Rinaldo Walcott, which I think is worth listening to.

AM: I actually had him as a prof.

HM: Did you? Oh well then you know what I'm talking about. But I was actually really surprised because at the keynote his message was essentially the same message that Desh Pardesh was saying in the South Asian community 20 years ago he was saying in the Black community. Which is you know, it's great that we've worked in these past decades or so in collaboration in the community across racial borders, but now is not the time, now is the time to come together and stand alone, and assert ourselves and our own rights and our own platform. So I was kind of shocked that that was his message but that definitely was the message.

AM: Mhm, and really interesting in thinking about the diversity of what it means to be South Asian, the diversity of what it means to be Black, and then bringing that together as a community voice or as a voice together it's like, you know I imagine, I mean, as you said there were some tensions that arose because of that but also a lot of richness it seems like. And when you were uhm working for Desh… so you were working for those one or two years and were you also involved with programming committees at different times and board or was it those two years that you were involved?

HM: Uhm. There were a number of attempts to save it as it was dying. And I was called to be involved in that. In some round table circles and so yeah. How many, when did it actually close it's doors?

AM: It closed in…

HM: Was it 98/99?

AM: No it was actually 2000.

HM: Ok, Alright. So in the late 90s and around then I was involved as well. Uhm, peripherally, and uh, How else was I involved? Uhm.

AM: I mean I guess the reason I was asking was over those different periods of time when you were in involved, uhm What was the make-up of the organization as a whole, in terms of, like was it very diverse in terms of, because there was a board and then there were committees right?

HM: Mhm

AM: Board, committees and then mostly two staff people.

HM: Right

AM: and in terms of…

HM: I think ultimately one staff person right?

AM: Right. Yeah, and waas it quite diverse in terms of who was involved, both in terms of like ethnicity and religion and gender, sexuality, all of those things.

(25:00)

HM: Yeah I think it was, I mean. It was when I was there. I sort of feel like the heterosexual people got pushed out towards the end. Uhm, which sounds a bit strange, but I think that did happen. There was a kind of militancy in the politics that if you weren't, if you weren't Gay or Lesbian or Bi you weren't one of us.

AM: Hmm

HM: Yeah. But certainly, I think it was very diverse.

AM: Mhm. And something you mentioned at one point you talked about diaspora and I'm really wondering. It seemed like it was a new thing to talk about South Asian in general when Desh first started to use that terminology then right? It was sort of a new thing., What kind of a role do you think that Desh played in, and you can speak for yourself, and for what you experienced of other people but in sort of shaping your understanding of what it means to be part of a diaspora.

HM: Hmm. (25:55) I think they played a huge role. But ya exactly, sort of from my perspective they, because that I mean. Part of what I did actually with my masters degree in Race and Cultural relations was go out to arts organizations and give them like a little one hour, you know, race and cultural sensitivity 101 training, and you're right. You're absolutely right, people really didn't even know what South Asian meant. They didn't even know how to, what words, they certainly didn't know what words to use for the aboriginal First-Nations communities. I mean people were like, it was, yeah. (laughing) And people wanted to know, like people wanted to be politically correct and informed, so. I think Desh had a big role in opening up people's eyes. Especially the wider audience that it attracted, and it did attract. I mean largely the wider audience came in through people's partners, and close friends. But my memory of the festival was that it attracted a really large audience. And that was great.

AM: And what about you as like someone working there, and kind of experiencing that all around you. Like, for your own. I mean I'm also mixed-race I also was born here, and I know that can be really complex and you do face you know, sometimes people directly challenging your legitimacy. But like, I'm just wondering if there's a way that that shaped your understanding of your own identity?

HM: Ah. It's still shaping my understanding of my identity (laughing).

AM: (laughing) We all are.

HM: Yeah, well I mean it's interesting because a lot of my art is about identity and belonging. And so, these are obviously really deep and personal issues. Uhm so, yes it completely opened my eyes. I guess I wouldn't have had, I wouldn't be the person that I am today if I hadn't, been involved with Desh. I mean I can sort of site my parallel life with my sister who married a 9-generation white guy, Canadian guy and lives in the suburbs and just completely, I don't think if I asked her to define South Asian she'd probably get it wrong. So, yeah. It certainly had an effect on who I am. And what it is that I choose to do with my life.

AM: Mhm. And did you think it influenced in any way your, I mean, becoming an artist? Like a practicing artist later in life? Do you think that Desh had any influence on shaping, shaping you as an artist?

HM: Hmm. Oh that's interesting. Uhm. I mean, yes and no. Because I mean, hm. I just finished my curatorial degree at OCAD, so.

AM: You just recently did?

HM: Recently, like this past spring.

AM: Good for you.

HM: Thanks. So I chose to do my major curatorial project on mixed-race identity. Not actually within South Asian communities, because I find it very hard to find, South Asian, artists like the South Asian artists community, is fairly limited, in Toronto. But anyway, all that aside, that's a whole other story. So yes. I mean in that sense. It affected me in the decisions that I made, because I made, you know I was considering a number of options and that's where I ultimately went. I guess I would never have stated a direct causal link but I would definitely say it had a huge… working and being involved with and in the community of Desh Pardesh had a huge, did definitely have a huge impact on me, personally. Yup, I would say it was formative.

AM: Mhm, mhm.

HM: Because I was really you know, I was 25-26, right, those are really, impressionable age in time, in your life. So.

AM: (30:00) And based on your experience then and you know as an arts administrator or working in the arts, not necessarily as a practicing artist and now, trying to hustle as a working artist, what kind of changes do you see in the sort of atmosphere, or the climate, political climate, as an artist, now versus then?(pause) That could be anything, in terms of race politics or in terms of, yeah just generally.

HM: Well I mean certainly, my colleagues for example who are in their mid-twenties and just finished the curatorial degree with me. You know, it's a lot harder to, it's a lot tougher landscape

to get a job, as an arts administrator. They're looking for arts administration jobs and curatorial positions, only one out of seven have actually managed to get a job, so far. Uhm. And I'd say. Well in the mid 90s, I turned down other job offers to take the job at Desh Pardesh. I mean it was a very different landscape. So there's that. I mean that's a big thing. Uh as an artist working now, as opposed to the artists working then. Well I think it's harder, I think it is harder to be an artist working now than it was then because, this shift this sort of shifting, it's almost like tectonic plates shifting, that was happening around recognizing, I hate the term but ethnic arts, as valid, arts, expertise based arts, unto themselves was just coming of age so that people that were emerging and as, at that time like Lata Pada And gee I don't know who else can I think of, uhm trying to think across disciplines so certainly Lata, in dance, can you think of any?

AM: That were involved with Desh?

HM: Or, ah. Oh well that's true that we're... Hmm. Involved with Desh. Uhm.

AM: It seems…

HM: Well Shani Mootoo, uhm, exactly Shyam Selvadurai ah, you know. Somehow I think that they were there are so few of them that if they got the launching pad and the lift off and that sort of a firm launch into the world they've succeeded and they've done really well. Where as I think somebody starting out now, not necessarily just me, but it's harder to get that foothold and launch into the world. Uhm because it's almost like, I'm speaking metaphorically, I guess that's how an artist talks (laughing) But I mean there's just so much noise right now. It's hard to break and it's hard to be a voice and heard, you know above all the clamor where I think it was less hard back then.

AM: Hmm

HM: And that across all, like that's everywhere, I mean look at sort of the old white boys network of artists who were billionaire artists at biennales and so on. I mean it's the same thing, there were so few of them then and now they've risen to the top, now it's pretty hard to be a, to have that kind of start and rise up to fame, in the art world. It happens but it's hard.

AM: Well one of the things that I thought of immediately when you were talking about that is the sort of, I know my brother as a writer in Toronto talks about the pressure to, of like cultural essentialism, so sort of like if you're a South Asian writer, you need to write about, ah what the spices smelled like in you're grandmother's kitchen uhm where as if you want to write, my brother writes like all kinds of sort stories and fiction that some of it's sort of magic realism stuff, like there isn't space for that. So I'm wondering if you still feel that the kind of, multiculturalism politic that can essentialize culture, like do you think that still plays a role? In terms of like who gets recognized as an artist who's South Asian? Or do you think that that has changed? (pause) Do you know what I'm referring to?

HM: I do. I think I know what you're saying. I think it depends on how established you are as an artist, uhm. A number of things came to mind when you were saying that. Hm. **(35:00)** Uhm you know so my husband who's got a 30+ year career as an independent filmmaker, when he ten years ago came out with his documentary about the Komagata Maru incident really implicates the South Asian community, and more largely the Sikh community. Uhm, there was kind of a huge sort of outcry and a bit of resistance to him from the Sikh community because he's not Sikh. So even within the larger Sikh community uhm. But now, this year is the 100, you know, the centenary of that event in history, it's much more welcome and I didn't hear any of that "Well you're not Sikh why are you doing this?" Uhm, you know his next film is about the Chinese community and I don't feel, or I haven't heard any people saying "Well why are you doing that?" It's kind of like saying, to you know why would Norman Jewison do a film about you know, a family that was Christian, in the States. (laughing) You know, but he certainly does. So there's a lot of exception to that. Uhm, so cultural essentialism. I mean I started at one point earlier to say that these are issues that I'm really looking at in my own life, because I'm, having done my masters work in bi racial or… artists, working with bi-racial artists, I'm really noticing this. There is a trend for artists themselves of mixed race to actually culturally essentialize the otherness in them. Uhm, and so my mother being of sort of Irish-American background, I'm starting to realize that I really need to, want to and am driven to spend some time in the next you know, mid-term sort of a 3-5 year goal to get over to Ireland to look at the roots to try and, you know explore that and give that side of me the same, emphasis as the side of me that is visibly, other. You know.

AM: Well yeah, I wonder. I mean I wonder about that also in that's been a tendency for me to kind of focus on wanting to connect to my father's side of things for sure. In terms of my Kashmiri ancestry. Uhm and I think my kind of having gone through that for many years my analysis on that has to do with racism. Like it's just that when you live in a society where whiteness is kind of up-held and brownness is pushed down. As someone who identifies with mixed-race identity and with like being a woman of colour, it's, the urge to focus on that is so much stronger this way, because it's like in the face of this racism I need to actually celebrate it even more or. And I know what you're saying, it can lead to a kind of cultural essentialism. I think kind of what I've noticed in what I have read about Desh and what I've heard, is that actually there was an active attempt to not, do that. To not allow for cultural essentialism. I don't know if you would agree with that, or not.

HM: Hm.

AM: and also I know Desh changed over time, it wasn't always the same but.

HM: Mhm.

AM: There were conversations about cultural essentialism.

HM: I have to say I don't, I can't recall any off the top of my head. And I was a part of the programming committee. Hm, I don't. I'd have to think about that.

AM: No that's fine. That's totally fine. Are there any other sort of like lessons that you feel like you gained from your experiences with Desh that carry forward, or anything else that about Desh that you would want to have documented, that you feel is really important?

HM: Well I think, they shared office space, which building were we in?

AM: I think in changed a few times. There was one on Bathurst maybe?

HM: Yeah. Ya no I think it was on Spadina here somewhere. I'm trying to think.

AM: Up closer to the university maybe? Yeah I know I saw a few different office addresses.

HM: Right. But anyway, that's crazy that I can't even remember where we were but the point is that we had open office space, and we shared a larger room with Fresh Arts. Has anybody talked to you about Fresh Arts?

AM: Not anybody from here but I have heard a bit about Fresh Arts. No one so far I mean I've only done one interview so far.

HM: Right, so I think **(40:00)** it was important that we did share that space with Fresh Arts.

AM: Can you just talk a little bit about Fresh Arts?

HM: they were ah, I'm not going to remember, a culturally specific, I'm still trying to remember that term for like vertical, orientation, I mean anyway nevermind. So they were a youth organization working with Black youths., and I think particularly they were looking at disadvantaged youth, and giving them the skills to work in like dub-poetry and music and recording arts. So that was their main thrust. Sharon Fernandez, I mean is somebody you have to interview. If you haven't.

AM: I would love to actually do you have another email for her? I've been trying to get in touch with her. I'm going to go to Ottawa in fact, for my own, I mean I'm going to be in Montreal so I'm just going to zip over to Ottawa, because there's a few people living there now, who I think we can interview but anyway.

HM: Did you ask Sheila James?

AM: Yes.

HM: She didn't give you a a current address for her?

AM: Uhm she gave me the same one I had. So I guess it's the right one she just hasn't responded yet.

HM: Oh ok.

AM: Mhm. I'll try again.

HM: You should get somebody to ask who knows her really well. I don't know her that well.

AM: Does Sheila know her well?

HM: Yeah I would think Sheila would know her really well. Ask Sheila to ask for you.

AM: Yep.

HM: Because anyway she was, I think she was pivotal in kind of pulling those two communities together and pointing out synergies. And in my recollection. And I don't really know concretely why, I felt that Fresh Arts was integral to SAVAC, you know, becoming, kind of birthing out of Desh Pardesh when I was there. Rachel James, was very much involved, you know Sheila and Rachel are sisters?

AM: Right. (laughing) I didn't realize that but that makes sense.

HM: Yeah, uhm is Rachel around?

AM: She's in Ottawa I'm going to interview her in Ottawa

HM: Oh great. Ok good good.

AM: Shelly, I think Shelly also I know Shelly

HM: Shelly Bahl is in Ottawa?

AM: Unless I'm confused.

HM: Ok she was in New York recently but maybe she's…
AM: No you're right you're right. She's in New York. No you're totally right yup.

HM: Yeah, so I don't know. I just remembered… they would be the people to talk to more about that.

AM: Mhm.

HM: Uhm. My definite area of preference within the arts sphere was in performing arts and I spent more time with music theatre than I did with visual arts, yeah.

AM: Ok, is there anything else you want to add?

HM: Uhm…

AM: It's your space, if there's anything you want to. That you're like "you should research this" or you should definitely think about this as a research. Because I want it to reflect back on people's experiences.

HM: Mhm. Uhm.

AM: You can also feel free to email me as well if you think of things later.

HM: Yeah. I can't think of anything off the top of my head now I think. I'll probably leave and think of ten things so if I do I might.

AM: Feel free, because I'm going to do a written portion too on the website….

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 013 – Interview with Ian Iqbal Rashid

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Ian Iqbal Rashid (IR)

Interview Date: 28/05/2015
Interview Location: Conducted over Skype in London, UK

—

AM: Okay, Great. So Ian you were kind of one the.,.. one of the people who started Desh and one of the people who started Salaam Toronto, is that right?

IR: I- I definitely was one of the people who started Desh — in fact its correct to say it was my idea, uhm, but I am not one of the founders of Salaam, I was one of the organizers the first year, but I was not the, uhm, sort of on the ground floor. Uhm. If I recall correctly, it came out of Khush, and I was a member of Khush, but I think it was one of those ideas that emerged informally between probably between Nelson, and Corrine (sp?), and Mohammad, those guys uhm, that sort of socialized and always hung out, and I wasn't - I didn't hang out with them, though I was part o8f the meetings at Khush. When I came, they brought it to a Khush meeting with the main idea already in place, with the idea being at the 519, they asked me to contribute, get involved which I did happily. I definitely was— I was there, but I wasn't involved with the origin of the idea. I remember — I mean it was, for me I felt like it was a wonderful event. It felt slightly uncomfortable, a bit like caravan? is caravan still around? Caravan used to be a festival that Toronto, a huge festival in Toronto that went on for years, it was very multicultural, so everybody kind of dressed, all the different communities kind of dressed in folklore from their home countries, eat the food of their culture, and so it became about homeland. Salaam Toronto sort of began, sort felt a bit like that. In some ways it was great, it was inviting [inaudible] in the gay context, is it still called the 519?

AM: Yeah

IR: Uhh and to kind of participate in a gay context in a gay situation, but it was very unthreatening, which I think is a good thing, because it was about, you know, eating Indian food, and experiencing Indian culture, but in a very sort of mainstream, homeland kind of way. And I wanted to, I was ah, an annoying little bugger in those days and wanted to disrupt somehow—

AM: Can you just say what you just said again, it sort of blanked out for a few seconds, you wanted to?

IR: Oh I wanted to disrupt the sort of happy multicultural idea, and I was afraid that Salaam would become something like that. I don't think it was, because it was in the queer context, but in the south it was awful. [inaudible] in the West Brooklyn, tended to be inside the South Asian community and outside the mainstream community — and challenge that a bit. And so I invited [inaudible], and so I invited activists and writers to choose a piece of writing that they felt spoke to their experience about being south asian and living in the west. So we had, I invited Nelson, who was at that time the head of Khush, and uh, actually I can't remember, Kaushalya Bannerji wrote something, there was a poet who is no longer with us, Michael Lin was a very important queer poet and activist at the time, founded AIDS action now, he read something, uhm, but by an Indian writer. It was sort of slightly cross cultural but it was trying to penetrate the geopolitical engagement in this sort of otherwise multicultural festival.

AM: So this happened within Salaam Toronto?

IR: Yes, and I got very excited about that corner of the event because it kind of really had discussion, its really provocative, and I thought it would be actually useful to test that a bit further, and to have a cultural festival, and arts festival, that talked about what it was to be South Asian in the west. And not sort of [inaudible] talk about how our culture has changed as we were transplanted. And also, whenever possible to challenge in the activist context. At the time I was on the board, I was on the programming committee at the board of a local community theatre called the Youthfest which is now condos by College and Bathurst, sadly but it was an amazing little place, and kind of intervention in Toronto's cultural scene for quite a few years. And, [cuts off] for events to put on there as part of my commitment to the board. And I thought, there should be like, lets take that little reading and kind of expand it. I approached the board, —

AM: Can you say that one more time, you approached the — say that again?

IR: I approached Khush and said you know, what about you know doing this even in a bigger context at the Euclid, I don't know, I approached the Euclid board and kind of present a concept— event, and it was a little bit tricky because the the Euclid was by definition, you know it came from the welfare and education centre which was an organization which was committed to social activism and cultural change, it began as third world development actually, supported third world NGOs and third world problems and issues but became broader than that. it needed to espouse a political concern. Khush wasn't that. By its very nature it wasn't that. Khush was at this time, a, we were a group that did not have a public identity, but within that it was also I think it was a little cozy and became kind of uhm, about, sort of, a select board, I guess it was about trying to valourize our identity, you know, about being positive about being south asian and gay — which was absolutely needed but I kind of wanted to do something else, and challenge the straight south asian community about accepting art, [inaudible], challenge the community about, you know about, accepting south asian identity and queer identity. And so, I wanted to sort of a very provocative political kind of first event, we had no money, I think the Euclid kind of gave us, a very [inaudible] in terms of putting on the event. We sold tickets, which I think was our source of funding and we did really well. I think I might have money from the city, a tiny

amount, I can't remember, but you know, it was, kind of program and committee with people from the community, from Khush and from the Euclid, but it was pretty much run out of my living room, and well it was run out of my living room. it was a 3 day event, but it was a very exciting moment because there was all this cultural work that was just kind of beginning, particularly in fiction at the time, it was writers like, Rohinton Mistry, Micheal Ondaatje and Moyez Vassanji were kind of the mainstream, but there were a very exciting south asian women's poetry scene. It was great. And academics were kind of interested in the work, people like Himani Bannerji, Kaushalya Bannerjiand Arun Mukherjee.

[00:10:00]

IR: So I just wanted to kind of galvanize these people and their ideas and the conversations that were happening in peoples living rooms and bring them into a larger cultural space. So, it was a 3 day event, we showed cultural work, and there was afternoon sessions, an unfortunately, and this was also indicative of the times, I wasn't at the first event because my lover at the time, died of AIDS over the weekend believe it or not. So I never got to see a number of the events. But it was by all accounts a huge success, and after it was over, we organized the meeting, a community meeting to discuss the successes failures and what we could do better because it was clear that there was a will for this to keep going on. And, you know, a lot of people came and I think there was a call for it to be a more inclusive event. Some communities felt that most of the cultural events came from people whose origins were in North India, South India, but they want like — they wanted a representative — its the obvious problems that emerged, about inclusion and representation, which [cuts off]

AM: One second, you're cutting off, sorry, you're cutting out again. The last thing I heard I think, you said it was challenging and then you started to say something else.

IR: The backbone it was challenging [cuts off], but it was a good thing, but there was a will from everybody that entered that meeting that it should go on, that it should be a regular kind of event. I was asked to kind of be the director, which initially I did, and I started to approach the funding bodies, to sponsor the event and it was amazing, they literally [cuts off] they were looking for events like this to fine and sponsor, so we came at the right time

AM: Ian do you mind if I stop you, do you mind if we hang up and starting the call again, its coming in and out a lot. Do you mind?

IR: Of course, yeah okay.

[00:12:56]

AM: Is that okay?

IR: Yeah no problem. So basically after Desh there was a postmortem meeting that took place and people were, they brought their criticisms of the event, but there was generally a very positive feeling of good will towards it, mhm and the community, oh I guess the communities that came together definitely wanted it to continue and become an ongoing thing, and people sort of asked for me to stay on act as a director, which I was happy to do, and I approached the funding bodies, provincially and municipally and everybody was really thrilled to support it. And let it be clear that they would support it if we put in applications. I think he timing of Desh dovetailed beautifully with the need for kind of race politics, sort of multiculturalism was coming into race politics. And I think Desh sort of dovetailed with that moment beautifully. And so I started to get the funding in place, and thens shortly afterwards made the decision that I was going to leave and move to the UK.

AM: Okay.

IR: So, I didn't want to continue, I couldn't continue, and approached Khush and suggested that we bring on Punam Khosla to carry on, Punam was sort of a friend and a colleague and I knew she sort of had the experience in the organizing role, she had far more experience than I had, and she you know, she was also very positive about the event, and really championed it, and so she — I spoke to her privately, spoke to Khush, and Khush felt that it would be really great if we brought on somebody from Khush to work with Punam, and so that was Steve Pereira and the two of them sort of went down the road together.

AM: mhmm.

IR: And I came back for Desh for the next couple of years and contributed programming from the UK and also did, you know readings, and I think my first short film was shown. But, was not involved with any of the organizing in a major way.

AM: Okay, so if we go back to before that time, I'd love to hear a little bit about — So you had the vision for this, and I'd love to hear a little about — how would you describe the sociopolitical climate at the time and in particular the kind of cultural climate, like the cultural production that was happening that Desh was inserting itself into? Could you describe that a little bit and why it was necessary?

IR: Of course, I mean, you know I think that up until that moment being from minority communities or being non white mean that your identity always referred back to a homeland. And, from a point of view of empowerment and identity, that was useful to a degree, but I think it also served as to keep people as outsiders in their new culture, in their new homeland. And particularly as a second generation was emerging it felt like the language of multiculturalism and what was going on just didn't serve our needs anymore. And so you know, for me Desh was just something that echoed what — Desh was something that I wanted to go to, not necessarily something I wanted to create. And I kind of helped to organize it for me and for people like me, it was the event that was missing for me in my cultural calendar. And it was — you know at that point, it

was the kind of beginning of a race politics that was about people of colour it wasn't more culturally specific than that. And at the same time we kind of were, which was kind of useful, there were issues in our own community that you know, needed to be dealt with and at the same time there was all kinds of interesting cultural work being done. You know as I mentioned, particularly ripe in fiction, but it was beginning to show up in film and video. And Shrenavaz (sp?) Krishna had just made Kala, which wasn't just a kind of film that showed locally, it actually brought distribution and travelled around the world and played at festivals and that was huge for that particular moment. Deep Palmeto (sp?), just made "Sign in Me" which was beginning to travel, and now it seems like common place for south asian canadian film makers to be doing work, but at that time it just hadn't happened. And they were representing canada, not india, and they were talking about life in the west, so that was very exciting. You know, again it was happening in fiction, you know Mukherjee had just written a book and Moyez Vassanji and Micheal Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry had just written his books — So it felt very exciting and it felt like we needed a place to congregate and talk about this work and sort of put it beside each other and see if there was a sort of movement, if the work did speak to each other, and that sort of was the impetus.

AM: And so in terms of where you were at personally in your life and the work that you were doing — you know you have become a very prolific film maker at this point, and so were you at that time — had you already gone to art school were you doing it on your own — what were you up to creatively at that time?

IR: Well I was um, thats a very interesting question. I'd always written poetry and id always been published, but I never kind of imagined that the things I was concerned with, the things I wanted to write about would ever sort of be published in a broader context, like I could ever have a book published, or be part of a larger literally conversation. And then suddenly it felt like it was possible. At that time I was being published in student magazines and that sort of thing, I dropped out of university, partly because my lover got sick with AIDS, I was working at the development education centre, the place where I spoke about that housed the Euclid but also a small press called Between The Lines. And I worked there as an editor, part time. So I was kind of involved in activism and cultural production but didn't really see myself as an artist, I didn't even really think that was possible. Through dash it was not just an opportunity to interrogate and showcase other peoples work, it was also a chance for me to sort of see myself as an artist, and then as somebody who could appear on that stage. And it was around that time that Moyez Vassanji and his wife Nurjehan, that started, had a journal called TSAR, Toronto South Asian Review, and they had been publishing my poetry and through Moyez's success, he decided he would also publish books to kind of use some of his success to publish other South Asian writers

AM: What was the publication called again?

IR: TSAR, the Toronto South Asian Review and the press was called that as well — and I think they're still going. So they approached me and said, you know we're really happy with the poetry you're publishing, do you have enough for a collection, would you like to publish with us? So

this happened shortly after Desh, so it was kind of a galvanizing moment for me personally as well as an organizer, you know, as an artist as well as an organizer and I never imagined that I would become a film maker, that hadn't occurred to me yet, but I did always have a passion to be a writer, but I have to admit I always thought "who would be interested in the stories I want to tell?", you know I thought that there were no paradigms yet, there were no South Asian Canadian yet, or American authors at that time, and they suddenly emerged and suddenly there was a path to follow. So you know, I'm kind of a generation younger than the Vassanji, and the Vassanji, but definitely you know, their abrogation, their mentorship really helped me — and part of that was really through Desh, I met these people at Desh, as I was kind of programming and coordinating the event and so it was an exciting time. I mean, politically, it was a very charged time in terms of race politics, the women's press had just this remarkable public division where the women of colour along with a few white women walked out — a group of white women who weren't at the Euclid — some of the race political issues that were going on, or how race issues was being addressed in their policy, in their oppressive policy, you know it was a very public walk out that divided the press community and sort of hit the mainstream press. The Royal Ontario Museum had a show about Africa, which was met huge protest about its representation about its lack of consultation with the native African American communities, there was and there was a big pan conference in Toronto and a lot of writers of colour across Canada were really dismayed that they were not invited to read, whereas there was representation by non-white writers but they were all from India and Africa, and emerging from developing countries but none from the west, none from writers of colour of the west. So these were all kinds of issues that were circulating at the time, and race was a very divisive and hot topic and representation was a very important topic and Desh was taking that on. And always at its core, you know it came from Salaam, it came from Khush, was this notion of both [inaudible] and challenging the mainstream South Asian community to issues of sexuality. Though, it was a very kind of, a very interesting time.

AM: and I'd live to hear a little bit more about the early visioning conversation. So when you did end up, you know when you were sitting in you living room or other peoples living rooms, I know it was a long time ago, but what were the things people were talking about as a basis of unity, or kind of as organizing principles for Desh?

IR: It was quite haphazard. at that point we were kind of looking for cultural work to feature and a lot of it was sort of information value. It was sort of getting the mainstream, but there were dancers and performance artists and animators who not all of us knew about, so it was about introducing each other to artists in our network and looking at each others work, and then it became sort of about how does this work sit next to each other and what are the themes that are emerging and you know I think, it wasn't very contentious, there was a great deal of agreement on what we should show and what we should not show, and I think the most contentious, perhaps discussion was about who should sit on the panel — at the panel discussion because then it became about representing all the different communities that made up the larger south asian community which was impossible, at the same time keeping the focus on trying to find, to walk the line between talking about culture and politics and finding things that would represent that. So, I mean, it was you know, the organizing committee was more advisory than decision making if

you like, because there wasn't that much work that was sort of ready for public presentation at that time. Work that had — you know, its a problematic word but professionalism, you know, that didn't feel like community centre, sort of cultural work, that actually spoke to the community but at the same time that could proudly present itself to a sort of larger context and also had a level of craft, a level of skill, that we could show. It was — what was interesting, the following year — the important bit of inclusion for me was the film maker Pratibha Parmar a very important artist, she was left wing, radical academic.

AM: you have to say that again — she was a left wing, academic…?
IR: you know, radical lesbian film maker, who was beginning, who started out making unfunded personal work, but in the UK there was this incredible moment where channel 4 was taking on issues that had previously been gusted and protested on the street and they were funding them to a very high degree, it was kind of a work ship movement. So, groups like San Kofa Black Audio Film collective were making programs were channel four, and Pratibha was making films about a queer, south asian identity in the uk. that wasn't really happening in Canada yet, and so my big kind of uh, impulse was bringing Pratibha over, and having a program of her films as part of the first Desh. The Euclid kind of had travel money, and so they gave me a fare to bring her over, and she stayed with friends, and it became kind of a really important symbol for the festival. You know, here was this film maker making incredibly polished, incredibly political work that was being showed on a network, a television network in the UK. And it was kind of galvanizing to show, you know, where we could go. And she was very much you know, an political radical lesbian, so that was kind of a huge catch for us I think.

AM: And sorry to interrupt, but I'm just thinking in you know, that was the very first festival where she came, right? Did she come more than once?

IR: oh yeah she did.

AM: Okay she did right? thats what I thought. You know, I'm so curious, because the ways in which race politics and kind of identity politics if you will, were being talked about and being organized around the UK are so different from here, so I'm wondering like, what was it like to have these kind of transnational conversations?

IR: It was really really important. partly migration was earlier than in Canada, the communities were a bit more established, and if you like, a little bit ahead of us. The artists, you know Pratibha was second generation and but yet kind of working — but came from and activist background but was working in mainstream production, and that wasn't happening, that was just beginning to happen in Canada. There were already writers like, you know, Salman Rushdie, with big presses and getting nominated for the Booker prize, you know that had already begun in the UK, and it was kind of touch stone for us to say, you know this is possible, and we were having a similar kind of migration to the UK — you know big South Asian, Caribbean and African migration happening. It felt like our experiences, there were differences but there were a lot of similarities as well. And partly, we kind of, London had kind of, it had already happened a bit in London,

and it was starting in Canada and it was useful to kind of talk about the pitfalls and what could be avoided and how we could sort of learn from the activism and cultural work over there. I mean, Pratibha's, the work that she was showing in that first year was about south asian artists in the UK, particularly in gay and lesbian art, it was work kind of reaching out of the main steam

AM: Can you say that again, I heard Sunil Gupta and then I didn't hear

IR: She made a film called "Memory Picture" which featured Sunil Gupta, who was a very successful gay photographer, and Sunita Namjoshi who was a very successful poet, and it featured their work in her work. It became — it really was about helping promote other people's work, you know to work in alliance, and you kind of speak in solidarity — and that was one of the principles behind Desh you know — help each other help each others work, try and have conversation between artists and the art form to feel a part of the social movement as well as the arts practice. And that was already happening in the UK. We didn't really reach out to the US much that first year, but that happened, but I think in the back of both Khush and Desh, there were queer organizations like SALGA, and Trikone, I think Trikone was already around in San Francisco, but we started communicating with them and by the second or third Desh there were contingents from South Asian groups, you know certainly queer groups from the US and around the UK and around the world eventually. So kind of politically minded artists who wanted to be part of this conversation and movement as well started pitching to Desh, and as Desh became bigger and its outreach became bigger, outreach became unnecessary because people kind of pitch ideas, pitch themselves to Desh.

AM: In you know, kind of, so you left Toronto after was it the first Desh or the second?

IR: The first, so the first Desh was in 91' right?

AM: Yeah I think Salaam Toronto happened in 89, so it might have even been 1990?

IR: I think you're right, I think it was 1990, I left in 91', and it took a while to, so Desh happened in 90', and the decision, we sat out the summer, and we had conversations, we had a few meetings about the postmortems of Desh and how to move forward, and it was really only in Autumn 90' that we talked about making Desh permanent, and then in the spring of 91' I decided I was going to leave and actually left summer of 91, and I think Desh happened in November of 91', the second one?

AM: Yeah, I think so. Yup.

IR: So I came back for that.

AM: Okay.

IR: And I mean, I'd sit in on meetings in the early days when I could, to help with the transition, but um, you know, it was pretty much all Steve—

AM: Sorry say that again?

IR: It was pretty much Punam and Steve kind of running the second Desh and making it a sort of permanent event, and and institution it was really ad hoc that first year.

AM: And so, in thinking back on kind of the, I know you've said that it wasn't necessarily this clear vision than more so it was about picking work and then kind of coming through, would it be accurate to say that in those beginning days it was about looking through the work and deciding what went well together

IR: Yeah, yeah

AM: Obviously some political messaging but—

IR: The work sort of suggested the theme, rather than us deciding what the themes were and then us finding the work partly because the posterity of work, or at least our awareness of it, I mean the networks were just not in place. And you know sort of, community work was just transitioning into professional arts practice at that time, you know, so it wasn't easy to find, but—

AM: What I was going to ask, even with this sort of basic vision you had for Desh in those beginning moments, as you watched Desh grow and as you said become more international, and obviously so many people coming in and out of the organization, did you feel, in watching Desh from afar and when you came, did you feel that it was carrying on the vision the you had for it?

IR: Um, at times, you know for the most part I was thrilled, at times it didn't completely reflect, I mean I wanted Desh to be challenging but inclusive, and at times it felt like it wasn't, I felt like it alienated pertaining members of out community — at times it felt like it was preaching to the choir, speaking to people who had the same sensibility, it wasn't really about reaching out and trying to do transformative work in the community, that we were just talking to ourselves. You know, but at the same time I kind of didn't feel like in position to really voice that, you know I felt that I needed to let go and let people run with it. there is nothing more tedious than someone who was involved and never lets go, but as a visitor at times, just that, I remember that there was a session and a south asian man spoke up at one of the other community events and said "what is all this queer stuff, you call yourself a south asian festival but you're not, this is a south asian queer festival, you don't welcome people like me, where is the comfort level for people like me?" and he didn't say it in those words, but to be honest he was much ruder than that, but he was shouted down, and I felt like that was a missed opportunity, kind of the reasoning behind Desh was about sexual politics and gay rights in our own communities, it was about empowerment for sure, but it was also about coming out and speaking to the community and having a dialogue rather than sort of inside or outside kind of exclusion politics. and at times I felt, it felt uncom-

fortably like that, I think that it was a large enough festival, it was sort of broad enough to appeal to certain kinds of people and have certain kinds of programming, but often it felt like if you weren't part of the sort of, if you weren't part of the political clique, there was no room for you and I think people started to feel that. And I think people perhaps felt silenced as well. So, there were aspects of that that made me uncomfortable, there was a kind of performance at the later Desh, I forgotten his name but a performance artist named Kalpesh, who unfortunately was dying from HIV/AIDS, got up on stage and had a very personal rant against people in the AIDS, gay and south asian community that he didn't agree with, and he was given a platform to do that — and that just felt like the wrong kind of activism for me, and it made me very very uncomfortable. I think that that particular year, the programming got a bit skewed and I don't think Desh ever recovered from that. Certainly it became smaller, and I, it was the last Desh for me.

AM: In reflecting on that, because I hear what you're saying, I hear exactly what you're saying, and in reflecting on that kind of, almost like balance between empowerment and staying true to certain principles while also having a festival that like you said doesn't just preach to the choir and attempts to make linkages and connections with other parts of south asian communities, right? What, I guess, its a big question, what do you think the strategies are to do that walk because its a tricky line to walk, would you say? Its um, like, what do you think are the ways like a festival like that, or an organization like that, what are the strategies?

IR: Well, one of the things we did at Desh, the first Desh, is that we had queer only spaces. We had women only spaces. Sort of a, I'm not sure, I cant quite remember, some of that might have been the second Desh, but certainly at the first, we had a queer party, we, there was a women event that kind of happened informally. and I think that was really great in terms of creating moments of, in terms of empowerment, and having the conversation that we needed. And what I wanted was for all of us to come together and kind of have a larger even that was about social change, and for that you need cohesion, you need to speak in a certain kind of political voice. So, its a balancing act, and its about creating the right tone for the events, the people who are chairing the events are crucial, they need to both be challenging as well as sort of mediating all the time, and that becomes crucial. So, yeah. I don't think that there is a magic formula, I think that you need to be kind of vigilant, create small spaces and have inclusionary larger spaces, choose your work carefully, know what you're about — you know have a goal, or a mission statement in mind, and always refer back to that. And I also feel like, its really important to sometimes bite your tongue. and you know, allow dissenting voice to be heard, and I think at times thats all what people need, to be heard. And you need to create a forum that allows for that without having those voices take over and do damage. I don't think there is a magic formula but I think that you need good people in place that are organizing, who can kind of manage things, and mediate, good chairing is crucial.

AM: Yeah, and one of the pieces that you briefly touched on, was kind of this mentor piece, you know you described yourself asking of being from this younger generation from the writers you mentioned —

IR: Yeah, no longer…

AM: Pardon me? Sorry yeah, at the time, I mean sort of in a general sense, to what degree was Desh intergenerational and to what degree was, whether it was in terms of audience or organizers and artists?

IR: Well, at the first Desh, it was very intergenerational, it was very important to me. Because you know, I wanted to have a mix of first generation and second generation to have a route back to India and Pakistan and Trinidad and all the places we come from, but also kind of say "look we're also of this race", it felt really important to have those populations kind of represented. And it also felt really important to honour people who had been working in isolation for so long, because there wasn't the kind of forum for South Asian cultural work, but there were people there that were doing it whilst having day jobs you know, without having an obvious audience and it felt important to valourize those artists as well as the you know, the Michael Ondaatje who were, who had a global audience, and it felt really exciting to have you know, Shyam Selvadurai to read something alongside Michael Ondaatje or um, Gita Saxena, who had kind of made a little animated film, show something in front of Shrina Vaskrishna's (sp?) Masala which had been around, which was on a global stage. So, I kind of wanted a cross-fertilization, it wasn't necessarily about mentorship, but I was hopeful that there would be a way, to inspire, to show what was possible, to say you know the cultural work that was being done on a bigger stage was made on the back of writers and artists and cultural producers who had been working in isolation, who might have been called amateurs, if you'd like, who were doing amazing work without a forum to present.

AM: Mhmm, Mhmm, definitely. So in terms of um, Desh as, we've kind of talked about the interactions and impacts within south asian communities, what about the impact Desh had on the arts and cultural scene in Toronto and more broadly?

IR: Well its, funny, you know I would travel, so I basically went on to have my poetry published, and the first book was with TSAR, the second book was with (inaudible) which was a kind of bigger national press, and then I started to make film, so I often travel to events and people would say to me "oh theres this organization in Toronto, you know, you should go" and that was great, because it had this very international profile, and it was interesting because people were seeing my work as something that could be shown at Desh, without sort of knowing that I was involved with organizing it. So, it sort of, it developed a life of its own which I kind of lost track of, and from a distance anyway, and it was very much from a distance, it seemed to kind of shrink both in terms of its size, and its sort of relevance or footprint. Which may have been that mainstream culture was accommodating south asian work, south asian identity sort of kind of emerged on a national, international landscape — I don't know, I don't really have an answer for that. It felt like for a while that Desh wasn't needed. it felt like the political climate became more tolerant for a while. When I left there was an NDP government in intro which was amazing, which was very supportive to organizations like Desh and institutions like the Euclid and Khush, and you know maybe there came a point where it felt like we were on the inside suddenly. I don't

know, I can’t really, I can’t testify to that. But from a distance it felt like Desh became less relevant.

AM: Mhmm.

IR: And then it sort of went away, you know I think SAVAC emerged from it, ASAP emerged from it and their goals seemed viable and relevant, from what I gather, you know I don't know the organizations well. Khush certainly gave up the ghost, and splintered into more ethnicized and religious cultural groups. But, yeah. The need for those initial groups seemed to kind of wane.

AM: Mhmm, so do you think there is a kind of inevitability, this is maybe a harsh question but you know, Desh lived for about 10 years, do you think there were things that could have been done — I know you weren't necessarily involved right up until the end but um, do you think there is an inevitability to these things dying off or do you think there is a way we could keep that kind of community based arts initiatives that are actually producing high quality art? So, you know Desh was very much a unique organization — do you think there is an inevitability to these things dying out and becoming something else?

IR: I don’t, I don't actually. I think actually the UK is testament to, you know there are groups, organizations from that time that survived today, and the ones that have, have kept themselves relevant. They have adapted with the times, they've changed their mission statement, some have become smaller some have become institutional, but you know, I think its about evolving. Im not saying that Desh didn’t, or didn't try to, and perhaps the need wasn't there or the community support wasn't there, I suppose what could have happened was that it could have just gotten smaller, and worked at the same size as SAVAC, you know rather than becoming this big international festival as it called itself, or it could have become more of an institution, more of a kind of cultural centre, you know like the Japanese cultural centre at you know Winford park or something like that, which might have meant becoming more mainstream, toning down its politics and language — I don't know perhaps not. But certainly, you know a group is only as strong as the community its serves and if it isn't serving that community, the community no longer wants it, theres no need for it. I do think its kind of evolutionary in a way. I think that if there was a need for Desh, there would be a Desh, you know? I mean sometimes, with organizations its about bad management and bad practice but from what I understand that wasn't the case with Desh, people that worked there the people that ran it, always seemed very passionate and seemed very motivated. But I think that if there isn't a community that demands it, then it isn't going to survive. So, the important thing for the organization is to figure out what the community needs, and speak to that. So yeah, I don't think its inevitable, but I do think that times change, political, social and cultural climates change, you know, so perhaps Desh didn’t.

AM: Yeah, I mean that was kind of the answer I was hoping to hear. Its kind of a rascally question, its something that people ask often of these kinds of, I would call it a cultural movement even, and what that looks like, I mean anyways its a bit of a rascally question but. Uhm, so

maybe as one of my last questions, can you just tell me how you would say Desh shaped you? Obviously you shaped Desh, but how did it also shape you? as an artist, as an organizer, as a film maker — as all these things?

IR: Well I think, you know, I think growing up in Toronto in the 1970s, there was a lot of racism. So a lot of race shame, at least for me anyway and I think as a community. You know I remember you know, going to high school — I grew up in Flemmington Park, which was heavily immigrant and as my parents started to do better we moved down to the suburbs, to a school that had very few south asians and we wouldn't talk to each other at school. Even though in the evenings at cultural, family events or something our parents would know each other and we would hang out, but at school we would totally flack each other because we didn't want to be associated as a south asian. Somehow, if we spoke to another south asian we would be a Paki, and if we didn't we would pass. It was really sort of, sad, and I grew up with that sense of cultural and race shame I think. And eventually, I eventually tried to shake that off myself, and I think that Desh really helped with that. Both Desh and Khush sort of, certainly as a gay man and as a south asian gay man was very empowering in both strengthening my identity but also creating a public identity for who I was. Desh did that for me as an artist. I felt like it sort of needed to be invented so I could benefit from it, if you know what I mean. But and it was wasn't that conscious at the time, but I felt like needed to sort of like, I felt like I was a writer but I didn't have a community to write for, and I needed to know that it existed. Desh confirmed that. And it kind of set me on a path that allowed me to believe that I could continue to create work on my own terms, in my own voice and in my own identity, you know. Rather than have to sort of speak in a white Canadian voice, or make films about people unlike myself. So which I've gone on to do since then, but as a choice, not as something forced upon me. So I think Desh helped to kind of show me that there was the possibility to exist as a south asian artist. It didn't, that flexibility wasn't even dreamed before Desh existed, for me. So definitely I think that it gave me the sort of confidence, and the belief and the hope that there was a path for me.

AM: Yeah yeah. that makes a lot of sense. Ian is there anything you feel that we didn't cover in the interview that you would have liked to have go down in this particular oral history?

IR: Uhm, probably a million things but they aren't occurring to me now.

AM: (laughs) And also, I know it takes time, but if you ever wanted to do a part two, or if you wanted to email me some things, thats always a possibility because theres gonna be some written portions and the sound portions on the website. so yeah.

IR: I'd be happy to, if things come to me I'll email you. But if you want to have a second session, if you feel that there are things that I didn't cover, you know I'd be happy to do that.

AM: Okay.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 015 – Submission from Leah Lakshmi

Participant: Leah Lakshmi

Interview Date: 07/05/2014
Interview Location: Audio file recorded by Leah Lakshmi in Toronto, ON.

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My name is Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and I first encountered Desh Pardesh in 1996 and 1997. I grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts, not in Canada, which is a very rust belt, working class, economically depressed, small city in the northeast. And I came to Toronto in the late 90s because there was an incredible queer people of colour arts and activism scene, of which Desh was a huge, huge part. I also came because I'd grown up, like many South Asians, in the United states had in the 80s and 90s, very, very isolated. There was a small Indian community, but me and my father were the only Sri Lankans in Worcester. And we would meet other Sri Lankans when our families would come and visit. We had cousins who would come and stay, and my grandparents, but it was amazing to come to Toronto, period, and find this enormous refugee Sri Lankan community, and this even larger South Asian community that was incredibly diverse. Some of the things I remember about Toronto, in general in that time, was hearing that it was not only the oft-quoted (laughs) most-diverse city in the world, but that it was ten percent South Asian. And being in Toronto meant being in the in city where South Asian meant Indo-Caribbean, Sri Lankan, Bengali, Kashmiri, you know, Punjabi, South Indian, from the Maldives, South Asians from South Africa, I knew people who came from all of those communities. And in terms of that political moment, it was at a political moment where South Asian had not become hip or culturally on the map yet, or consumable by white capitalism. We were these smelly dirty people, we didn't (laughs) have any cache, and because of that we faced oppression, along with other reasons, but it also left us a lot of room to find each other and to define ourselves. Some of the things that I remember feeling were that in Toronto in the 90s every person I knew who was South Asian had grown up with African, Caribbean, Black, Latino, Indigenous, East and Southeast Asian folks, and there was an incredible amount of pan-Black, Indigenous and people of colour solidarity. Everyone, almost everyone seemed to be working class, or barely lower middle class. Everybody had grown up in Regent Park together. and even though we talked about differences between blackness and brownness, there just felt like there was a lot more class commonality in terms of police profiling, racism, oppression, immigration, and also solidarity. So in the middle of all that, Desh Pardesh was this incredible, incredible political and cultural institution. I know, believe me, I knew there was a lot of drama and struggles, but as a twenty one year old kid who was this mixed race Sri Lankan queer femme girl, who had been a part of student of of colour organizing in New York, but had never really been able to hang out with all South Asians from across the diaspora, coming to Desh meant coming to this cultural space where South Asian was queer, it was very very very intentionally not just about a bunch of North

Indian upper middle class, upper caste people. There definitely were those folks involved -- I mean I remember things like going to DMO, which was the dishwashing machine operators theatre collective, which was a bunch of Tamil folks who lived in St. James Town in the housing projects, who were being led by Krishantha Sribegedatha, who is a singularly Sri Lankan radical poet, and who were doing political theatre and I went to see a show they did at Desh in the basement community room of St. James Town. You know, and it was just this most incredible working class, sophisticated Sri Lankan theatre piece. And the audience was full of folks from St. James Town, and queer folks and queer Tamils, and queer Lankans, and queer South Asians from all over the map, and our friends. Desh, culturally, I -- I covered Desh Pardesh for CKLN In 1997, and I did it totally immaturely, kneeling, holding a little handheld microphone and I was recording all the performances to play on CKLN, because it was just, you know, it was obvious of course that CKLN would be broadcasting every single public performance that Desh was doing. And (sighs) I got into trouble because I was interviewed by Pedro Sanchez, who now works for the CBC i believe, but who back in the day was also working at CKLN...I believe it was him, but whoever it was asked me to describe what Desh was, and I kind of (laughs) I probably departed from the press release, because what I remember saying was that Desh was a place for South Asians who were freaks and who were different, and who didn't fit in. And there was more to Desh than that, but I still really hold that for me and for a lot of other people it felt like a place for the freaky South Asians, it felt like it was a place for the queers, the mixed race folks, the working class folks, the folks who were shooting heroin, the folks who were radicals, the folks who were feminists, the folks who did not fit in. So I was drawn to that, as a mixed race Sri Lankan queer femme survivor, you know, baby baby baby rising writer, and I came to Desh to try and find some place -- this is going to sound corny -- but that would feel like some kind of home. And there's so many moments from Desh that I think about weekly that were so formative. For example, I think -- can think of Sheila Bhattacharya who is a mixed race Bengali, queer yoga teacher, who had done her thesis on trying to become a yoga teacher as a mixed race Bengali, working class person, and all the racism that she was facing within white yoga spaces, and all the cultural appropriation. And I remember going to an event that Desh held at the 519, almost twenty years ago now, where she spoke about her thesis, and she talked about the fact that so many Black and brown women, you know, didn't feel safe closing their eyes, and breathing in and out, and relaxing in a yoga space that was mostly white because of all the racism we'd survived. And, as a young survivor, and as someone who is certain to be chronically ill, it was this incredible space where Sheila was talking about cultural appropriation and being mixed and what it was like being a mixed Bengali trying to get this knowledge. and, you know, twenty years before we invented the term "healing justice", that's what Sheila was doing. You know, she was talking about what it was like to decolonize our bodies through yoga and what it was like to create a space where South Asians and people of colour who were survivors of violence and racism could heal. You know, culturally, I also think about the parties. I think about the parties, I think about just the social milieu of going to Desh. In my memoir, Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Colour Dreaming Her Way Home, which just came out not even a year ago, it just came out in October of 2015, there's a scene where I remember being twenty-two and going to one of the big parties, and I described it as a catastrophe of brownness. And my editor who was white was like, "Don't you mean something more positive?" and I was like, "No, I mean catastrophe in all the

best and most disastrous ways." I remember -- and what that meant for me was I remembered being there and seeing, you know, communist radical femme aunties in beautiful salwars and saris, smoking cigars and flirting. I remember seeing Sudharshan, who many people know is a queer Tamil Sri Lankan pundit, who was organizing one of the Tamil worker centres as an out queer Tamil radical man. I remember seeing lots of other young South Asians my age, some of whom were, to me anyway, it seemed like they were trying to be as authentic as possible, but then there were other folks who were just such weirdos and freaks and people who didn't fit into our communities who were trying to find each other. And it was also one of the places where I really found what I've gone back to over and over again as what I love about South Asian cultures, which is our tradition of genuine warmth and radicalness, and imagining different South Asia's that are loving and progressive and egalitarian and revolutionary, and that are open. I might be rambling a little bit, but some other things I want to say are that Rosina Kazi of the Ben Lau and I -- the first time I met Rosina was at a Desh open mic. It was a youth open mic in '97 or '98, and we were both these baby baby baby young performers and it was one of the first times I think both of -- either of us had performed. And I remember we came up to each other afterwards and we were like, "Ah you're really good!" and it's amazing to me to think about twenty years later how both of us are, you know, working artists, working class South Asian artists, working class queer South Asian artists. And for me anyway, I don't want to speak for Rose, but I know we've shared political, and cultural, and artistic community for those twenty years, and activism. I can remember us being at protests and events after 9/11, you know, in the days where so many of the people we'd met, as early twenty year-olds around Desh and post-Desh, you know we're -- we're all trying to do, you know, immediately after 9/11, political organizing, and really running head into all the white activists not getting that we were terrified to go out on the streets, and that our family members -- you know so many of us had family members who didn't go outside for a month or two after those attack because of profiling, and racism, and violence. And it was from those relationships that a lot of us made through meeting each other at Desh in the 90s as these baby twenty-year-old queer South Asians, that carried us into the organizing that we would do and we would make up. And it's -- not to sound like an old fogey -- but I've got five books out now, and Lal has so many albums, and we've both toured all over, and been artists who've stayed really committed to Toronto, and Black, and Indigenous, and people of colour in Toronto, and South Asians in Toronto, and being part of that -- this ongoing conversation is about what South Asianness can look like in all its forms in this city. And that's really really important to me.

[00:10:57]

There's a question in front of me, "How did Desh interact with feminists of colour, queer, POC organizing at the time?"

I've gotta say that for me -- and I've said this before --- Toronto felt like paradise. you know, it felt like in the late 90s when I was there, some of the political players that I can think of, the places, the scenes, the organizing, it was all about CKLN, Toronto Women's Bookstore, This Ain't the Rosedale Library, you know, those really important queer feminist of colour book stores. A Different Booklist, which used to be run by two queer Caribbean men, and then transitioned into a straight and, at the time sometimes homophobic space, but there was this period where it was like, "Wow this is, we're so ahead of the curve in terms of queer of colour

organizing." I think about things like Fireweed, which was an incredibly important feminist literary journal that had lots and lots of people, queer and feminists of colour content. I think about all of the parties, you know, all of the three dollar and five dollar DJ nights that Amita, and Vashti, and Zara did, and so many other DJs. In the downtown east side, down on Queen street in Parkdale, in houses. I remember going into Strictly Bulk and seeing Dionne Brand in a "Free Nicaragua" t-shirt, you know, scooping up lentils. I think of the way that Toronto west end felt when it was a broke, hood neighbourhood, when Bloor and Lansdowne was nowhere -- you know, there was no hint of gentrification. There were a lot of folks who were poor, there were a lot of folks who were drug using. I can remember when Rose and Nick were living above, I think it was this Bengali restaurant, Bloor and Lansdowne -- it's apartment there. You know when I was living up the block at Emerson and on Dupont, and this feeling that, you know, you would just walk around west end neighbourhoods and just see all of these queer artists of colour, you know queer South Asian artists, queer artists of colour. I think about the coalition organizing, the groups like women against racist police violence; CARPV, the coalition against racist police violence; WARN -- all these things. Camp Cis, which was such an important space of queer women of colour cultural and political organizing that was doing prison justice work. It was an incredibly, incredibly rich milieu, and I have to say that for most of the 90s I maybe had one white friend? You know, maybe two. You know, and I knew so many people who were also activists of colour, queer activists of colour, who really felt like we had no need to work with white people. You know, there were these white anarchists over there, but they were irrelevant, that we were doing such incredible work on our own. So those are some things that I can share, and that I also want to say that I briefly had a gig, you know, this little little contract that -- I don't remember, I probably got paid like four hundred bucks or something -- and I'm looking at a poster for it right now. I was org-, I was hired to do the organizing for this thing that Desh was doing called the Brick By Brick Community Forum, which was an attempt to have programming outside of the festival, to have open forums in different neighbourhoods where there were a lot of South Asians, about different issues. And the flyer I'm looking at I found when I was going through my archives, and it says, "Access denied," "Social services," "Grassroots healing," and "February 15, 2000," and it was this open forum with speakers at the Parkdale Community Library. You know, which, and it has tokens accessibility, wheelchair accessible, and it was a space where folks from Parkdale Community Health, Parkdale Community Legal, Martho Acampo from Across Boundaries, which for years has been known as the only mental health clinic that's focused specifically around people of colour, where all these folks were talking. and I remember organizing that, I remember flyering, I remember wheat pasting those flyers up. And I found that a couple years ago in the thick of living in Oakland, in the middle of healing justice community, and organizing and it really, it really moved me because I was like, you know we were doing this 15 years ago. You know, we were having conversations about healing, and access, and oppression, and racism in counselling, and racism in the health world. And we were talking about disability access, and I find that really really important to remember. I'm trying to think what else I can say.

[00:15:26]

I mean one of the questions that I have in front of me is, "What kind of intervention do you think

Desh made into identity-based organizing and other community organizing at the time, Toronto arts and cultural scene at the time, leftist arts and culture nationally and internationally." This might sound weird, but I think that in a lot of ways Desh put South Asia on a map, you know, it really did draw a map that we controlled. For me, I was born in 1975, and I grew up in America, in the United States, and I moved to Canada when I was twenty-one, and my experience of South Asianness was that we weren't even on the map. we weren't in -- you know, I would say mainstream political discourse, or also in people of colour political discourse. There (sighs) -- you know if you dug you could find out that there'd been an Asian American movement in the 60s, but I didn't grow up knowing about the Ghadar party, or any of the radical South Asian histories that I know about now. You know, it just felt like we really didn't exist, and, you know I think that Desh took that invisibility and flipped and said, "Okay, you don't care about us, we're not in the paper, we're not represented anywhere. We're gonna define what South Asianness is within diaspora, and its gonna be queer, and radical, and working class, and leftist, and all of these things." And I think that was incredibly powerful, and I think that it still resonates for me fifteen years later. And one thing I always remember is that the year -- a year or two after Desh folded in 2000, yeah, I remember different things. I remember Madonna's Ray of Light video, with the bindi, and I remember the beginning of South Asia actually making it on the pop cultural map, and being co opted, basically. And I remember, you know -- no disrespect because I've performed there -- but I remember that Masala Masti Mehndi, which is one of those harbourfront centre, kind of like multicultural festivals, started and people were like, "Oh this is going to be the new Desh," and I, you know, was asked to go and perform and do spoken word down there, and I did. and I met Nisha Ohuja for the first time, who is of course an incredible theatre artist and yoga teacher and South Asian queer radical. But I remember being like, "Wow this is the new Desh, and its depoliticized. It's, you know, it's samosas. and it's music, and those are wonderful things, but it's not the Taxi Workers Union, and its not talking about yoga, and it's not talking about Islamophobia, or caste, or any of these things, or queerness, or domestic violence, all of which were things Desh talked about.

[00:18:08]

The last thing I want to say, well before I get to that, I want to say that (sighs), you know, I mean for me that was a watershed moment in going from being invisible, to the system basically being like, "Oh, well we're gonna take -- you guys are actually palatable, so we're gonna skim some of your cultural off the top and you know just kind of blanche it, and depoliticize it, and resell it. And we're not going to allow you cult- we're not going to allow you control over it. Or we will allow a few people control over it if they just want to sell some music, or some clothes, or some food, but we won't allow you to actually talk about oppression or racism." The last thing I want to say is that in terms of what Desh meant to me, it's where I got started as an artist. I had known I wanted to be a writer since I was 9 years old, and I had gone to New York on scholarship to go to college there with really big hopes that I was gonna make it, and I was just so depressed, and traumatized, and freaked out, and I was a baby that I didn't become a twenty-year-old spoken word sensation. And you know, coming to Desh -- and so much of the message that I got when I was there was that my story was too weird. That being mixed race was weird. That being Sri Lankan -- where was that? No one knew where that was! That no one cared about South Asia.

You know, maybe you could be -- there's like one spot for somebody who was Indian, but you know, it -- everything else it was just too weird, it was too foreign, it was too strange. And then you added being queer, and working class, and femme, and a survivor, and all these things. Oh no, there's no way. Desh was really one of the first places where I sat, as a twenty-one-year-old, and I saw this enormous diversity, which is a word I don't' like to use, but I'm gonna use here, of what South Asianness could be, and I was like, "Oh, I can -- I can fit in here. You know, I -- there's a place for me and here -- and Desh was the first big gig I ever got. And I will always remember when I got the acceptance letter, it was 1999. I had been poor and struggling, and in an abusive relationship, and really really chronically ill for a bunch of years, just really really hard times. And I didn't think they were going to say yes when I applied, and they did and they put me on, on --- I forget, but it was one of the big Friday or Saturday night showcases, and I talked about being Burgher, and I talked about sex, and they paid me a hundred dollars, and I was incredibly incredibly cash poor at that time. It meant everything, it was such a huge -- it was like getting a thousand dollars now. You know, I just, it was more money than I'd seen in years. And it, it meant so much that they were saying, "Yeah, come and perform, like you're, you're the voice that we want to hear," and that there were other Lankans in the bill, and that there were Indo-Caribbean folks, and other folks who are not the North Indian diaspora. And it wasn't every idyllic, like, and you know there were many many times, as a poor person, as somebody who was really struggling, as a mixed race person, I still felt like a freak, I still felt like I was not -- I definitely did not feel like one of the cool kids, but it was still a place that was so foundational to me beginning as an artist. And I really need to say that. And I think I will stop there, especially as my partner, I think, is running the dishwasher.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 016 – Interview with Leela Acharya

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Leela Acharya (LA)

Interview Date: 09/07/2015
Interview Location: Conducted at Starbucks in Toronto, ON

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AM: Okay, so Leela, kind of starting talking about Desh now (0:00:56). Can you just tell me what was your first interaction or involvement with Desh and what were you up to in terms of the community organizing or the work you were doing leading into that?

LA: So, I arrived in Toronto (0:01:08) in April of 1991 and chose to live here. I had grown up in Alberta and I had been in Holland and India prior to this. Toronto seemed like the most racially diverse city in Canada to live in and upon getting here I found myself at the South Asian Women's Centre and began to meet South Asian women, feminists, progressive feminists, lesbian feminists, bisexual feminists, gay South Asian men, folks from diverse communities that all made Toronto their home. It was a community of people I had always longed to meet. Then in the spring of 92 I attended the second Desh Pardesh. I was an audience member at that point and I heard so much about Salaam Toronto and I remember going and it was just euphoric because the programming, the event, the art, the talent, the music, everything was just absolutely phenomenal and so that was my entry point and first involvement with Desh. After that, I got involved as a volunteer, later a board member and a joined programming committees and became a member of Desh from then on.

(0:02:09)

AM: Okay, in terms of your involvement outside of being an audience member, so you mentioned programming committees. What did that look like? What was the kind of set up for how you would organize the event.

LA: I think, as I recall, we would sort of look at: "this is the program we have and so what we can do better?". We started to look at how and why a class politics needed to be injected. We needed more diversity and inclusiveness in terms of the programming. We wanted to make sure that feminism and queer activism were front and centre but we also wanted to make sure class issues were brought in. We wanted to make sure that there were voices from the marginalized communities across South Asia. So, the issues of caste and class and the interactions would come in and it would impact in terms of the programming we were looking at. (0:03:01) For me, I was working as a researcher with immigrant women's health centre at that time, I was a volunteer at

ASAAP. I was just sort of taking in a lot of South Asian community organizations in Toronto at that time. So, as an organizer in those kinds of places and spaces, I was sort of bringing that experience to Desh. I found that, as a Board Member, they were sort of looking for people to join various committees and so, you know, you are working together with a group of people, you get to know people and you're brain storming, coming up with ideas sort of figuring out who is doing what and just go off and do it. Then we would plan this festival every year. Of course, there was paid coordinators who did the brunt of the work but volunteers were instrumental in terms of making things happen because, as you know, Desh grew over the years. '92 might have been fairly small but then '93 got bigger, '94 got big, it got quite significantly large. With it came all kinds of changes and all kinds of other dynamics as well.

(0:04:04)

AM: Can you tell me a bit more about the changes that you saw over time?

LA: Well, I saw a one-day.night festival grow to 2 or 3, then to a 5 day/night fest I believe. And the festival programming became richer and a lot more diverse. I saw more international programming. A growth in international programming, with people coming from the UK, from the across the United States from different parts of Canada. It was also diverse in terms of forms of art so there was film and video and then there was performance art and visual/digital arts and installations and panel discussions. There was also a range of musical performance. Like, it was just, very very rich. There was always room for improvement and this was something the board and programming committees examined all the time. So, I think there was always this questioning. There would always be feedback sessions about how can we make it better, what's missing? Where are the gaps? How we were we not inclusive? Whose voice is not being represented? There was always opportunities I found for giving that kind of critical feedback and then using that to create a better festival year after year. That's my recollection, pretty much.

(0:05:09)

AM: And was this something, was the structure and the kind of, like it sounds to me like the festival itself had a politic and that meant that internally also there were sort of an understanding of how, like collectivity should work. Or how consensus based decision making. Was that something that was familiar to you already or was this an early experience in that kind of community or organizing?

LA: I think, I mean, I had some experience with consensus building in feminist organizations. So, it wasn't particularly new to me and it was something that we were able to manage at an early time in Desh but, as Desh grew, it got harder and harder to be able to keep that kind of organizing philosophy or principle. So then it became a little bit more decentralized and a little bit more, um, particular committee would figure out things and report back and they would always be another level of decision making before anything got decided. Something that starts small and grows big so quickly, there is inevitably going to be a lot of growing pains and there

was. There were all kinds of, you know, not very pleasant dynamics going on too. I think some of the earliest organizers had laid the foundation for a very strong politic, some of that got watered down by the third or fourth or fifth year and then it went back to having strong politics again. It depended on the organizers and their leadership and politics. So, the organization sort of changed and evolved over time. I hope that answers your question.

(0:06:48)

AM: Yeah, totally. So, I'm actually going to shift a bit to the bigger picture in terms of what else was happening. Not only in Toronto but in terms of diaspora and in terms of understanding diasporic identities. Can you tell me a little bit about, for you, the intervention that Desh made into the sociopolitical moment that was the late 80s early 90s?

LA: Well when I came here it was a very progressive time in Canadian and Ontario politics with an NDP government, there was funding for Arts, there was a lot of community organizing going on , there was a lot of, very vibrant social movements that were active in anti-racism, a very strong women's feminist movement, labour movements. So, all of these groups would merge now and then and there would be protests and demos of amazing vigour and lots of good things going on in the City in terms of organizing for change. There was just a vibrancy that existed in the 90s (0:07:50) until Mike Harris came in. So, that was the broader political climate, and so that climate was very conducive for an organization like Desh Pardesh and so, things were thriving. Desh Pardesh provided a place for a particular kind of identity politics to also unfold. So, if you were queer, if you were South Asian, you were non White there were strong alliances built with other communities of colour. For sure, there was making sure people from the African diaspora were part of the festival. And other marginalized groups, Latin American, etc. It was a festival... I remember Latin American community in awe of Desh Pardesh like "wow you have this festival every year we don't have anything in the Latin American community and they were working really hard to create their own organization. So, Desh, just because of its resources and the privilege, probably, that most of our community had at the time in terms of getting things off the ground was a point of envy for some of the other communities, more marginalized than South Asian. But, so, identity politics if you were queer, if you were non white, if you had an analysis of, you know, issues of class, race, gender, this was place where you could bring those perspectives and discuss them, think deeply about them and different forms of art that spoke these very issues. And, that kind of entry point was nowhere to be seen in Canada, so it was like very significant, it was huge (0:09:27) and it was a devastating loss when we ended up losing it. So that's sort of the climate of the time, vibrant social movements, and a space to actually bring some of these movements together and talk about some of these things fusing politics with art.

(0:09:46)

AM: when you were saying, you said something about the more, the maybe less marginalized position of South Asian do you mind talking about that a little bit more?

LA: Well, I think the group of people around which the beginnings of Desh Pardesh took place and then subsequent mobilization of others that came in, many of us come from middle class privileged backgrounds in the city of Toronto or from other parts of Canada. And um, we're very conscientious about making sure there was always a class politic and making sure marginalized voices were also included in the festival. But that took work. And it was not always present. That took work, that took organizing, that took outreach. I remember there was a point when there was no inclusion of Tamils from Sri Lanka. And the issue of Tamils in India, you know, and so we started to look at that and bring that kind of programming and bring people in, in terms of being on the board and bringing in their particular experiences and visions as well. So, that's what i mean by I found most of us were middle class, most people were university educated, had one or two degrees already. Were living a privileged life,in many ways. That's who was organizing at Desh Pardesh. (0:11:09) Until we made that contentious effort to look at ourselves and reflect on ourselves and see this bias, this class bias, things, then things started to change a little bit more. Also, in terms of what kind of art, what voices in art were represented, you know, mainly Punjabi, north Indian, kind of stuff we realized ok what about voices from north east India, where is that? What about voices from Pakistan? What about muslim voices? What about other religious minorities in India, etc. So we started to look at all of that and, and for example programming about an Indian Jewish identity evolved, it took time, but it evolved.

AM: Mhmm, mhmm. I am curious about that looked like internally. Were those conversations, did that ever bring up, and I don't mean in a nitpicky way but was that a difficult premises for Desh to go through?

(0:12:18)

LA: I think it was. I think probably several people might have taken things personally 'cause that's just the nature of this kind of work. You get passionates, the personal becomes very political and it is very political. I think there were, there were, there were fights. There was tears, there was all of that. I think if we are honest with ourselves, those of us that were involved heavily will be able to look at that and say: "yeah, that existed". So, they weren't easy conversations but there was always a space to have them which I appreciated. But then, again, there was a space to have but it depended on the facilitator of that space. In terms, of did these questions come up, were these conversations allowed or were they brushed under the carpet. Personally, I found that most of those conversations were being had. But then it was left to organizers to carry it forwarded. So you had to entrust people that they would do the right thing. You had to wait. Like any movement, like any organizing, that's just the nature of it, right, so it was not easy.

(0:13:18)

AM: Yeah , I imagine. And I'm wondering, you spoke to this a little bit in terms of alliance building but can you tell me a bit about how Desh interacted with the feminist of colour,

queer,POC, like person of colour organizing of the time, whatever it was called at the time. What were the kinds of interactions happening?

LA: I wasn't a core staff at Desh so I can only speak as a volunteer and a board member but I think we actively sought out alliance making wherever possible with other progressive groups and marginalized groups so, um, whether in the in the Caribbean and African diasporic communities or whether it was the latin America communities there woudl always be.. and then we came upon the Punjabi Mexican connection. So, then you brought in latin american communities, or you looked at the indo african connections historically and then you brought in communities of African descent. So, there was always an opportunity to do that just in terms of our shared histories as well, but there was also purposeful, intentional kind of organizing and bringing in other communities in and looking to see well, what are they doing and in their political and artistic communities and with their community organizing. So, what did it look like? It was very intentional and it meant, it included a lot of outreach. And, again, there were tensions sometimes. There could have been tensions. It wasn't easy, it wasn't straightforward. But it was something that was actively sought after.

(0:14:55)
AM: mhmm. mhmm. And so, can you tell me a little bit about, you've spoken to this a bit, what were some of the strategies that as volunteers and as people who were committed to Desh that you used internally to kind of. There were so many different perspectives, so many different lived experiences, identities, and also just ideas, right? How did you,

LA: outreach?

AM: outreach and also internally dealing with that. What were some strategies that you used that we can draw from?

LA: good question. not sure I have an answer to that. I do know that there was some criticism about Desh being too Toronto centric. But, I mean, there just wasn't the means to be able to create a Desh in Vancouver, a Desh in Alberta, in eastern provinces, I mean, ideally that would have been something. I'm just trying to recall. I think outreach was really a lot of word of mouth, getting out in the community, we certainly weren't into social media the way we are today. Could you imagine what we would have been able to do had we had social media. So I think it was a lot of word of mouth and perhaps email. I don't think Desh even had a website. It was a lot of networking and word of mouth. So it was an artist having connections with somebody else, an organizer, cultural producers having connections with others, writers having connections with others and then by word of mouth. People had heard about the festival and people wanted to be at the festival and people were coming from out of town for the festival. But in terms of the organizing group, the board members, the committee members, it was very Toronto centered. No doubt about it. I don't think we even got out to Scarborough or Mississauga or Brampton. In retrospect, absolutely not. So, it was limited in that way.

(0:16:53)

AM: yeah, I mean, it seems like from what I've heard that was another thing that sort of a critique that came up and then maybe there was some efforts to try and expand that but also there's also there's only so much capacity or, you know, how do you do that?

LA: and so, that critique of being very Toronto centred and being very gay focused, queer focused, and very feminist, a very strong class politics, which some claimed also turned off a lot of people. But we, were not apologetic. I can only speak for myself. I personally was not offended by that. That's okay. We have, they have their own spaces, this is our space and we kind of got very protective of that space in some ways. Was it exclusionary? I did not see it that way. So, that was part of the limitations of having something that was so focused based on an identity politics in downtown Toronto. But it had immense strength as well.

(0:18:00)

AM: Sounds like it. Can you a little bit about two of the projects that you were involved with that kind of, well one in particular that very directly came out of Desh.

LA: mhmm.

AM: If Im not mistaken, that Rewriting The Script (Indian or Medium)* workshop series?

LA: If I recall correctly and I think you've already spoken with Farzana and Deena, the three of us were just basically chatting about our own experiences and we realized: "You know what! We need to do a workshop about .. I think we called it Coming Out of the Dixie Mall Food Court or something like that. I can't remember, I remember Dixie Mall Food Court but can't remember the first part. As we were chatting about it we realized there is such a huge need for this and so we made a proposal for this workshop and they might have better recollection of the details but I remember it was pretty successful. We had quite a few people that came to it. (18:25) It was welcomed by the programming committee and it was all about family relationships and the need for family support for LGBTQ South Asians. At the workshop we got suggestions if I'm not mistaken at that workshop for well, we need resources, there is nothing out there for parents dealing with their queer child. There's nothing for young people in terms of well if I came out to my parents what are the repercussions what are the implications. At the same time, we wanted to look beyond the coming out and look at the long term. Because, it wasn't jjust about coming out. So, if I recall correctly, we got the idea for the video from that workshop. We thought ok, we got to do a video, so a group of us including I, R, T, myself, A, and A, we said ok so we started to apply for funding. We even got backlash from the City of Toronto (19:56). We got a grant from the City of Toronto and some of the more right wing conservative city councillors, we made it into the media and there was criticism of the city putting in money for gay and lesbian video in the South Asian community. The reaction was like "how horrendous this is". It was actually in the Toronto Star we had to go down to city hall and do a deputation to defend ourselves about

this, you know, measly 5,000$ we were getting from the City Toronto equity access and equity grant. We had alliances within the city. Her name was Ceta Ramkhalawansingh that worked there for years. Anyway, she was one of our strongest allies within the City of Toronto. And, anyway, we got the money but we had very little money and with very little resources but we were able to pull together what we thought was a pretty good labour of love. And, um, you know the sound quality was horrible. We were able to create this really important resource and we got a lot of support for it because nothing like that had ever existed.

We honestly thought, we've now opened the door" we've created this film, lots of other stuff is going to come, but to my knowledge I don't think there is that much since 14 years ago when we created this film. So, it's kind of interesting that it remains quite an important piece. Even though it's such poor quality. So, yeah, that came straight out of Desh Pardesh because that's where we did the workshop, that's where we got the feedback and the idea for the video.

(0:21:29)

AM: Tell me about the reception of the video, when you screened it for the first time.

LA: It was another euphoric moment, for all of us 'cause it had been a long process and none of us were filmmakers except, you know, Amina was sort of the closest to being a filmmaker in our group and we went through outreaching to various people and got their personal stories and we met many, many Friday nights, and called ourselves Friday Night Productions. The project went on for a few years, I think. I'm pretty sure it took us at least two years to get through it and when we finally had it, we had to live with the final product. It wasn't perfect but we were still very proud of it. We had a lovely launch at the Isabelle Bader Theatre, it was a house full. The support was just phenomenal in terms of the video. And then, I think it was shown at a film festival. I can't remember which one because I remember going there to the screening and there was a few audience members. But, you know, at the back of my mind, I just still can't get over the poor sound quality. We were all stuck in that poor sound quality thing but, you know, we realize it's still a great piece, it's a great resource for families.

(0:22:43)

AM: At the first, at the major screening that you had. The first one. Was it a mix of parents and youth?

LA: It was.

AM: Or young people?

LA: It was. It was a mix definitely of parents and young people and there was a lot of our own friends and allies there. Certainly, but I do believe, it was a house full so there was a lot of other folks that came. It was sort of an anticipated video people had heard about it and so it was much

anticipated and also there was a guide that went with it. So we'd found some funding to create an educational guide and Gulzar Charania and Tabish Surani, two educators who created the accompanying educational guide that went with the dvd,/ video. So that was also a bonus. Cause it sort of laid out questions and scenarios pre screening of the film and post screening of the film. To have with your friends and family. So it was a really lovely lovely tool. I stand by it today. I mean it's just something very special, personal and political.

AM: Totally, yeah. I couldn't agree more. Is that something that people can access somehow?

LA: yes, I believe it's available on Youtube.

AM: The video, but the guide?

LA: The guide, you know what, I don't know whether.. where the guide is available. I have a hard copy but I'm not sure it's, if there's a pdf version posted somewhere I really don't know I'd have to talk to Gulzar and Tabish about it.

(0:24:18)

AM: I think it's a very special resource. Can you also talk a bit about your involvement with "the children we sacrifice"?

LA: mhmm, so Grace Poore is an artist and filmmaker who had attended Desh a couple of times as a writer and she was there reading some of her work and we talked and we connected and she had told me about a film that she was working on. Looking at women's survivors of sexual violence of all kinds of sexual violence and it was a rather big project and she was looking for funding. She finally got the funding and she asked me and my partner to be her production coordinators in Toronto and we were quite thrilled by the opportunity because we really supported the project. We really believed in the project so. So, she came here and she filmed and I had put her in touch with several women and she had outreached to several people and so we were basically accompanying her to all these interviews, that she filmed and we would do the set up of the interview. We would create space for the interview, make it look welcoming and warm and all that kind of stuff. It was a fun experience, I've never done anything like that. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed it, I learned a lot and so we were her production coordinators. Then we were able to, I'm not sure Grace had done it or I had done it but when the film was finally finished and we had the video we wanted a screening and I had suggested, I think, we screen it at Desh. That was the year, I think Vashti was one of the coordinators of Desh Pardesh and I'm not sure who she worked with maybe Arif and we put in a proposal and they had said yes. Grace was not available so I was the organizer to put on the screening of the film. (0:25:59) It was very well attended and there was a great response to this first ever film looking at survivors of sexual violence across the South Asian diaspora. A painful but compelling film.

(0:26:15)

AM: Was this a thing in terms of programming at Desh or conversations that happened internally.. was sexual violence something that was talked about much?

LA: Not really, but it was part of the feminist politics, in terms of the feminism within Desh there were a lot of feminists there who knew about who were aware and working in the violence against women community. So, this was just a natural thing to include like this. This was a sensitive controversial topic and it needed to be spoken about and here was this first ever film on the topic. We had the screening at Women's Health in Women's Hands, a women of colour health centre and they were one of the partners involved in the screening. I mean, there were men in the audience as well but I do recall a lot of South Asian women at that screening. It was a highly anticipated film and it had a big impact. So, I can't say that sexual violence was talked about on a day to day basis but among the feminists that were involved in organizing at Desh Pardesh it was defnitely front and centre as part of our feminist politics. How could this issue not be?

(0:27:24)

AM: That kind of makes me think about a sort of related question. Because Desh certainly was mix gender in terms of who was organizing but there were sort of Khush beginnings and there were different dynamics. Can you talk a little about the gender dynamics within Desh?

LA: Yeah, *sighs*, I mean I had heard more about the sexism within Desh more than I had directly experienced it. I worked with a lot of women at Desh, I worked with a few gay men that worked at Desh. I personally didn't have any difficulties but I knew there was dynamics in terms of Khush being perceived as a very privileged male group and they really had no class politics and they certainly had no feminist politics or awareness of sexism. So it was a lot of work for particular organizers, coordinators at Desh Pardesh to make sure that this awareness got injected in the daily workings of the organization. Because, otherwise it was just becoming another gay boy kind of festival but brown gay boy. So, I know there is a history of that. But, you know, when you are aware of that you then automatically bring something different to the table, right? So I think that was working in my subconscious. But, there was gender dynamics for sure and I think we had to make sure that feminism and feminist politics and anti sexism was sort of part and parcel of everything we did. Just like a class politics. It had to be a sort of an integrated analysis. It was always front and centre and so, particular coordinators would bring that and others that didn't bring it, it would be brought by board members, it would be brought by volunteers, etc. We tried to have that lens all the time but it was not easy.

(0:29:31)

AM: In that particular... you've spoken that kind of moment in which there was feminist organizing and queer of colour organizing. Today, do you see any echoes of that kind of, because it is very much driven by feminism, right?

LA: absolutely.

AM: Do you see echoes of that in organizing you are involved with today or?

LA: Definitely. it hasn't changed. *laughs* it hasn't changed, it depends on what kind of spaces you find yourselves in. But, for example, in Educators for Peace and Justice, a group I belong to and get involved in now and again, I mean we are a loose grouping of educators but there are often moments where it's very male dominated and there are very few women of colour, or people of colour for that matter, and so we are constantly coming up against the same kind of struggles over and over again. Making sure there is space and voice for other marginalized groups because it's just not there. So you have to actively, consciously always be working on it. And as an educator in a school setting, I have to do the same thing, day in and day out. So, it never goes away, it's never going to go away in my lifetime, I don't think. So, I do see parallels and I do see that challenge continuing to exist even today.

AM: 20 years later, absolutely.

(0:30:51)

LA: Unless you are in a specifically queer people of colour space, ok, LGBTQ feminist people of colour space, and you are in a more general space that brings these people different in, you are still dealing with the same stuff absolutely.

AM: Yeah. Okay, I want to ask you so many more questions about that but we only have a certain amount of time. Maybe just looking back and you've spoken about your, you've always been a big appreciator of the Arts and you wouldn't necessarily call yourself an artist but you've always been very involved in some way and very appreciative of film in particular you said. Maybe I have, you know, a general question: what were some highlights for you during Desh, whether it was artistically or whether it was just some great organizing moments. Whatever highlights you can think of. Sometimes just sitting and thinking for a second, things come back.

LA: So many. I mean there was a lot of political art at Desh. That was one of the very positive things about Desh Pardesh. I remember a film, and it was all in Tamil and there was I think English subtitles and, or maybe it had different stories of, it was on sexual violence and I'm pretty sure, Punam was very instrumental in bringing that film and it was all about these different stories of female survivors of physical and sexual violence and the male collaborators in the situation and was just these stories one after the other in this film. I just remember that stood out significantly. I remember another artist from California, from Punjabi Mexican background bringing that rich history of Punjabi Mexicans and I think she did a film and she might have done an installation. That was really powerful. There's so many. I wish I could remember all of them. There were many many in terms of (0:33:01) there would be dance pieces. There would be visual arts. There would be film. I think even we tried to do, we tried to bring a couple of, a Theatre group, if I'm not mistaken a very very strong piece of theatre about the high end Toronto

restaurants that are filled with Sri Lankan Tamil male cooks. Many of it, a lot of it was very political and a lot of it was identity based or was based on a particular issue. There were pieces around class issues as well and you know, I remember, The Continuous Journey, the first making, making the first draft of his film, forgetting his name, the guy who made it .....

AM: Ali Kazimi

LA: Ali Kazimi! that was one of the first places where he was starting to talk about The Continuous Journey. So that whole piece. Writers, poets, like there's just, there was just so many honestly and I just, I would just go to that festival for. I think it started out as a one day, a two day, a three day, and then at one point it went to five days if I'm not mistaken. With an opening and closing, jam packed events. Happening simultaneously. So you had to prioritize: okay I'm going to go to there to see this workshop 'cause I can't make it to the 519 for this workshop. It got really big. Maybe at that time, not all the programming was overtly political. But, it had a role to play and there was a voice that had to be represented through the art form. It still was really important. Um, there were many pieces that stand out for me. I can't remember them all but those are a couple of them.

(0:34:43)

AM: yeah. This is kind of more general question is thinking about a festival like Desh and making and showcasing political art. What do you think it is about expressing politics through art that makes it so powerful. What do you think it was that made Desh last so long? I mean, I know it's really tragic that it ended. But it was a long standing festival. So, like, what is it about that mix of art and politics that was so important?

LA: I guess what was so important about that mix of arts and politics is that it spoke to the reality of life in the diaspora. It spoke to the kinds of oppression marginalization that people were experiencing. it spoke to the histories that were sort of unheard of, or untold until then. It allowed voices that had not been heard before, to be heard for the first time. it brought all of that together and it wasn't just art for arts sake. It was often art infused with a strong message around social justice, equity, things like that, um, lived experience, I think that's what made it really really stand out. And with that many other communities of colour came to the festival with their own shared, lived experience. That was, your jaw would drop when you walk in and see the number of people of colour. I'd be like where have all these people of colour in one room, how come we don't see this on a day to day basis but we see it for four nights during Desh Pardesh. You know? So, I think it also spoke, I think for a lot of people myself included you were able to make connections between what you saw at that festival to other things and other communities as well. It was just a, an entry point to our lived experience in some may ways. (O:36:47) And if not your own personal experience, lived experience of somebody else and so you were able to make links, understand each other better. Raise your awareness, educate yourself. It played a huge educational role.It was so multidisciplinary.

(0:37:13)

AM: That kind of leads me into my last question: how do you think that Desh shaped you as, you know, you are a parent, you are an educator, you are an activist. How do you think it shaped you?

LA: It shaped in very big ways. Because that was, I had just arrived in Toronto, I was also looking for my tribe. Soon after that, it was, dealing with family, coming out to them and it sort of set my own sense of self and direction in a new city and make some roots here many ways. It allowed me to be who I am and be accepted because there was this community of like minded people. We had our differences but we all were after some of the same shared goals. And so, we could work together across our differences. I think that was a pivotal moment for me just to realize that this possibility exists. And so, it did play a very big role in shaping me and I was in my mid 20s, at time. It was one of my peak times in my own shaping as an adult and I think it was just really influential. I don't know who I'd be had I not had some of those very positive experiences in Toronto. I remember even talking to my parents about it all the time: "Desh is happening this week" "oh leela is not coming to Edmonton 'cause she's going to Desh Pardesh". It was so big. It was just a yearly thing that was so important to so many of us and certainly played a role in shaping who I am today. I continue to be and educator an activist. Desh provided an opportunity in my own personal development and growth to experience a sense of community, feel empowered and just be – and in many ways shaped and led me to where I am today. It helped shape, validate, mirror my many identities.

AM: Is there anything we didn't talk about that you were hoping to kind of share about your experiences wether positive or hard or anything in between?

LA: Um, the only last thing is that an organization like Desh, I think there was an attempt to make sure that you didn't reproduce the same kind of power relationships that we found in the mainstream world. But I'm not sure we were always successful at that because as people of colour in a racist society you are always up against relations of power, so once you have power in an organization like Desh Pardesh where you can put on this amazing festival and you can be involved the goal would be to not reproduce the same kinds of relationships of power but I'm not sure we were successful in that. And that, I think, for any organization, continues to exist today. So, once you get power what do you do with that power? How do you use that power? That continues to be a huge question.

(0:40:27)

AM: In terms of a lesson you would draw out of that, obviously there's no one clear answer, I think we all struggle with that in the work that we did. Is there kind of like lesson that you have kind of drew out of those experiences in terms of how to work towards an ideal/optimal state where we don't play out those power dynamics on each other, where we don't play out things aren't actually about each other?

LA: Not really. I have certainly experienced a lot of learning, and I consciously work in ways so as not to reproduce the same relations of power but it takes a much larger change to really make any significant impact on more than just individuals doesn't it?

AM: Thank you.

Not A Place On The Map- The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 019 - Interview with Michelle Mohabeer

Interviewer: Anna Malla
Participant: Michelle Mohabeer

Interview Date: 04/07/2015
Interview Location: Conducted in person in Toronto, ON

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AM: So Michelle you've been making films since… what the late 80s?—

MM: Since 1989

AM: 1989. And you work a lot with themes of queer/diaspora, race, migration, gender, the body, identity, sexuality and colonialism. There are many, many themes that I picked up on in watching some of your films, so kind of what first drew you to film as a medium to look at these issues, which are both personal and political simultaneously?

MM: I've always been interested in film and cinema. It was one of the means by which I coped with being in Canada. My family and I emigrated from Guyana to Toronto in 1973, watching and reading about film and film history, reading novels and exploring art by gay and lesbian artists, about the histories of various artists, along with listening to all forms of music, were important ways that I coped with the culture shock and isolation of what it meant to be living in Canadian society during the mid-1970's into mid-80's, in the era of Paki-bashing. I didn't know what "Paki" was at that point, but then soon learned. I spent my early years 12-15 in Parkdale, then my family moved to Mississauga. At that time, the Caribbean community in Parkdale was mainly represented by Afro-Caribbean people, I didn't see many Indo or mixed race Indo-Caribbean people and the formation of my identity and affiliations gravitated towards Afro-Caribbean people. My interest in film was a coping mechanism. I submerged myself in film, film history, film aesthetics, and gay literature and reading about gay/lesbian artists. That's where my interest in film began. So that was my teenage years --everything film. My close friend and I frequently went to the Carleton to view "foreign films" –this is what they were called at the time. Film, sexuality, and astrology— *laughs* major passions! I went to film school at Carlton University in Ottawa from 1981-85, which was an interesting, challenging, and difficult experience. I don't know if you want me to talk about that..

AM: Yeah

MM: I was the only women of color, person of color in the film department that goes without saying, although there was a TA who was Indo-Caribbean and that was great, he was Trinidadian, it was great to have him as my TA but he was only there very briefly. But other than that I found

that era, that time in Canada, in Ottawa a complete and utter nightmare. It was deeply racist, sexist, homophobic, that university in particular. They have tunnels and there were all these slurs about everyone and everything. There was rapes on campus every week, it seemed so rape culture today was initiated since then, pre-internet. There was very little about identity at that time in terms of courses offered in the film program, and the courses that I most gravitated towards because there was some sense of culture was Japanese cinema and Quebec cinema, as well as documentary and Avant-garde cinema, so those were the courses that struck me and to some extent informed my aesthetics as a filmmaker. Once I completed my degree at Carlton I returned to Toronto in the late 1980's and became involved in the queer women of colour community and the arts community, I got a super 8 camera and was shooting stuff here and there, none of which I screened publicly. My interest in film, lead me to apply for an opportunity that came up in 1989 when the National Film Board of Canada -Studio D had a call for young women in Canada to submit works and it had to have a feminist theme, so I submitted a proposal to make a 16mm film about the histories of lesbians of colour. My idea was the documentary EXPOSURE was selected by Studio D and this was how I made my first documentary film. There was a nascent community of Lesbians of color in Toronto, many of whom were activists and there was a women of colour press (Sister Vision), but there was no actual representation made by or lesbians of color in film. As far as I'm aware, I think Exposure (1990) was the first 16mm film made in Canada by a lesbian of color about themes of political identities and history of lesbians of color. Unfortunately, the film was reviewed horribly by Globe and Mail the male reviewer panned it and reduced it to being this thing about so what does it mean to be a lesbian? And someone said "the books" and there's nothing wrong with books in the influencing your identity that actually means you're…you're investigative and curious in some way. The review was one-sided, it failed to take into account the kinds of struggles that the women brought up in the film…EXPOSURE explored the politics and aesthetics of inter-sectional identities, in particular the film focused on an Afro-Caribbean woman and a third generation Japanese-Canadian woman, and my voice-over and a baby photography of myself also shaped the construction of this work. I inferred myself as the director. Well that's essentially what drew me to film, and in terms of all of the intersecting themes in my films…well really film is first of all my passion …it was not just simply a medium or a vehicle for me to use as a vehicle to explore themes or issues of identity, or migration, or diaspora, the body, etc. it wasn't just simply that, it was about me exploring these social, political, cultural milieu that was around me at the time that I felt was either lacking invisible underrepresented and really just to put it out in culture. And I didn't think at the time how I was in terms of putting this out there, I just did it. So you know usually when you're a trail blazer you don't think of something you just do it. You know just know that it's not there. So it's interesting when you're called names later, like trail blazer…one thing I will say about my work, is my work is complicated, my work is not simple and on that level my work has been misunderstood because my work is very layered, it's aesthetically layered with all the themes that I mentioned. I was also told that my work is ahead of it's time, particularly Coconut Cane and Cutlass, the film was exhibited widely on the LGBTQ film festival circuit worldwide, and also screened at many global documentary festivals. Despite this success, some audiences and/or festival programmers reduced C/C&C to simply being a personal documentary, it was actually not simply about me, I was actually using myself in a very

representational way as the exile and the filmmaker, and the film's nuanced and layered meditation on themes of home and belonging, the nation, space and place, queer sexuality and the rupturing of Indo-Caribbean diasporic identities through a history of indentureship and migration –was framed through a disjunctive aesthetic in both sound and image. Dance and performance were used to evoke a cultural history of indentureship, and fluid hybrid diasporic identities which were a huge part of the aesthetics in this documentary. Personally and creatively, C/C &C was an emotional cathartic release on some level for me to make in the sense of returning to my homeland where I left as a child of about twelve and to return as an adult in 1992 during the country's elections which was a very divisive hard time politically. Coconut/Cane & Cutlass was informed by a deliberate use a fracturing technique and aesthetic to explore ruptured colonial histories of trauma and displacements. I evoked the history and trauma of colonialism and its intersection with queer sexuality and performance. I explored the idea of barriers through the representation of lesbian censored bodies behind barbed wires in the opening section of Coconut/Cane & Cutlass and in a section entitled the exotic and the erotic. Artists view of the world, often involves turning the seemingly mundane into something deeply symbolic. The investment then in Coconut/Cane & Cutlass (1994) with the use of barbed/chicken wire was formed when I saw a chicken coop and my first thought was to shoot this seeming mundane object. I was invested in turning a mundane object find in the country side of Guyana into some deeply meaningful about the space and the censoring of queer female bodies in that space (Guyana). Coconut Cane & Cutlass, metaphorically speaks about the enclosure and denial of queer sexuality in the Caribbean, through a multiple layered front screen projected image of two women vertically posed in an intimate moment, framed behind the barbed wire – conjuring the censored queer body and antiquated buggery laws in the Caribbean against expressions of queer sexuality. It became this far greater political commentary than simply being this personal film. I also utilized the paired image of two women to take the viewer on a historical journey which began with the voyage from India across the Kala Pani (black water) to the Caribbean.
These dual images of mother-daughter, lovers, sisters, they could be anything, the representation of these two women was symbolic of the fluid journeying motif in the film.
It seems that that film really took off five-ten years after it was made and like the work of many Canadian artists my work was embraced in the US before it was in Canada, lending the work international legitimacy before it could be recognized in Canada. However, there were some independent Canadian film festivals that were the exception, namely Images, Desh and the various LGBTQ festivals across Canada that over the years programmed the film. Coconut/Cane & Cutlass was very successful it screened worldwide at numerous LGBTQ and documentary festivals and was purchased by US University libraries before the film was validated by Canadian institutions.

AM: Why do you think that is? The difference between the US reception and Canadian reception?

MM: I think it had to do with American history and how America as a society tends to be more risk taking and open to , especially since its history is more visible ….it's not that Canadian history isn't skewered around history and identity and the construction of what constitutes valid

Canadian national identity or citizenry. In America the ravages and trauma of slavery was more visible and still lingers…Canadian history to some extent was more hidden or rendered invisible (from the cultural decimation of Aboriginal peoples, the sexual abuse of native children in residential schools, the presence of slavery and segregation, alongside the underground railroad, and so forth…was not acknowledged in Canada until fairly recently. America openly had slavery, segregation, aspects around how the various wars affected American society and culture. I think independent or fringe film audiences in America are probably more open to seeing certain kinds of work that are bit more risky; whether it's personal or political or both, or works a film like C/C &C with a meandering style and aesthetics which spoke to the diasporic history of fragmented hybrid identities and journeying, as represented in my film, this didn't seem to put off festival audiences in the US. I remember screening at a screening at New Festival in NYC, a few women from Latina and Caribbean communities connected to the film, which was interesting, since it wasn't South Asian women that were engaged with the work, but rather Latina and Black Caribbean women that wishes to discuss the film. I remember one woman in particular, commented on the use of the derogatory slur of "spick" in the mask section of the film, in which I represented ideas of mistaken or mislabelled identities. In my travels to NYC, I was called "spick" on a few occasions (derogatory term for someone assumed to be Puerto Rican), in C/C &C I was interested in exploring this mislabelling and perception of mixed race identity. I've received many interesting comments from women/queer women who have seen the film. There still is no other film made today by a mixed race queer Indo-Caribbean filmmaker, that deals with this kind of meditation around indentureship, colonialism, sexuality, the nation; how the nation was constructed. The beginning of Coconut was conceived it as a love letter to the nation, "I have felt your absence for the past was twenty years parts of you have dissolved in my memory but yet I long for some connection to you, as intangible as that may seem…since I no longer feel the embrace for all that I am and am not…" I wrote the voice over when I returned to Toronto because I needed to viscerally, emotionally and sensorially experience this return to my homeland in Guyana. So, in other words, I've woven many intricate connections in this film in terms of diasporic identity and fractured cultural identity to question space, place, home and belonging. Coconut/Cane & Cutlass was ground breaking and was initially not understood and dismissed by some as "didactic" but yet the film won awards abroad, one of the awards I was most proud of was given by that Ann Arbor film festival which is an major experimental based film festival in the US, I won The Isabelle Liddell Art Award for it's formal innovation, contribution to women's issues, in terms of how it intersects colonialism, sexuality, the body and identity. Another award, was from the Turin (Torino) International LGBT Film Festival in Italy and the festival recognized the films for its innovative linking of colonialism and sexuality and also for "the best sex scene in a film" because at that time that kind of eroticism between two brown women was not represented in film (Fire was made two years after Coconut/Cane & Cutlass). The construction of the sex scene fused an Indian aesthetic with its vertical composition of two female lovers in a deep embrace in a private space framed by colourful sari fabrics, they were also bodies placed within the space of Indentureship and the Caribbean (which was achieved through the use of front screen projected imagery from Guyana. I also choose actresses whose background echoed Indian and a mixed race Caribbean identity. In this regard, C/C&C is a fusion of diasporic history, sexuality and the politicizing of identity.

AM: Before we move on to Child Play, within Coconut, Cane and Cutlass I kept coming back to this idea of the body as storyteller and I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit? I particularly think about the moment in which the person is doing a dance performance with a cutlass. I was wondering if you could comment about that in general in your work or in the film

MM: In that particular scene the dancer/performer is Florette Fernando, she's an excellent dancer/performer her performance with the cutlass evokes an ancestral spirit and colonialist trope of the sugar cane plantation, a symbol of all of the Indian women with their head wraps who toiled and cut cane in the burning sun. Instead of simply using archival footage I wanted to create a vivid remembrance of the link between Indian and Guyana (the Caribbean). I wanted to interpret this history in a very different way in that section of film called Ancestral Spirits. She comes in like a spirit and she leaves like a spirit and then there's this disembodied cut up chopped up dance where her torso is literally chopped in pieces, floating in and out of the frame. This scene was deliberately edited in that way, I wanted jump cuts throughout. I really wanted to show the fragmentation of identity, the hardship and to show the link between India, the Caribbean, and then this merging of this new identity. The dance she performed was a kind of a mixture of interpretive folk dancing and a modern take in terms of interpreting the cutting of cane, so we worked on that together. We worked from an idea of concept and that dance sequence was developed, so that was form of visual storytelling about the ancestors, an homage to the ancestors, to the past, to the women that worked in the cane fields, to their incredible labor, to the idea of the indentured labourers, and also linking back to the spirits, the ancestors that were long gone, so it's really a linking for me of India, the Caribbean and then this kind of past and present linking, and this idea of a kind of spiritual essence, and a spirit that always lingers. The past in the sense always lingers in the present, the present has to be informed by the past. This idea of the lingering of the past is a very ghost-like ephemeral thing as well, it's something for me that's kind of paradoxical because the image of the spirit figure is further explored in Child Play, where the past haunts the present. And the effects of colonialism is deeply haunting, the residues of it still haunts us in 2015, it has not escaped us, it's not gone. It's not just history and it's gone and that's it and now we live in the present and we have diversity and that's it and somehow it disappears. It doesn't disappear, it just refashions itself and reforms itself into something else.

AM: Absolutely. I think that's what's interesting in actually all of your work that you've spoken about wanting to absolutely draw on the history and on the past and to bring that into the present. And so in Child Play like what I definitely felt there was both this sense that this child is um…is a child, but she's almost like an old spirit who's carrying actually so much that came before her and then so much that's going to come after. I guess one of the things I wonder about is this idea of inter-generational trauma, is this something that you've been thinking about or working through?

MM: Actually interestingly enough it's kind of a… I guess you could say it's a psychological aspect of the work, of that work, that work can be read in the number of ways. Um…Can I just go back to one thing about Coconut that we didn't talk about?
AM: Sure

MM: Was the idea of memory and remembrance. In Coconut as well there's strong footage of using Mahadai Das' poetry which is a really amazing and striking work about the indentured voyage and history of Indo-Caribbean people from India to the Caribbean. Specifically, I reference part of her poem that speaks about the arrival of three ships that brought the cargo, the indentured labourers (coolies) as they were called to the Caribbean. I incorporated Mahadai Das' poem to evoke memory and remembrance and memory as history, so conflating all of those things was deeply important in terms of the aesthetics of the film, there's a scene with a gaze my gaze…across history into the pass. The narrator in the film gazes across an expansive waste land that was actually water with the tide recessed and it looked like this kind of barren wasteland and I like that kind of expiration of landscape as well with memory 'cause that's also really important to my work, is the use of landscape.

AM: Actually in my notes something that I definitely noticed that runs throughout your pieces

MM: Child Play in particular, was inspired by a childhood waking dream haunting that's how I can explain it. When I was a kid, about nine or ten, I saw an image exactly like the Georgie de Roote figure in the film. I am an only child, and I used to play by myself when we lived in an old house that was on stilts as many houses in parts of the Caribbean and other parts of the world are. And underneath was earth, and there were rumors of a body being buried there so of course my child-like curiosity was very stirred about that, I was interested in spirits, ghosts, that kind of thing. I felt that there was some kind of imaginary friend that I had named Georgie and I saw a figure of Georgie pretty much looking like the figure in the suite with a hat, he was a Dutchman. That how the inspiration of Georgie came about, in addition to the nursery rhyme (Gorgie porgy pudding and pie..). I was also interested in exploring the Dutch colonization of Guyana. Georgie emerged as a quasi-figment of my imagination and as a vision which I never forgot. Child Play was also intended as an allegory of colonial rape (of both the land, the people, the resources and even the minds of some people). The presence of the Dutch was throughout Georgetown, there are canals or gutters, big gutters or canals in the middle of the streets and that's definitely a Dutch influence. So that's how Child Play came about, I was inspired to explore the idea of colonial rape and trauma, through this the lingering of history and its haunting residues. In my writing of the script, I constructed the Georgie figure as a child molester but also he was a symbolic figure of the colonial past and the colonial presence in Guyana and in the Caribbean. In the film I also don't name the space, it's a very kind of ephemeral, mashed together --jumbled space of no specific Caribbean region. I did that very deliberately because I wanted to create this unmoored constructed presence of colonialism, the rapes that occurred during colonialism, the molestation of women, children, etc. This fuelled the idea of a young girl who was possessed by the spirit of a Dutchman who haunted her until she was an old woman, and it was not until she was in her late sixties that she was able to rid herself of this spirit that haunted/colonized her

mind. She took back her power essentially so that is really what Child-Play is about. I created Child-Play as a surrealist, experimental narrative that was layered through the elder character's dream state and remembrance. The film utilized moments of a psychological channeling of the past and of something from the past haunting the character in the present. Child-Play is constructed as a waking dream state you see the woman in bed, you have all these screen-dream imagery many of which evokes her childhood and in the end of the film she is unified with her young self.

Child-Play represents a cloistered world with sparse sets and dream states that are continually dissolving. Some people expected or considered this film to be a magic realism drama, it's really a surreal visual play. It's title Child-Play, is also a play on childhood, the past, the imagination, but also about history and memory and colonial history and trauma, which intersects all of those things in this very surreal way. Child-Play was the short film that I , made in fulfillment of my MFA at York University, it was short partly in Tobago and in a studio in Toronto. That sense of enclosure and enclosed space was also deeply important in the film I wanted it to feel claustrophobic and cut off from the outside world because it's ultimately a dream, and some dreams are suffocating in the sense of how something is really in you that sort of haunts you. That is really how Child-Play (1996) came about and how its construction was reflected in the time and care that I took in creating a new kind of Caribbean visual aesthetic in the film.

AM: You've spoken a little bit about the mainstream reception so you talked about the Globe & Mail, I'm very curious about what was the reception among your peers? I mean it could be artistic peers, but it could also be like lesbian communities that you were involved with, Indo-Caribbean or Caribbean communities, what was the reception like?

MM: Child-Play premiered in Toronto at Images International film festival because of its experimental nature and the film won an honourable mention for Best Canadian Narrative or Best Experimental Narrative. And then it won Best Experimental Narrative at an online festival (Zoifest), and it won two other awards that I can't remember right now. Child-Play wasn't screened as much as Coconut was, Coconut practically everywhere. Child-Play was purchased by a lot of university libraries and was used for classroom study. Scholar interested in exploring trauma and the past, memory and colonialism, the body and the idea of the dualities of the old and the young would find this film worth a study. At the end of the film the older and younger Ateesha hold hands and face a dream screen. I wanted to reconcile her younger self, with who she was an adult as they came together as one. This film pushes the boundaries of Caribbean aesthetics and the only other work similar is by queer Dutch filmmaker, Felix de Roy. Moreover, Child-Play has a more European aesthetic and is different from most American avant-garde films. The film is not about referencing the horror genre it is rooted in some things Caribbean (folk tales but with a surreal aesthetic. It's not a horror film by any means, someone mistook it for a horror film. The screening at Desh and Images in Toronto were both warmly received and I remember it was a very positive screening at Desh, people thunderously applauded so I think they really liked it. People commented on the aesthetics of it but I've also had negative responses to it, in a private screening of the film, someone said well the acting is bad and it seems did not

grasp the kind of film that it was (it is not a calling card narrative short) but more of a unique artistic creation. It's not a drama it's not that kind of performance driven story, I see it as an experimental narrative. In terms of how it was responded to, I would say well, but it unfortunately did not screen much since it is not queer, or a drama and it is hard to find a "niche" for such a film, it was also very Caribbean and parts of it was in patois (Caribbean dialect).

AM: Also I'm curious about conversations you had with people? Because part of the reason that you make the films is also for the kinds of …interactions as well right?

MM: I think my best conversations or interactions about the film was a film festivals, Child-Play premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival and that was an interesting audience because I think the audience was puzzled by the film, they hadn't seen anything like it, it was made in 1996. In terms of its aesthetics people commented on how beautiful it was but beyond that I think somehow some people found it difficult to engage with some of the varied themes that it was dealing with because it was not easy, and then some people thought it was simply about child-rape or molestation, as opposed to an allegory of colonial rape (of body and mind). As an allegory of colonial rape using the body of a young girl and an older woman, these two bodies were symbolically constructed as figures of the past, and the past haunting the present, through the Dutchman spirit; the past that haunts the presents also evoked the idea of tainted innocence and my use of the nursery rhyme Georgie Porgy, to infuse another layer in the film. The score and music was also key to the film's construction, I worked with Donald Quan to evoke African and Caribbean nuances, we used a lot of African-style drums and vocals in kind a pulsating way to really punctuate the opening the film. I also wanted to conflate many regions and culture of the Caribbean, it's deeply influenced by Haitian culture (crick crack) as well. Seeing the use of crick-crack in the work of Basquiat, further reminded me of this. I wanted the music score and composition to infuse Child-Play with the sense of multiple cultures and spaces, a cacophony of textures and styles. Part of the soundtrack is full of African and Afro-Cuban (Yoruba tradition) drums and chants, parts are quieter which draw in some melodies, guitar and voice, with sound effects. The music is also really important in all of my works to resonate with or against the visual aesthetics.

AM: I mean you briefly mentioned that you screened at Desh, can you tell me a bit about um… like the different experiences of…I'm actually not exactly clear which films you screened, when, and you don't have to remember exact dates, but your experience generally was with Desh

MM: At Desh I screened Coconut Cane Cutlass, that was the first screening and I remember that it was at the "Y," the reaction was good, it was okay, my Mom was also in the audience, I didn't know she was coming until she surprised me. I have to admit, post screening of Coconut at Desh was a bit disappointing in the sense that there wasn't an engaged Q & A of the film, which was very unfortunate. I worked very hard on that film, and it was so challenging to make, it took three years and a lot of struggle with funding, since the film did not readily fit in pre-defined categories of conventional documentary (at the time), it was a very hybrid work that was also performance based. I almost didn't get the funding to make this film, so an audience Q&A would

have been valuable feedback. I've had wonderful Q&A conversations about that film at conferences and at film festivals, in the States, in the Caribbean, and in Europe. When Child Play screened at Desh it was well received in terms of applause, I can't remember if there was a discussion either, I don't think there was actually. But there was a good Q&A discussion at Images Festival.

AM: I was gonna ask, what about Desh made you want to submit?

MM: Well I felt Coconut belonged at Desh because of it's obvious diasporic connection and how the film is an utter diasporic construction of the origins of the past of how Indians arrived in the Caribbean and that history of indentureship as another means of replacing slavery in terms of an economical system in the Caribbean, and the idea of the plantations and the bodies colonize in these plantation. I felt Desh was a perfect place for Coconut Cane Cutlass, I was happily surprised when they also programmed Child- Play.

AM: In terms of what you knew about Desh at that time, what was your kind of impression of the importance of Desh or what kind of intervention into the Toronto art scene at the time?

MM: I mean It's interesting to look back at Desh now from a 2015 lens to then. Sometimes when you're involved in moments, you might not always appreciate the moments, and what the moment are and how precious they are in terms of the work that was actually done in creating this yearly festival and celebration of South Asian diasporas. Desh was not just political but also was important in raising social awareness and to raise people's consciousness about the kinds of different artistic work, practices, etc. So the identity is not just something that's social or political but it's deeply embedded in artistic practices as well and cultural practices, and it was so diverse, so hybrid, and mixed in terms of culture, politics and aesthetics.. When Desh existed, I felt that it was very important, it was very relevant.

I might not have always felt welcomed because often times in discussions I couldn't necessarily always culturally relate because I wasn't born in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. So I didn't have that kind of cultural, historical background, there was also only a limited understanding on what Indo-Caribbean diasporic identity meant. I learned at a screening at the Vancouver International Film Festival from a South Asian woman in the audience that Mohabeer means "warrior" it's Hindi for "warrior", which I was happy to find out, I didn't know, so that pleased me and explained a lot about my life trajectory and choices (artistic and personal).

AM: What kind of an intervention you felt that Desh was making into the Toronto art scene at the time

MM: Desh was a necessity, it was important in terms of art, in terms of culture, it was social, political, cultural, I loved the multidisciplinary context of the Desh programming and exhibition. It was very cutting edge at the time, there was nothing like it. So in that sense Desh was invaluable, it was also invaluable for the amount of artists and people that it brought together, the

fact that it brought together organizers with artists was something that was really not done in the past because usually when people in so called marginal communities make work, it was often construed as only activist work, and I'm not denigrating activist work by any means, but Desh allowed activist and artist works to stand alongside each other, politics and aesthetics. Desh in this sense broke a perception that work made by people of color was only political or personal, rarely artistic and forging new forms of expression. I think Desh was invaluable for the multiplicity of expressions that it allowed; music, film, dance, visual art, performance, photography, authors readings, politics, panels, --it was truly multi-disciplinary and dynamic. I loved it on that regard. It was absolutely necessary and I don't think there was anything like it, and in that sense it was highly unique and influential. Other festivals came later, like Reel Asian and so forth. I learned a lot too from looking at photography, dance and other performances, and it was great to see the array of talent. As clichéd as it might sounds, Desh give voices and presence to those artists that were marginal, it give meaning to the various artists works and started conversations about these works. It gave a moment and hope to artist who might otherwise be invisible in the Canadian landscape of artistic expression or the overall arts community, which might only allow little pockets here-and there for the works of artist of colour. The fact that you had this multi-disciplinary festival that was also part conference, that was exclusively dedicated to highlighting works by SA Diasporas (in all of its differences, similarities or even inconsistencies), this was a powerful galvanizing force in Toronto. I think Desh should be appreciated for all of the ways in which a huge difference in the cultural landscape of Toronto.

AM: Yeah, that makes sense to me. I think that's part of the reason why we're doing this archiving project, as you've spoken about it a lot, it's really important to know the histories that we've come from. In particular in terms of like struggling arts communities, and in terms socially engaged arts, and I hear what you're saying in terms of activist art, I absolutely know what you're talking about. So from my impression what Desh did that was also new was actually showcasing some gorgeous, really important art, while having it be socially engaged in all of these things, it seems like it drew people from all over.

MM: yeah and I think what was great is Desh evolved as well, it was that. I think that they had more satellite programs in communities themselves, in communities in suburbia where people might not necessarily want to come downtown, so Brampton I remember, and other places, more outlining communities where people in the suburbs don't always travel to the city, or they have whatever construction or conception they have of city, or people that live in cities. I think it was great on that level as well, I think it was great in terms of having a culture, a culture that was so historically rich that produced such amazing art and statues of bodies, and bodies in various poses and various states; what the West might consider undressed or so-called nude sculptures, but clearly erotic art and sculptures that since colonialism became denigrated and the shame that crept into Indian society and culture, around the body, around expression of sexuality and a tainting of that in ways through colonialism through its processes and India taking on this kind of Victorian prudishness about sex and sexuality. I think it was great as well for Desh to celebrate that, I think that erotic queer presence within Desh and sensual presence within Desh of some of the art that I saw, particularly some by women and queers. I remember one performance that I

really loved was Sudharshan's Dancing in which he was painted as one of the gods. He was very dark and I loved the fact that he performed as a deity in one of the dance pieces and so in other words people talk about brown skin, brown identity. But then there's also different hues as well, that's what I also noted because as someone from the Caribbean we also have that gradations of color, and the hues and that for me was also equally important as weird as that may sound.

AM: No, no absolutely. It's interesting to hear you talk about a piece that engages with religion in someway, was that something that came out in Desh often? Was like some engagement with religion or with like Hinduism in particular? 'Cause I haven't heard that yet.

MM: I noticed it. I mean for me in that particular piece I noticed it, and I think Sudharshan talked about it. And I appreciated that because for me that wasn't a tainting or perversing of religion in anyway, for me that was more him embracing his queerness in its full aspect so that today now we don't use religion to kind of stifle and cut ourselves off from being fully participatory in a world and even you know regulating our children's values and who they should be as human beings around sex and sexuality, of course talking about the curriculum, the high school curriculum, or the general school curriculum which is important, the Sex-Ed curriculum.

So yeah in terms of Desh I think for me there was some other works, I'm trying to remember them all now, probably something filmic, I don't remember the name of the film, there was something to do with a river, there was something about a river, I'm not sure even if it was the Ganges, I remember there was something a river and there was something about cleansing and obviously it had a spiritual and/or religious context, I don't remember the name of the film, but I remember noting that as well. I mean my response to the work at Desh may be…obviously everyone has a different way interpreting the work, and I responded to it in a multiple sets of ways, for me it wasn't…I didn't just attend when I did attended the conference at Desh whether screenings, or photography or visual art or theatre, I didn't attend simply because it was political I attended it also because some of it was such amazing art. I was interested in watching, in learning from and being engaged by so much vast array of different work.

AM: And in terms of Aesthetics, you're a filmmaker and are there particular highlights from something that you experienced with Desh whether it was in watching films or performances, um…highlights and also challenges that you experienced, you've spoken a little bit about that.

MM: In terms of challenges I would say sometimes I guess it would go back to the idea of the diaspora and not always feeling understood, sometimes not always being welcomed. And I think attending a couple of sessions, I think I was the only one in the space that was Indo-Caribbean and I think possibly was perceived…because I also identified probably at that point I remember…maybe I won't talk about this, it's about my identity, I couldn't fully construct my identity by simply just saying I'm South Asian and leave it at that because I'm not only that. I'm someone that's three generations removed from India, who grew up in a part of the world that was a cultural mosaic of many races, cultures and religions etc. As Indo-Caribbean people who were colonized and interacted with various sets of people, we obviously have a layered identity,

steeped in the mingling of cultures, of class, of color as the Caribbean is this space of plurality. So all of that would have influenced me, so therefore I at times identified as Black (since my identity is also creole and I was also raised Catholic), I identified as mixed race Indo-Caribbean, I always have to add the mixed raced Indo-Caribbean because that's fully who I am. But I wouldn't always simply identify as only South Asian. I didn't want to say I was simply South Asian because for me it was more complicated than that because its means leaving behind how my history and identity was formed as a diasporic person. One can leave that history aside, dismissive it or be selective about it. I mean of course we're diasporic we're from the South Asian diaspora or whatever other diaspora.

AM: I want to ask you that sort of weaves in Desh and your work, so you've spoken to diaspora and obviously that's a huge part of your life and art and inter-mingle. Some of your work does engage with kind of longing in diaspora and my sense of Desh is that it kind of does too in a way because a lot of people, a lot of the organizers are actually second generation or if not more, so I'm wondering like um…yeah how did you…what are the kind of linkages there between the ways that your work and Desh engage with um…diaspora?

MM: To be honest I would say at the time I wasn't as aware of that as I am now, I think it's a really good point that you're making that some of the people that were organizing weren't. In fact I remember one of the organizers was from East Africa and certainly that's a different kind of diasporic identity too filtered through a different culture, and being a sort of a minority in another country from a so-called majority place. I think I had little inklings but I didn't know fully know all of the organizers as well. But I had a sense that that people were searching for ways to locate themselves or negotiate who they were. So yes there was a longing, people were searching. People were seeking out, possibly it was acceptance, possibly it was belonging, I think that was also in the time where there was a major shift in Canada, and particularly in Toronto culturally. There was activism and more visibility of various communities of color and the intersecting of various communities of color. There was a lot of debates and conversations about cultural appropriation, since various cultures, including indigenous and aboriginal cultures were appropriated in all matters of art form and in everyday life. So I think that Desh really captured that so it would be no surprise that there would this idea of longing for something, I mean yes my work is absolutely full of that longing too, I think that the idea of home is not a stable space, and this idea of home is something that can be transformed in many ways and can be transformed in space and time; my work is definitely about that it's definitely about destabilizing this notion of home and fixedness of home and home as something that evolves and I think Desh, doesn't the word "Desh" mean home away from home?

AM: Desh Pradesh, home away from home

MM: Yeah Desh Pradesh, home away from home. I did research that. Interestingly Desh being called "home away from home" yeah something absolutely resonates with my work, and I think that many of us that are diasporic in the various way and I sound as though I'm speaking right out of Coconut are looking for something that we can identify in some ways to connect to

community, home, whatever and even though there were criticisms or we criticize each other sometimes we're harsh with each other unfortunately, but you know that's the kind of fall out of sometimes doing community work of various kinds. But then you have at least moments, you have queer spaces in certain moments. Desh certainly established queer spaces, the various dances etc. some of which I attended, I mean that was the first time I knew of Bhangra, and I actually danced to Bhangra and because I wasn't as aware of Bhangra so that's when I heard about Bhangra and that's when I was also a DJ, and that's when I started to buy Apache Indian whose music I really loved. Apache Indian was great because he played on the versions of Indian --Apache Indian as the "other Indian", the Indigenous Indian identity, so for me in that British context he represented that, so that was a link I could also find in Desh.

I didn't fully realize it at the time, but Desh was actually quite educational for me as well in terms of identity and culture, it's interesting I didn't know it at the time, but when I think back now what it represented and where my educational processes about diaspora particularly South Asian diaspora, and also the multiplicity of the South Asian diaspora I think without Desh, personally I wouldn't have known that at the time. I can imagine that there were others who might have that experience as well, so I think Desh was interesting in that you had Sri Lankan work brush up against works from the Caribbean brush up with works from Britain against works from India works from Pakistan, works from wherever else, you know there's a disaporic community. I remember when Gurinder Chada's I'm British But was screened it was so interesting to contrast the British diaspora and the Canadian diaspora, I don't remember how much American diasporic there was, I think a bit, but I particularly remembered the British diasporic, both the Black and South Asian because for me they made a lot of impression on me as well in terms of my own work and aesthetics as well. I also remember Pratibha Parmar's work was interesting in that context as well because the fact that she also explored a lot of themes in terms in an American context ie Black or African-American history, ie the film Warrior Marks with Alice Walker, and her early film Khush, which I think have has analogousness to Coconut, I will say that the sex scene in Coconut/Cane & Cutlass (1994) the image that I spoke about earlier was also influential for a film that came two years later, which was Fire by Deepa Mehta, the sex scene and the vertical framing of that sex scene was echoed in Fire by Deepa Mehta,

AM: I'm not going to take too much more of your time, kind of my closing question is like moving forward now, like part of the reason also for doing this project is to like.. lessons learned and moving forward how do we do these kinds of arts festivals arts organizations, how do we do this well? What lessons can we learn? So one of the things I think about you, you teach film studies, you've taught film production, and you're watching kind of a new generation of artists and young artists of color in particular coming up, what do you think has changed since your fist emerging? Like what barriers do you see for young people today? What do you think to be propelling ourselves forward through the barriers?

MM: Okay, so it's a multi-layered question…Okay uh…I think for a newer generation of artists today and artists of color coming out…I guess some young artists might think their work is original and their work isn't informed my other places. I think to also investigate the past to

investigate the past of other artists, it's always important to investigate the past, it's never…I mean of course you get it, you learned you're influenced from the past, but you can construct your own ideas, aesthetics, etc and influences you know and a style. Yeah I mean I think to investigate the past but be mindful of where you're at in this moment and this present and how you…I think for artists today, artists of color today, they have social media, they have the internet, they have other kinds of digital tools that wasn't not present and to the four in the past. So they have very interesting alternative platforms to use beyond just kind of um…you know… beyond just simply film photography those kinds of time-based art. I think there are interesting ways to do multi-media platforms of work, of art and to infuse it in multiple and interesting ways, and intricate ways with past, present and how technology then can propel that. I think that's an interesting thing, I think no one today should feel that their here they know it that's it, I think that um…I think that looking at the past is interesting to inform the present and the future and amalgamating it all. I mean as I said I did see some of the work in the monitor I was particularly moved and impressed by the animation pieces I felt they were really strong in the program, and really compelling work and intricate work and I think that's definitely a good move, but that doesn't mean that they didn't have any kind of activism or even politics or awareness in them because they absolutely did they just used a different kind of vernacular expression, I think that's the important thing is the expression. And by vernacular expression I'm speaking about an expression that comes from your own particular culture, your own particular languages, sets of what you've learned, ideas, values, etc. customs, and how you can rework that and to always be curious in investigating I think that is also interesting around opening up art, and to create new aesthetics. Ah and you might wonder if a conference or a festival conference such as Desh should happen again, I think it could happen but it would be in a very different way at this point. I don't think it's necessarily a done deal. I don't think what Desh did was is over and done. I think it's not actually, I think that in my teaching anyhow particularly in the areas of diaspora and my student I realize that so many of them are so deeply unfortunately unaware. They're unaware, some of them, some of them are so deeply unaware of the various social movements that took place, so feminism, queer movements, um…movements around various wars, particularly from the 60s onwards, even partition in India and Pakistan, processes of colonization how that has impacted culture, societies, generations, trauma, not just contemporary traumas and family trauma, but also historical traumas. I mean it's all very complicated, so I think there's a lot of work and terrain that artists can still explore and festivals and conferences, a newer, a different version of Desh could still occur today if there were funding for it. And possibly more, even more dynamic using technology and the kind of platforms and different intersections of technology, I mean that's something that is definitely interesting and important. I can't remember if Desh had much of this, but performance art as well I think they had some, but I think performance art as well is also crucial. And there could be multi-generational works, so people from different generations coming together to do works, or um…different parts of the world and intersecting them I think a great idea would be people from different parts of the world doing little takes and then amalgamating it all as one big giant film or some other kind of platform you know, multi-media platform.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 020 – Submission from Natasha Singh

Participant: Natasha Singh

Interview Date: 21/05/2016
Interview Location: Audio file recorded by Natasha Singh in Toronto, ON.

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Ok, question number one: I gather you started out as a volunteer for Desh- what were you doing at the time and how did you hear about Desh? What was it about this festival organization that drew you in?

I was a young undergraduate student in Montreal when my sister who was based in Vancouver told me about Desh Pardesh. She suggested I meet her in Toronto so we could attend the festival together. At the time, I was a frustrated womens studies major exploring issues of race, class, and gender in my classes. But I had yet to find a space that could help me both name and frame my own experiences. Desh became that space for me. I'll never forget that experience of sitting in the audience during the festival and feeling for the first time in my life that I belonged somewhere. What spoke to me deeply was how radical the politics were, how in depth the investigations of identity were, and how utterly and gloriously unapologetic and celebratory people were in their expressions of self. There were the men who wore saris that swished around their ankles as they walked. There were the women in leather jackets and cropped hair. There was loud arguing, loud laughter, and loud and proud assertions of self that transcended identity. There was magic in the air. Even then, I had the sense that I was in the presence of an awakening- an unquiet revolt. I remember running around the streets of Toronto one night with the beautiful, sensitive and now deceased Kalpesh Oza. My sister was with us and a few other newly made friends were there, too. We were holding hands and singing Chalte Chalte. At some point, a couple of white men stopped us and began shouting racist remarks at our group. They told us to go back to where we came from. But rather than cowering or internalizing their words, as we might have done at some prior point in our lives—or had we been alone--we actually chased them down the streets shouting 'We are home! We are home! Why don't you go back to where you came from?' And afterwards we dissolved into exhilarated laughter that sounded almost like singing. Sometimes I can still hear it.

Question number 4: Tell me about Diasporadics-

Co founded by Sunaina Maira and myself, Diasporadics was modeled after Desh Pardesh. It was a two day event in New York City that featured various forms of cultural production, namely dance, literature, visual arts, music, and theatre. And we employed different formats including workshops, panels, visual arts exhibits, and performances. Sunaina was instrumental in bringing together various artists and activists to participate in the festival and on the curatorial committees. But I think New York proved to be a very different kind of challenge. Communities seemed bound to their respective boroughs, so there were often deep fissures between those

communities and Manhattan--the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island. There were also large differences in immigrant experiences. There were those who had immigrated to the U.S. for academic purposes, and then there were those who could never afford an education and were confined to low paying jobs. South Asian culture was also entering the mainstream in the U.S. but it was in a manner that reduced it to ethno-chic so it was common to see stars like Madonna wearing mehndi and bindis in music videos. In those days you could even purchase a bindi and mehndi kit from Barnes and Noble. In short, you could buy an orientalized version of Indianness and that seemed to reflect the extent to which mainstream culture was engaged with South Asian culture. This commodification of South Asian culture, an exotification of the 'East', I think, created a very interesting backdrop for those of us who were engaged in arts and activism. In a way, I think it fuelled our determination to create something that was new and rooted in our own experience of what it was to be South Asian at that time. The festival lasted for a few years and was part of a very exciting movement in NYC where several South Asian organizations devoted to arts and activism were springing up. Though they were no doubt native to New York, and uniquely responsive to an American context, they were seeded by Desh Pardesh who's reach and touch knew no bounds.

I think one of the pieces I noticed when I compared Diasporadics to Desh Pardesh was that at Desh it was relatively easy to retain volunteers who were interested in and committed to providing a community platform for other artists and activists. In New York, I found that while we had participation from various artists and activists, they seemed primarily interested in having a platform for themselves and for their own art and careers. I believe that had something to do with the ambition or that ambitious vibe that is very present and alive in NYC. And I think for that reason, it made our work more challenging. It's possible that that's one of the reasons Diasporadics didn't have the same staying power as Desh Pardesh did in Toronto.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 022 – Submission from Nitin Deckha

Participant: Nitin Deckha

Interview Date: 21/05/2016
Interview Location: Audio file recorded by Nitin Deckha in Toronto, ON.

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Hello this is Nitin Deckha, and I'm happy to answer these questions concerning my involvement in the 1993 festival of Desh Pardesh. So, in my response to question one, I was on the committee that reviewed and selected the programming for the 1993 festival. I had recently graduated from McGill University in Anthropology and Philosophy, and was enrolled in a Master's program at OISE in the Sociology of Education. At McGill I was involved in various on-campus groups such as the Southern Africa Committee. I was involved in various anti-racism events, including writing in a special issue in the McGill Daily, the campus newspaper. And I was also involved with the Indian Progressive Study group. I was highly interested in the cultural politics of representation and identity, as well, having written my undergraduate thesis on this topic, in terms of Asian Americans. And I was working on a Master's thesis on visual representations and otherness. So, in an important way, Desh Pardesh was the first time that I engaged in an arts organization, but with the sense that it was also an extension of my academic and activist interests. Okay, number two -- I found Desh Pardesh to be unique, exciting, and fascinating. I saw it combining anti-racist critical multicultural elements, with which I was familiar, along with the sense of being part of a movement to showcase and celebrate the expanding range of diasporic South Asian cultural representation. You know, and at that time in Canada it was very limited representation of visual arts, literature, film, about those kind of diasporic experiences and perspectives. And, you know, when you consider ones that explored gender, sexuality so directly, as many of the programming that we chose for Desh Pardesh, there was even far fewer of those. Okay, next question regarding Canadian multiculturalism: Desh Pardesh was concerned with what I might call critical, or perhaps even radical multiculturalism. It politicized, it problematized multiculturalism beyond, you now, the happy song and dance of different ethnicities or cultures that was often at the foreground of official multiculturalism. The works we showcased were explicit in discussing racism, otherness, marginalization, exotification, appropriation, and other cultural-political concerns. Desh Pardesh also complicated notions of home, belonging, community, probing the dynamics of acculturation and assimilation, and what constituted Canadian identity. And lastly, in terms of any sort of anecdotes, or stories, or challenges, my involvement with Desh Pardesh was limited and marginal. I did not see myself, at least then, as an activist or artist. And I wasn't -- and I'm not queer identified. I was living at home, ensconced in the suburbs, still a student. It was as if I was not in the trenches of a larger cultural war. I was, however, very excited to be part of a cultural movement to expand and showcase diasporic South Asian cultural representations to deal with and respond to second generation immigrant experiences that were coming of age, and to transform, you know, a then-

lowly white Canadian culture frame that dominated popular culture. Thanks very much.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 023 – Interview with Pamila Matharu

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Pamila Matharu (AM)

Interview Date: 11/08/2014
Interview Location: Conducted at Pamila Matharu's home in Toronto, ON

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AM: So first if you can just kind of describe what your involvement with Desh was over the years, like both in terms of capacity and also the approximate dates that you were involved. The kind of (inaudible) that you had.

PM: Sure. I had heard about Desh Pradesh through--um I guess a sister organization at the time called Fresh Arts, that I was involved with. And I got involved with Fresh Arts around the summer of 1994. And by that fall I was introduced to Desh Pardesh, through an artist named Winsom Winsom who now lives in Belize. Umm my first impressions were kind of like coming home. Like I finally felt comfortable in the skin I was in? Yeah. I was involved…I was still in my undergraduate years, but I had made a conscious decision to remove myself out of the university setting at York University; to learn as much as I can about artist run culture through the guidance of my—What I would call an artist mentor (Winsom) who I worked with at Fresh Arts and she had convinced me to learn a lot about artist-run culture, about the art community, about the political…umm I would say the political kind of system that it is entrenched in, funding--just really understanding it from not just a front door perspective, or audience perspective, or maker perspective, or creator , but also what it takes to put on shows, what it takes to understand venues and organizations and things like that. So I first arrived as a volunteer, and I wasn't really a fully formed practitioner at the time as I've said. So I was about 21. So it was a very eye-opening experience—I had just missed the summer festival of 94 and I had gotten involved in the fall events and the organizing committee. That was my first committee experience I would say in all of my history of the arts in Toronto. It was incredibly collaborative and equitable. It was representative of a lot of different, diverse sexual orientations, genders, ethnic and religious identities in the South Asian Community…Mixed identities, bi-racial…it was pretty mind blowing I would say like going from theory to observation and practice for a suburban kid in Toronto. You know? So out of a bedroom community, into academia and now like WHOA it's coming off the page, it's like real life now. So yeah.

AM: And were most of the people involved at that point like would you say…I'm just curious about the demographics. Was it mostly second-generation people who are involved or would you say it's like a mix.

PM: I…From what I recall, folks were pretty much, either had arrived as young children or were born in different parts of the world and somehow arrived here. Umm there were a lot of people who were travelling through, like there was an artist who was originally from Australia—I remember being on that first committee that I was involved in…Even understanding the Diaspora, like to really understand the diaspora around migration, what it looked like, and meeting people who had different stories. It wasn't that "okay my mum and dad met and then they got married and then my father was in the UK and my mom went to the UK and then (we) came here." You just kind of believe that that's everyone's story, like either its direct from India, or its through migratory, umm you know kind of lines of traveling, indentured labour, right? Um Even understanding like… like I understood that there were West Indians (laughs) but when I came to Desh Pradesh I...the type of artists, and uh outspoken activists I met, I just was like introduced to a lot more of a, I would say deep critical level of understanding. And I'm SO grateful that it was so early on in my…yeah my youth, you know? Yeah.

AM: and so have you at that point done, like you were working with that artist centre but have you been to art school or were you starting?

PM: I was in the middle of *Art School*. Yeah. I was kind of going part-time because I then realized that I was getting so much value out of being involved in artist run culture That…it was an affordability factor I couldn't afford full time school, and I think I just wasn't interested in full time school now that I think about it, as a student. I wasn't engaged at all. You know, what can I say about being engaged in a school that doesn't provide any representation of who you are? And is teaching from what you think is the end all-be-all of art history, which is the Western School of Thought—whether it is literature, or art or anything right? ...Philosophy. So it's not that the system discredited it its more about you building your own…do-it-yourself-kind of way of learning who you are you know? And Desh provided that. It really helped bridge those questions and that thinking.

AM: and did it feel sort of like...um uh mentorship in a way where there was sort of older generation people involved, younger…like was it intergenerational?

PM: It was! I mean as a young person, um of course grown up in South Asian culture like, elder worship is taught to you since you were born right? Like the moment you come out, you're practically, you're guided through learning life through elders, you know so, yeah I had that in mind where I thought that I am maybe looking at an older artist's career, whether it was a poet, or a writer or a filmmaker or, a visual artist. But now as a practicing artist, I understand when you're in your mid-career, or you're a senior artist, and how you look at someone who is just, emerging, you know you're considered the kids in the scene. It's different right? It's our different lenses of how we appreciate those things and our entry point of understanding what it is that we're doing.

AM: And were most of the people involved at that point practicing artists, would you say? Or would you say there was a cross-section of people involved more in arts administration or, was it mostly people who had an art practice…

PM: Everything! Yeah people who were in arts administration, were also practitioners, but might not have…I mean the very existence of Desh was the idea to penetrate the mainstream because the mainstream wasn't serving us right? So it wasn't in the galleries, it wasn't in the published work, it wasn't in anything. We had to make that platform where we could serve us as artists you know? So yeah umm so people were everything, like in the sense that you couldn't really hold one identity. You had to be a multiplicity of identities as artists, as producers, as cultural producers as makers, as you know, I would say probably the stake holders. The funders didn't necessarily look like us. Right? So you had to build that. You had to build that means of understanding how to explain that this needs to…that this is important work that needs to be funded right? Rather than just you know the major funding that came from the funding agencies, and non-profits, and whether it was venues or you know…And mind you I like I'm coming into it at probably at its critical success like, so I wasn't in those 89/88/89/90 when Kush first formed and this venue for creative expression was made. So it was almost like the bed was made for me and it was my choosing to lie in it comfortable. It was a really comfortable, charmed kind of you know, coming out experience as an artist I would say for sure. Yeah.

AM: What do you mean by "coming out experience as an artist"?

PM: Well, I mean, I know we often use "coming out" in the term or expression around like, you know coming out and disclosing your sexual orientation, but I think there are several kinds "coming out", whether, whatever society might have deemed as a social ill but you know. Desh really became a platform for you know, we weren't necessarily makers of Bollywood—And I say that in quotations cause I think true Indian cinema or Indian cinephile, you know, don't like that. There had to be an alternative to that and that's what we were right? Just like punk was to pop you know, so then now became our cultural expression, and who we are right? Because we were consumers of the same punk that those other people were consuming. There was a difference, you know? So umm…and that difference was the fact of the place that we came from, our stories, our identities, and who we were right? That's the "coming out". Like it was really you know kind of an acceptance. We weren't freaks and it felt really good to be apart of that community you know? And to be accepted and kind of like, "oh yeah your family doesn't understand you as an artist? Yeah mine too" like cool lets…lets...you know…

AM: And was it this sort of thing, I'm curious, was it this sort of thing where you would have those conversations explicitly with people or was it this understanding that like people were coming together and we're here to do the work, or were there a lot of sort of interpersonal conversations like that?

PM: Everything. Like I said. I think there were people like…there were interlopers, and um observers, and then there were people who were really confident and outspoken. I definitely could not be having this conversation with you as a twenty-one-year-old, like 20 years ago, no way! You know? So...but now like I've learned so much, like you know, like through that time like people just, there was a certain kind of level of acceptance and it felt good right, like you're

not crazy for who you want to be. It's okay. So whether it was someone who wanted to be an outspoken like queer activist, or a politically engaged activist, and on the same platform…or someone who wanted to share some like really radical poetry right about Komagata Maru, their experience being you know, closeted, or you know so...it was very like charged, you know, emotionally charged experience.

AM: Mhmm, and was it the kind of thing where once you were involved for a while, you would invite your parents? Like was it your…did people kind of…yeah I'm curious about that aspect.

PM: Yeah people did. I mean…and that had to do with a lot of like um you know…acceptance in families. You know? There're some people were a little bit ahead of the curb around that, whereas and then you know we had the typical you know kind of um…judgmental, close-minded experience too right? There's all…the community had everything built into it just as it does today right so… But again like I think, you know in 2014, and given that it's been a hundred years since south Asians have you know…and who knows maybe even before Komagata Maru have landed on Canadian soil, you know I think we have in some ways come you know… there are what? Third-generation, fourth generation, coming up now? And that's pretty amazing right? Given that in terms of looking at generations, we're into the thirteenth or fourteenth generation. So to be here for that long is pretty amazing. I…before I um found Desh, you know uh, my family having been born…my brother and I've been born in the UK, we look to the UK because the UK was exploding. You know? The diasporic scene was exploding in the UK and probably in Australia…but we looked to the motherland or the mother right—like the colonial mother right? So it was like um…you know my family has been in the UK for…or parts of my extended family has been in the UK for about 15/50 (not sure) now so you know here we're coming close to folks who have been here close to 40 (not sure) years. So 20 years ago, we were just getting started… just getting started right? …So you know, it was the excitement you would see growing up…TV didn't look like us right? So when the odd time there would be a story about a South Asian on the news report that night, it's like the entire family is like called to the TV. You know like "Look! There's a brown person on TV!" (laughs) Um…more importantly there in like a 12 car pile up, like a crash car pile up but, HEY! It's a brown person! (both laugh) That's how desperate we were to find ourselves in representations of uh…society know? Um, does that answer the question?

AM: Yeah Totally. Umm you started talking about how you were part of the organizing committee and I'm trying to get a sense of the structure of Desh—and I'm sure it changed overtime, but can you explain a little bit about that?

PM: Sure. So I…it was the programming committee that I was apart of and then I volunteered for some other aspects of it. But, from what I understand it started with up one or two organizers who just kind of called two or three people they knew, and you can probably count…you know in terms of the organizers over the actual performers, you could probably count them on your hand. From what I understand in terms of the early stories, and um…I uh, I was…like I said it was more fully formed as an organization and as a festival/conference, kind of organizing

platform by the time I got involved. So there was like…I remember an ED [executive director] I think or the director, and then a programmer, and you know it was also, like I said, my introduction to the artist-run culture—Understanding that directors have to apply for all of the funding you know, and funding cycles and what they look like, and you know it was just such a…like an education, like that no degree could compare to for me yeah. Um, and then there was committees, and then there was like discipline-based committees. So there was like a literary committee, there was a visual arts committee, and out of that rolled out into be what was SAVAC right? But prior to that was all committee-based, and the experts would sit on those…like the Artists who kind of were like "oh yeah I heard about this cat" you know "in Vancouver!" "I saw something in Toronto Women's Bookstore from this! Maybe we can find this person!" And this is pre-internet, the early days of Internet right? So in 1994…so we weren't really using…we'd have to literally pound the pavement and find people and call them up right? So…

AM: actually on that tip…actually I was going to ask you what you see as kind of…you know having cycled through that and watching the difference between trying to organize something like that and making art at a time that was pre-internet or very early internet, versus now. Like what were the things that you noticed in terms of…if you think about organizing people together at a time when people weren't relying on the Internet? Can you…its just a curiosity question like do you notice major differences in the kind of works that are produced and the way that people organise together?

PM: Absolutely! I mean, what I just showed you earlier, like this was, this entire idea was formed through the Internet. I can't believe…like that…no I can believe, I can believe that this could be done now. But back then? No. Like you'd have to have to have gone to a city; another diasporic city, where community exists, and you might've seen an artist there or a dancer or whatever. You know and, it was really like you know umm…calling up people and…may be you have a…or you're good friends with someone, or, "oh I know" you know "Salman Rushdie's cousin" (Laughs) (inaudible 20:15) …you know I mean it would be a dream if Salman Rushdie showed up, maybe he did, I don't know but Rohinton Mistry did come and debut some of his early work then, like you know and uh Shyam Selvadurai so its pretty amazing like where some of these um…figures have ended up in life right? Uhh back to your question though, um could it have been done what we can do with this tool now? Is that—

AM:—I guess I'm just umm… I've been just thinking a lot, going through the archive…and looking at what the organizing looked like, and seeing how it was just so different because…and I wonder about some of the things that we might be missing out on now.

PM: Oh well…. Hours and hours and hours of face-to-face meetings (laughs). Yeah. I don't miss that. (Both Laugh) if I could sit in my Pyjamas and find things and then put together like you know…I mean come on you're doing this project!

AM: Of course!

PM: Imagine what you would have to do without the Internet.

AM: of course, of course! Yeah, for sure.

PM: And look at the plethora of oral history projects that are showing up because of this tool. It's amazing right? And um citizens' journalism, you know? Like it's just amazing that without this tool, we could not achieve this level of interactivity and interconnectedness in the world.

AM: So how did you, because Desh really did achieve that. So how was that achieved?

PM: (Exhales) Like I said, hours and hours of face-to-face time. Just had to put power to the people man. Like, and it was like "OK we have to stuff envelopes." So you showed up and you stuffed envelopes, and that's how I got to know people right? And understand what their practice was possibly and umm… we were sitting there doing that. Uh you know so…and it wasn't for everyone. Some people wouldn't show up to do those things…(laughingly) If you're the only one who shows up then you're going to have to stuff a thousand envelopes.

AM:: mhmm, mhmm.

PM: You know? So It was kind of like that I mean, you just showed up. You just showed up. You know? And if two people showed up then let it be…like you know? You couldn't really be like (sighs) spending another half an hour trying to hound down people you know, because you just had to get things done because there's deadlines right? And I think it was a matter of…it was also a time of firsts. Like this was the first, so it was almost like, embarrassing if it didn't come through, or it messed up so…just whoever showed up, you just relied on the faith of other people, between people to get stuff done right? Volunteers—oh my gosh! What would we do without the volunteer spirit? So people showed up prior to the festival, during the festival, after like you know… and that's the thing: people volunteered. I come from a faith-based practice around looking at selfless service/ seva. To me, that's what I…if I look at my life in the arts, that's what I call it. It's selfless service. It has to be, right? I mean how do we keep the wheel turning? How do we keep this growing right? Like if we just all turn around and be like "oh fuck this! I just spent like three hours, waiting for so and so and I stuffed this many envelopes…" you know? It just wouldn't work if we just gave up on that.

AM: And did you see that change over the course of the time that you were with Desh?—In terms of the um…like obviously Desh became more institutionalized, more funding started coming in, and it became a bigger thing, what changes did you see?

PM: Well I mean…I think…(sighs) uh it was interesting because there was like people who were practitioners, who went to professional schools, (laughs) in my mind like you know, I've…I respect anybody who wants to put an aspect of themselves as creative people out there first and then an audience to take up. But it was interesting to me because, I started to see in the later years, and I guess near the end of it was that there were people who were like, "oh I'm an

accountant by day but I do this by night." Or "I have this other identity" Whereas I…uh…and I couldn't understand that. Cause then that's then —in my mind—differentiated like…those type of artists between the real artists right? And it took some time and growth of understanding why people do what they do. I mean of course like life is…you know…it's just not easy that way around finding your trajectory as an artist and like following through around your goal of what you want to do and what you become as an artist too and as a maker. And you would meet all sorts of individuals, uh..and uhh…it was just really fun to hear stories around people who were just excited about seeing a figment of who they were on stage, on screen, in dance, in song…you know? It was just really exciting to meet people who were exited by that. And you would meet people who would…like I met on of my really good friends in New York City, Geeta Chopra or "Geeta City Girl" as she called her self…and she started, because of Desh, she went back home to New York and started SALAAM, The South Asian League of American Artists in America. You know um (inaudible 16:10)…exists cause of that. And you know many organizations mushroomed in the diaspora, in America at least from people who were just so moved by the very weekend or experience that they might've had at Desh over the years. So, you know…we, you know…You just made it happen, you meet all sorts of individuals that would come and take whatever they wanted out of it. Um, and with that in mind, you know, you knew that you were reaching people. You know and that mattered a lot I think to a lot…to a lot of artists because, like I said, you knew that what you were making was not just for the sake of making...being an artist for artists' sake but for the fact that you had something to say and there was an audience out for you. Desh was a venue for us to find that audience. Yeah.

AM: And can you speak a little bit more to what you think the…how you'd describe the political climate and/or the social climate that Desh was kind of inserting itself into?

PM: (Exhales) Yeah…well I think the late 80s…again, like following the UK, and looking at diversity issues in the arts. It kind of followed around that trajectory; probably had its same battles that it had with its funding agencies and stakeholders. And we um…and I say this only because I've spent about you know 10 years of my life as an artist on five different boards. And that was to you know, to represent people who were not represented either in a membership or an audience or whatever, and also through the mandate of Toronto arts council and Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the arts. That voice had to represent different communities that you were serving. You know so, at the time, people weren't thinking of those things right? So it was almost like um organizations, whether they were theatres, uhh factory theatres, or galleries, or museums were like happy to host a Desh event, because they weren't filling that gap. So Desh was a stopgap to an audience that they clearly couldn't get through their doors. But because Desh existed, that audience came right? So we learned a lot in the past 20 years in Toronto around that right? And um given that the representation of the city is over 50% non-white, and still to this day like you know you might get like one show out of the cycle of shows where a major museum…pretty appalling right? So that's what I meant when I said that Desh was ahead of its time. It was really ahead of its time. Because it was a slap in the face to these organizations and to these people and to these funders, that you don't really understand what Canadian Identity is. You clearly haven't taken a good look at who we are right? So uh…and I think that's because

there's a shift…definitely the population has shifted. We were not necessarily an Anglo-Saxon, white audience anymore. And of course there has been a slow, slight shift in who is running these organizations and these funding agencies. Slight* I really strongly feel that the visual arts is like the slowest to change because if we look at the literary arts, look at the screen arts, the stage, there has been a shift. Cause definitely audiences are participating in those you know bums in the seats kind of thing—but not quite in visual arts.

AM: And why do you think that is?

PM: Um I think its just because we are…I guess you'd have to go back to the patron culture right? I mean who the patrons are. I don't think we are quite there yet in terms of um people who are collecting art. You know, particularly as a visual artist saying this. But, we're learning a lot more about who's making stories and who is taking up those stories right? I mean visual-art seems to be the slowest of the bunch in Canada, but not in other parts of the world. But in Canada, it is right? Um, you know, I mean I would wonder, if there was no (inaudible 31:30) or Deepa Mehta, or Sandra Oh, I wonder what Canada would look and feel like on screen, you know? Like I would still believe that it's Bob and Doug and the Great White North you know? How embarrassing…because it isn't you know? I mean even…I would say in the last 10-15 years, I shifted my own thinking around what is Canadian, who is Canadian, because I look at the indigenous rights struggle and how far, or how little we've come with their experience; our experience as Canadians. So who am I to complain then, that "oh my gosh they don't have the most cutting edge brown, Canadian, Artist hanging on the walls" right? Who am I to complain? So that's where I'm coming from…like in the sense that, you know, then the Black Arts Community, they're going to hold their forum around, (laughs) why there's not enough around "Blackness" around Canadian art? And Then Asian Canadians…you know so its like we're all having like our little dialogues, But really we have to consistently think of the big picture.

AM: Do you think Desh was doing that?

PM: Oh Yeah! By the end of it they were getting more interdisciplinary, more cross cultural, and I know it was a struggle, in the programming committee cycles, but you know, I wouldn't have learned of half the people that I know of and admire in terms of what I've learned about the Toronto Art Scene; and it was because of Desh right? Umm so, people were just looking for avenues to do that. Like Louise Bak first time I heard here read was at Desh, you know, and she does *The Box*, she's an academic, she's a writer…um published, you know? So, I don't know I can't say…I mean it was interesting, like I mentioned to you that there was fresh arts, there was a Latin-Caribbean Organization I believe…and slowly they just kind of extinguished cause it was like the (Bob) Rae days of funding and that whole time, our political structure changed, our… you know and than comes Harris (Mike Harris) and then once Harris came in we saw, you know the health sector, you know the education sector, you know definitely the arts felt in a big, big, big, way right? So it was really up to organizations to make a serious effort on audience development and also programming…audience development, audience engagement, and programming decisions, you know?

AM: When you say that, do you mean in terms of expanding audience, such that it looks better to the arts councils, and the arts councils can say that we actually still need to fund this? Do you mean in terms of…In what way do you mean that, in relations to Mike Harris for example, and funding cuts?

PM: (sighs) Well, I mean Desh doesn't exist right? So, who was it going to fall upon then? Where were these artists going to go? They had to find new ways to produce—not necessarily, produce, they were still continuing to whittle away and you know…um continue to create these little looms (?) (Inaudible 35:38) in our studios…No I'm joking (laughs). But we had to figure out ways to exist. We had to create new Deshs. We had to create new ideas so we had no choice…I think that's inherent for and artist to do that really. You know, when the going gets tough and you just go to Plan B and to Plan C and Plan D. So we are natural Problem Solvers in that way. So it was like, I think, by the time Desh died down, I think people really started to get up and notice, and the critical success was of course really awesome for Desh…just the social political, historical moment, looking back, like you know those…Toronto Star covering us, and the Globe (The Globe & Mail) and Now Magazine and yeah…I have to say tough, I mean, I had a brief kind of experience with Desh. When I mean brief, there was just, you know as an artist, producer, supporter, you know as a volunteer, it was just um, it wasn't long, my history, but I was there in the audience, and I was always supportive…and then you know you kind of look away, and try to do something else in your life, you look back and you're like "Oh my gosh! Where did it go? What happened? You know, so it's like…

AM: So what is your impression of what happened, in terms of why things closed down?

PM: Mmm, so was mentioning Harris, and of course with every organization, finding new funding structures, being in a precarious industry, in the arts where you don't have a permanent home. You know you're renting off a space, and staffing it and whatnot—Those things (have) costs right? So slowly it disintegrated to like one person I believe, from what I understand so… and that has its lasting effects like you can only hang on to so much. At some point you have to say, "okay, you gotta let this…just die" But I don't think I really saw the—if there was a fallout, or if there was a disagreement, or funding (inaudible 38:33) you know I'm sure its some really emotional story. I wasn't physically there for it but I had heard things and people had their own opinions. But we of course commiserate and remember it in ways that…like it's a long lost relative or something. (Laughs) you're gonna hear tons of stories like this.

AM: Are you still in touch with a lot of the people?

PM: Uh like some, I mean Facebook is brilliant! But I don't think I'm talking to them everyday. So around '97 I believe, in my mind, in my memory, that's when we, I guess loosely formed a little bit earlier, probably, people would say '94, but I think it kind of came together for me in like '96 for SAVAC. Like as the collective forming and actually, striking out as a collective outside of Desh and operating, getting it's own project funding and whatnot…

AM: So, that was a Visual Arts Committee that developed into SAVAC.

PM: Yes, 'cause there was just, uhh…Visual Arts wasn't always—it was like the kick off to Desh, But then it's so different from the performing Arts right?...as an art form. So it was like people wanting to do performing arts things in the space but visual arts is almost like stand-alone that way whereas performing arts you know you could mash up like a poet and a dancer and a film in terms of a program.

AM: so was it visual and media arts, where there was video work and… (Continue at 40:24)

PM: Everything!, yeah it was very cross disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and then of course there was the conference

AM: Oh I'm sorry, I meant specifically in terms of the visual arts component…

PM: Oh right…

AM: did you include media arts in that? It was just visual arts…

PM: No. It was mainly 2D and 3D installation…it was like monitor came way after. Yeah so...but, when it broke out at Desh it was like 2D and 3D installation.

AM: And how…Do you know what those…like were you a part of those initial conversations? And that formation of like how it was decided that it should become a separate thing? That's a part of the history that I am interest in.

PM: I was there…Uh my memory and recollection is that I was there—other people think that certain other people were there of course—but I remember clearly…Um Amina Ally…and she was hired—she was coming out of Queens, in the Fine Arts education department. So she had gotten a Fine Arts B.Ed. So she wasn't necessarily going into Art Teaching, she wasn't necessarily going to have a practice, but years later, now she has a practice. So she had said that she was applying for something in which SAVAC could actually form. And I clearly remember the call for submissions, the year that's she coordinated/curated and it was…my memory is attached to that and that was around 96/97 was the year. That was the year. But people will say that it was loosely formed years earlier around 94, so I wasn't really, like I know the people that were involved, but it was kind of my younger…I would not have had the balls to get involved. I was kind of like "I want to volunteer" but not on such a deep level, like I want to be kind of in there, like I don't necessarily want to lead, but I'd follow, and I'll watch and I'll observed and learn to from the elders. That was my feeling then around those early 90s period. But many of the years later I got more involved and I was on the first programing committee for SAVAC.

AM: And at the time when you joined, what was the gender make-up and I'm also curious about like was it pretty diverse in-terms of like diasporic South Asians. Cause' I know I've read a bit in the archives that there was an attempt to create more programing rev…umm people from the Caribbean and Tamils and actually diversify like did you see that representation within the organizing itself?

PM: Uh, at Desh?

AM: Yeah

PM: Yeah! I did, I mean I'm of North Indian Decent and I wouldn't say like…my parents didn't…we immigrated and came to the Punjabi Enclave, Rexdale at the time of the day, which is now like "Little Mogadishu". But my parents, I guess you know, "climbing the social ladder"…they wanted to get out of that so, we moved then to Concord and then to North York. We weren't in a predominantly South Asian Community at all. It was Anglo Saxon and Jewish. (laughs) So in terms of my teenage years, Outside of visiting family or family coming over I didn't really have a brown kind of teenage experience. It was removed from that. So then I go to University, and I was like "Oh my god! Look at all these people. Where did all these people come from?" I mean I could sing like Jewish rhymes for you (laughs) but I didn't have a…I didn't understand what a South Asian teenage experience like that. It was a Suburban experience for me, and then that I was kind of introduced to the brown teen experience you know at York. But then it was mainstream, it was like I'm an artist, I'm not down with this, my thinking is more "left". And then I saw Desh and I was like "HOLY SHIT! My people. And you come in all colours and shapes and sizes and orientations and it's amazing." And so I think that was also like my first conscious interaction with Tamil people, and with West Indian folks, even though I might've had the odd person in class but I wasn't really so involved. And that came out of fear right? —The fear of the unknown. Whereas like at Desh it was like "Oh cool I'm gonna learn about someone's other brown culture". Like I had no choice but to…like where was I going to run to? Like if I had to be on a committee with someone—I was going to learn about them in one way or form. And it was just brilliant because I don't have the diasporic experience. Everyone's got their enclave or a particular identity that they have an affinity with. Now as an educator, I see that kids do that. But I was raised to be like that, like my parents wanted us to have a very secular understanding of Canadian life…'Cause that's what their work life was about. But at Desh, I met Goans, and Tamils, you know Sri Lankan's and Gujarati folks…it wasn't my high school experience and I definitely didn't want to have that particular experience. I was in the arts and I wanted to be with the other artists. I was probably like one of the only brown kids in my year. Like I would be called the only other brown person—who—I then met at Desh—It was always funny that the Profs would call me Sutapa Majumdar and I'm like, I do not look like Sutapa Majumdar (laughs)

AM: Of course not(Laughs)

PM:(Still laughing) But that's the only person you called me (by)! I mean, how crazy is that? So there was that invisibility that existed in my life and then at Desh it didn't. I was Pamila and people accepted me for who I was and we just learned about it and accepted each other. So I met Sudharshan and Rachel James and Shelly Bahl and you know all these amazing—Arif Noorani! And it was great, like I would never in close proximity to that anywhere else but at Desh!—in an open non-judgmental way because really, the affinity was we're all artists, producers, we're all here to make and create and celebrate us.

AM: Can you tell me about a highlight from your time with Desh?

PM: You know what could be a better highlight than being in a space that is creative and politically charged and motivated and you're with like-minded people, and then of course the parties. (Both laugh) And then the parties would lead to all sorts of things. I've met some of my nearest and dearest friends at a Desh, in terms of looking at the diasporic artists and stuff. Now I have friends in Chicago and in New York and in New Jersey because of it. You know people made friendships and I think that was a great highlight: people met people and they became friends. In a time where, what Internet does now and like…again, back to the social media thing. It was a head of its time in the sense that you know, you had to physically come to Desh and then of course become blown away by the work and meet people who you just celebrated and talk to you know, and were connected through what you experience together in a social setting. Like, parties would be hosted by people, either in small spaces or like in peoples' houses, and all sorts of debauchery would be happening—as you can imagine—and it was great! Because it was like based on these stories, (that) other people would come, year after year, because it was like, "yeah I heard about Desh Pardesh! I heard it's amazing!" So they'd be so psyched to like come to Desh (laughs) because, of course it's like this mind-blowing experience. And so, you're going to be like (Gasps) "WOW look at all these brown artists and we're together and we're connecting and then we party together! AMAZING" right? —And you're so desperate! Hungry, for that connection! Like, it's pretty awesome like to think back now to what it (Desh Pardesh) did: I was introduced to authors, and writers and poets, and—you know, I don't think that I would have ever picked up poetry but because I was introduced to I through the form of Desh Pardesh, I take it up now in my life you know—though I'm not a poet I mean…but yeah.

AM: Given that you work with young people, do you see anything comparable to Desh around—doesn't have to be South Asian but—anything comparable to Desh these days?

PM: I mean there's hints and glimmers, like sometimes I'll go to something and say to a friend like, "wow man that was really rad it was like being at Desh" But very seldom do I say that.

AM: You mean like one off events—

PM: —Yeah yeah, like you know I may experience a form, or a symposium, or something, and some radicals out there are going like "you're all fucked up and full of shit" and I would be like "yeah! that's like being at Desh" —

AM: —was that what would happen at Desh?

PM: Oh yeah

PM: Sure. I mean its political engagement is…you cannot contain that right? It's you know, it's a pendulum so you're going to have to…I mean it's a pretty good understanding that we're all pretty left. (Laughs) But there was definitely like extremely left and then like center of left. You know like you were with like-minded people &&& you'd get the odd person who might be a "poser" you know? But you could weed them out and be like, "Okay, clearly you're uncomfortable here" you know? But that was great! I think that's where the best learning happens. It's when you're uncomfortable around these things. So it's like (Laughs) you had nowhere to run but to address it with the other person; whether it was in a social, informal context, or in a formal context. But now like you know, the people look to—like we were talking about critical geography, I look at critical pedagogy—and you know, I really look to young people to tell me, and then kind of make the links towards like what I've gone through and what I've…rather than like, "let me pour out everything I know"you know, "I'm a walking book of knowledge" like, tell me who you are, tell me what you know, and …Oh my gosh! In 1994 I had this experience, when I was 21, and it was at this festival…Art history is really story telling right so, its going to become a part of that like this will exist in that form so I will eventually play this and how amazing would it be that I'm telling this story and then I'm playing it in class and we,re like, "you're talking about telling a story right now and we're listening."

So, I think that aspect of doing like critical enquiry, was very evident in the artist who presented and you know like you might be sitting there going like, "what the fuck is this shit?!" And then someone would be like (laughs) "But I'm really passionate about showing this work" But that was the chance you took! So the program coordinator…like we would kind of re-group and kind of feel like, "Oh my god that really was an epic fail! Holy smokes we put all this money and time and energy into bringing this person and they were like atonable (laughs) "but sometimes you have to experience that its nothing like we could preview online and see. We'd have to go through those tapes and whatever people presented us it was like, "okay this sounds like an amazing artist" and then they come and you're doing the live experience and it's like "what is that?!"

PM: They would send you like a demo tape and—

PM: —yeah demos yeah. So there was this whole process around programing: at the end of the day there were like key decisions made by the organizers, but the committees existed of course cause it is publicly funded and it would go through channels of a collective kind of jury process right. So these juries existed, so there would be a collective kind of process to it yeah.

AM: It's amazing. It's really amazing hearing about it. Having spent some time in the archives, and reading through the materials, and talking to a couple of people that I've met like Sudharshan really early on—

PM: —Oh right

AM: —to get a sense from peoples' interviews…I didn't know the frame work and it's so exiting so yeah I'm really looking forward to like building on this.

PM: Oh yeah like Sudharshan was like one of the first people who like really shattered, my own naiveté around sexual expression, through dance. It was amazing.

AM: He's an amazing choreographer

PM: ABSOLUTELY! But it blew my mi—like you've got to understand, you're in you early 20s and you're like, "Holy smokes!" Like he made the Kama Sutra come alive in a gay man's experience. It was amazing. Again like, I don't know, I mean, I'm so gleeful about it because it was just like, probably you know, you just didn't need—it wasn't like you needed any other dressing. People just really bared all. It was like pretty amazing to see that you know like people crying on stage performing! I'm sure it was scary but exhilarating at the same right. You know like crying because you finally have a brown audience. Its pretty…yeah.

AM: is there anything else that you want to…? I mean I don't really have any other formal questions but feel free to—

PM: —Um you know thinking about the legacy of Desh, you know, and what the next generation of artists will do like, if they can look back on this archive, it would be amazing for them to even understand…In fact whenever I found out about Desh online, when I meet young artists, probably 30 and under, they just think "oh my god, I'm the shit." And it's just like "actually, no. Take a look at this" (laughs) so yeah.

AM: OK, that was great I'm gonna stop recording.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 024 – Interview with Paramjit Rai

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Paramjit Rai (PR)

Interview Date: 27/11/2014
Interview Location: Conducted in-person in Ottawa, ON.

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AM: Okay, I think this is actually working perfectly now. So, if you can start by stating your name, the date and where we are doing this interview.

PR: My name is Paramjit, today is November 27th 2014 and we are in Ottawa.

AM: Okay. So can you start by actually telling me a bit about when you started being involved with Desh and kind of in what capacity?

PR: Okay, I started it was around 1992 and I had finished working in another south asian organization in toronto which was called CASA—

AM Sorry i'm just gonna stop —

PR: Did you want to listen back?

AM: yep.

PR: So it was around 1992, and I was just finishing up with CASA, the coalition of agencies serving South Asians which was sort of new then, but it was already established and I was looking for another job and I might get the order wrong. I met somebody who, one of my profs ar Guelph, where I finished my masters had mentioned Punam Khosla, and she said you should talk to Punam because she might know of potential jobs or research or something you might be interested in in Toronto when you go back. So I did do that, I got in touch with Punam, and although she was not directly involved with Desh Pardesh at that time, she said why don't you start working with Pardesh, even just as a volunteer. And so I ended up doing that, for about a year, and I was a volunteer. The second year I was there, there was Steve Pereira who was there for quite some time. He was the coordinator and then they were looking for a co-coordinator and so after about a year of volunteering I applied to be co-coordinator, I didn't get the job, Rachel James got the job, and or was that the first year? Sorry in terms of timeline things are a bit, kind of murky. No, she got the job the first year and I also applied the first year and I ended up staying on as a volunteer and ended up doing a lot of hands on work, and then she only wanted to stay on for the year, she was carrying on doing other things. The second year that I was with Desh the

position opened up, and I think I didn't apply and Heidi McKenzie got the job, and she didn't stay on the job for very long and then midway through the time she had been appointed she left, or was fired, I can't remember now. Then I basically was brought in, I was already kind of involved, but maybe not as, I wasn't as involved as the previous year, but then I ended up being paid staff. So thats, that was my involvement.

AM Okay. and what kind of led you into that, I know that Punam said you should do that and you were working for CASA but what was, were you doing art practice at the time?

PR: No, I just finished a masters in english and I ended up doing research with CASA on the south asian community in toronto and it was social policy research and then that was a kind of, I guess a year or a year and a half I can't remember now. That was a kind of large project that they had started, looking at the needs of the south asian community. And I guess in my own kind of background I was looking at post-colonial literatures, so there was always kind of interest in arts, community and I guess previously as an undergrad I had worked in Toronto in a community called Thorncliff part, which is kind of, it in kind of a triangular little community, lots of high rises, its very very dense, and a lot of south asians that their mostly from East Africa and I was doing a little bit of research there as an undergrad for summer work. So, I had kind of been in and out of social policy research and Desh Pardesh was new to me, so I just wanted to see what was going on in the arts community and that, it was a kind of really interesting place to be at that time.

AM Can you talk a bit about that? like what kind of, what was different about Desh and what kind of intervention was Desh making into the art scene?

PR: I think the thing is that it, I guess for me the biggest thing for me was that it was so broad, because it had visual art, because it had discussion, it had the literary art and the film, and panelists talking about sort of class and race issues and it was a really kind of broad spectrum. And I guess because I had already worked at CASSA, which had covered all, it was basically an umbrella group for all the south asian groups doing social work of one kind or another in the south asian community, I guess my experience there revealed how broad the needs are and so Desh Pardesh was also addressing that but from a different angle. Rather than social policy, they were looking at a theoretical or critical or artistic needs of the community in a way, well obviously that no one else was doing, so that was so appealing, that nobody else was doing it. They were also doing really interesting work and also making lots of international links. Cause I think in the, when I went just as a participant there was, from what I remember, there were people coming from Australia and then when I was working there would be people from England and America of course and India of course, theres participants from India, and within the south asian diaspora theres people from all the south asian countries represented, I would say more or less rep—in one capacity or another, not in every panel or in every medium but there were some indication of south asian origins including the earlier diaspora — the West Indies, the Caribbean, things like that, Africa of course.

AM Can you talk a little bit about that aspect of things? In terms of what did it look like to be organising around identity at that point?

PR: It was, um, I think in the 90s, it was what everybody was doing, it was the kind of language of activism and its still the language of activism I think, and we were using very particular terms that, basically, we had kind of defined for ourselves and that we were kind of defining for others as well, for people who did not actually use the term. In Canada we use the term south asian, well mostly in Canada we use south asian, although in Toronto it was kind of a new term, it had kind of originated int he 70s, it wasn't something that was common in the 70s, I only know that because I was reading a lot, and one of the things that came up was the south asian identity and that was from a government document, that this one, he was some kind of bureaucrat but he was also some kind of sociologist, Dr. Ubhale but I think he kind of came up with the umbrella term south asian, because previously it was East Indian, so in Vancouver I think they still use East Indian to mark identity but in Toronto we started using south asian because we were trying to encourage people to make the kind of links in terms of their historical connections based in South Asia as a region. Also kind of linking it to colonialism and post colonialism, so it was kind of useful to have that umbrella term.

[00:08:53]

AM Can you describe a little bit what the day to day work looked like in Desh? Obviously you were involved in different capacities, but I'm curious to hear what like the day to day—

PR: The day to day was pretty, well was pretty basic, it was office work. You know, at that time faxes were still used, so there was a lot of faxing that went on between participants or granting bodies or, just you know, people you are communicating with email, there was a lot of email of course, but there was a lot of faxing. And there was a lot of people who would just drop in and chit chat, and you know things, ideas would pop up and there were some people who were lets say, board members or volunteers who were more active or less active, so the people who were more active would, although it was kind of a working office every now and then people would drop in, that was quite nice, so it was kind of a meeting place as well. But the day to day was pretty basic, Steve worked hard, he was always kind of in early and kind of working away at his computer and just doing a lot in terms of the paper work whether it was the grants or the media packages or promos to the media organizations or communicating with the artists in one way or the other and lots of work not he telephone, which I don't know if now a lot of people do work on the telephone I don't think so, but there was a lot of discussions that just took place over the phone, so yeah. It was basic office work, but it was a nice atmosphere, it was fun.

AM: And were you there kind of through the transition from Desh being a one or two day festival to a more established —

PR: Um, no it was already established I think by then it was already four day, I think in the end it was four days, I don't think it got bigger than that, yeah. It was kind of a thursday to sunday thing. It was already established.

AM: And at that point was it already a situation in which there were things happening throughout the year? or was it all building towards the annual festival?

PR: It was kind of building towards the annual — but I think, I cant remember now if we tried to do a fundraiser or I think pre-Desh event because in terms of a lot of the grants— I mean I didn't do any of the grants writing but I think the grants that artists got or Desh got were geared towards the spring, so the actual festival itself. And I don't know, actually after I stopped working with Desh I was not in Toronto anymore, so I did come back and attend Desh, but I had nothing to do with it once I was gone. So I don't know how they kind of changed their mandate, or if they changed their mandate, I think there was there a time where they were doing events throughout the year?

AM: It seems like it, like once it became, kind of as it was becoming a registered non-profit, it seems like there was more kind of an impetus to do more throughout the year.

PR: There was always pressure to do more, and people kind of expected Desh to produce miracles, and it was interesting because there was a lot of people from outside of Toronto that expected Desh to be on the go all the time, their vision of Toronto, I remember them saying "ohh you're so lucky you live in toronto, you've got Desh here, we live in such and such place and we just don't feel the same sense of community and bonding and all of that" and for them their impression really was that Desh happened every weekend in Toronto, which of course is not true, but it — and obviously they knew it wasn't true but there was this sense that you know, Toronto was really punching above its weight in terms of south asian organizing. And I think its really hard, because there was always demands for — do more workshops do more programming and just, it was very tough in that way for Steve, because I worked with Steve very closely and so there was always pressure from not necessarily the board, but just from people that were asking questions about programming and saying well "oh why cant you do this"— especially at the meeting, the general meeting, there would be suggestions for the next show which was fine, but it was always about capacity. Like how can people, all these demands are great but if you don't have the funding to hire more people just to kind of put the festival together with just the two staff plus the volunteer board and the volunteers is hard work. So there was always that.

AM: Mhmm. Yeah. And so the structure if I understand correctly was — board of directors, staff and then there were different committees?

PR: There was a programming committee which was very active, so they saw everything they read everything, they you know, had lots and lots of long meetings too and basically program the festival. And there were certain things we picked without having seen them just because either they weren't ready or they were or kind of a big name or a big draw. Like for example, one year

it was—i think it was Bhaji On The Beach which nobody had seen because Gurinder Chadha wasn't you know, sending her reels around, but by then she was already a big enough name that just to have her in the program was enough of a draw so we didn't need to — her shorts had already been programmed I think in previous years, I think, arranged, something or another, I don't know, its a nice arrangement its a little short video about sort of comic wedding or — so anyhow so that kind of stuff we did. And then one year it was Hanif Quereshi's film, one of his films was, that he wrote the screen play for, the Buddha of Suburbia I think or something its called. I can't remember now, but anyhow one of his films was screened without us having seen it. So yeah the progamming committee was very hands on, and then the board was also pretty hands on but uh, I think there was an overlap, I can't remember but I think there was a bit of an overlap in terms of board and one or two members might have been on the programming committee. But there was a lot of different people, a lot of different backgrounds all working together.

[00:16:03]

AM: And what was that like? the work together with a lot of different people?

PR: Its like any organization, where you've got conflicting personalities and you've got conflicting agendas, different expectations on what the end product will look like. So there was lots of different kinds of tensions even though, I think the impetus was always that people always wanted this to be good and they also wanted it to be long lasting and they also want it to be meaningful. But they come at it— I guess at that time you'd say they come at it with different levels of awareness of the issues, so if you've got somebody thats a bit more new to political organizing like that would be me, versus somebody who has been working in the labour movement for 5 years by then, so there was another board member who was quite active in the union organizing in toronto, so her perspective was very different from my perspective, even though I had done social work, I hadn't done it for very long. Versus somebody who was just coming in right out of university you know, with no organizing, no job, no nothing I guess we must have had people like that as well but I can't remember who they would be. Or more theoretical activism, lets say, so there was someone like that as well. And you could see that, you know awareness changes over time, and so interacting with different kinds of people changes their understanding and perception of the issues, so that was good, I think that was good that there was all kinds of conflicting definitions.

AM: Mhmm. You could say that brings a richness.

PR: Mmm, yeah you could say that (laughs).

AM: When you think back can you think on some highlights of your time with Desh whether it was performances or just moments with the group.

PR: Well, it was quite nice. It was quite cohesive in terms of the programming, in terms of the core programming committee when I guess when I was a volunteer. although it was a very large committee, it was double digits, if it wasn't 9 of us it was at least 11to 12 like I cant remember but it was a lot of people. But generally everyone got along and it was very kind of eye opening in terms of the kinds of work people were producing. So I think that was kind of nice, though you can program everything that you saw the idea that there really was all this rich material out there that people were creating and thinking, I guess now you would say that about the internet, but theres just so much material out there, its just amazing kind of what people post about themselves or what they create. And I think it was that kind of a feeling in terms of submissions because you would just get kind of like a pile of, back then it was still VHS, even though people were — even though there were CDs and stuff, so we would have like these chunky piles of VHS cassettes that we would have to watch and so that was — some of it was worthy and some of it was terrible, and you know it was just a big range. So that would be a highlight and at some point we started, um I think at that point I was still a volunteer, we started this thing for youth called Brick By Brick and that was really good, I don't know how long it continued but it was basically one of those yearly events, it wasn't a fundraiser but it was kind of a pre-festival, where people were getting together to talk about issues of concern and so it was youth based and I think it might have been gender based as well, I cant remember but I sort of have a feeling that there was a women's Brick By Brick, young women's Brick By Brick that I was at. So I think that was a really good one.

AM: So was that kind of a like a um—

PR: An open dialogue—

AM: A workshop?

PR: A workshop yeah, where people could come and talk about issues around race and identity or class or just issues—

AM: And was that open to anyone or just—? Internal, or?

PR: No, it was open to anyone to come but I think there was one where I went to which was a women's, a women's Brick By Brick maybe some for younger south asians, which uh— I'm just trying to think back, I'm can't remember if they all actually happened but I remember there was certainly one that I went to that happened. So I thought that was a good one, and then what else was good? I think the interactions that people had at the festivals like outside the actual programming — that was pretty amazing in terms of discussions that went on, people kind of connecting and meeting with one another, there was you know it was very international even in the audience and I think people really valued that. I mean, some ties and links, like if you didn't keep them for twenty years you did keep them for a few years and I think that was really good in terms of making linkages and then I was in London, from about 1997, well 96' 97' till 2000, but in London they tried to do a Desh Pardesh, they had a different name, but it didn't have the same

feeling, it didn't have the same atmosphere, I mean I only went to one day there, but I mean, its my impression, was very limited I guess, but it was a sort of festival I cant even remember now what its called, but West London has a large south asian population so it was at a theatre and talks and things. But London is a much different city than Toronto its a much bigger city than Toronto and the south asian community is also, has kind of deeper roots in England than the south asian community in toronto does, so it was a very like, just the whole kind of makeup, the way they kind of presented their issues was just a sort of very different feeling but it didn't have that same feeling of connectedness, or maybe it was me as an outsider that I felt that.

AM: I've definitely heard other people say that. I'm curious what do you think it was about the context that — was it the political climate, the sociopolitical climate, what do you think it was about that moment in Toronto that made it possible?

PR: I don't know, I mean you know, you had a lot of people in their 20s and 30s, maybe some a little younger who at that point in the 90s, if they had grown up in say, North America, because a lot of people were north american south asian, by then they had in some ways, well they had gone to school, gone to university, had jobs, you know they had been kind of part of the north american culture, but they were still looking for — not ties necessarily but just trying to make the links back to their parents or their family history or if they had been removed three generations, you know they still have curiosity about their background but they weren't interested in kind of photographs, or stories about coming over you know — like how is that still relevant to me today in the context, in the world that I'm living in today, the modern world of 1991 or 1992 and at that time, things were pretty dynamic, I think culture was pretty — there was a moment that Desh was kind of part of and its changed since then. I don't know if anything's been as, whats the word, I don't know if things in Toronto have taken place that are as all encompassing or as inclusive in the way that Desh was. I don't know if theres been a replacement.

[00:24:43]

AM: it doesn't seem like it (laughs)

PR: Yeah, so Desh seemed to capture, for at least for about five years that I was kind of in and out of it, because I went first as a curious on looker and didn't know anybody at all involved in Desh Pardesh and went away and did a masters I guess and then a couple years later, then got involved, and then kind of at least if not once, twice went back just as an on looker I guess. At least from what I can tell, the first 5 years it was a moment that it was a part of that things — I guess the language was also expanding so there was space linguistically I guess you could say, or the vocabulary on inclusiveness was expanding so much that you, you know you felt like you had a small space to say what you wanted to say and do what you wanted to do, or present yourself in a particular way where you would actually be part of something larger.

AM: Can you kind of remember what it felt like when you first went to Desh as an outsider?

PR: Oh yeah. it was really great, it was at the Euclid theatre which is no more, which a really, or was a really sweet little community theatre and it was just very buzzy the way festivals are really buzzy and conferences are very buzzy and its just always nice to be surrounded by people who look like you even if its only for three days. The you know, whatever was one stage either a panel or movie that I must've seen was just interesting — it was just interesting. Whatever it was, it didn't even matter what it was, it was just very thought provoking. So its just that feeling that things are just kind of buzzy and exciting, and I think Toronto, I think that the story of Desh Pardesh is also a story of toronto in that toronto was starting to see that it is a big city and I think it is in the 90s that Toronto changed its perception of itself. And so, Desh Padesh helped to, at least for the people who were participating in Desh Pardesh, they started to you know, started to make the links internationally but you know also started to see Toronto as an international spot, so I think Desh Pardesh was— you know theres this kind of relationship, where although they were bringing in people from all over, I don't know if I'm repeating myself here but all these people were coming to Toronto because it seemed like a close knit community — actually Toronto itself was growing and so, it became this space where you could be international and you could be local.

AM: Mhmm, yeah that makes a lot of sense. Um, I'd love to hear your reflections on — like how do you think that Desh shaped you?

PR: It was very influential, I ended up working in London afterwards, after doing some more studies. And one of the things—i ended up at the british film institute in London for about a year and the kind of work I was doing in london, I was kind of programming in a film festival, digital media but what my boss — who was an editor— said "you know the work you've done so far before joining the BFI shows that you're able to synthesize lots of different areas" so I was kind of moving between academia, social policy and the arts community in Toronto and then back into academia and he said that "i really like the way you — its high culture and low culture and you're able to kind of synthesize that" and I think that Desh Pardesh was really helpful in that way because we were looking at theoretical issues that are kind of lived on a day to day level even though its kind of high theory on identity and race and things like that. But then the practical reality of living in a whatever kind of society kind of you know, at that moement, you know, still trying to come to grips with an immigrant population in Toronto or in New York and kind of the day to day realities of what thats like for south asians from different classes and from different well— and in terms of sexualities as well and just the kinds of struggles. And I think in that way Desh was really helpful, just to have that kind of experience where you're able to be flexible and I think thats probably the defining thing I probably took away from Desh Pardesh and the experience.

AM: And if you were to sort of carry forward lessons or have people take from this experience something in terms of how they organize, how we work together, how we bring social justice and arts together — can you think on lessons learned from those experiences?

PR: Umm, I think thats hard. I mean I do think about it from time to time and it was important— I wonder if its time for…this oral history project is very good but I also wonder if — whether its time to reintroduce or restart Desh 3.0 or something just because it would be interesting just to see whats being produced now by all kinds of people but I'm thinking about young people younger than me of course, but just hear what their issues are. I think it would be interesting to see in terms of identity and race politics how far along we've come. because a lot of the people who were activists in the 90s around race, gender and sex, sexual identities — you know things have changed for a lot of them, but a lot of them ended up having really interesting positions in terms of their activism like in terms of carrying forth their activism. Like I'm thinking of one particular Rishi Vide in the US because I think she ended up becoming quite senior in the gay and lesbian movement in the US, so I just think its really interesting in terms of there was a kind organizing around race and gender and sexuality but then in terms of going out into the mainstream — kind of their experiences in the mainstream, they were able to take that and organize at a much broader level, kind of at a national level. I just wonder whether some of the artists or activists that are working now whether because we seem in— there seems like theres a lot of organizing going on but a lot of it is just very individual because you link up digitally, you don't link up kind of face to face. So it seems like — its very fragmented, I mean its a feeling that you get on one hand, the internet or the organizing that people do on the internet brings people from anywhere all together around one issue and thats great but it also seems that its very fragmented because theres a million issues that people petition around. And so I wonder if they were brought in physically again the way we used to organized, either panels or discussions or whatever it was — just what it would look like, I don't know. it be interesting.

AM: Definitely. Is there anything else that you would like to add about Desh that you felt wasn't covered? that you kind of want to put down?

PR: No its, I mean it was really really important I think it was great that we had it for as long as we did. I think the ended, I'm unclear about how it all unfolded at the end— so it be nice to get some clarity because it was really like, I was really sad when I heard that it was basically like closing down and I just wonder, the kind of people involved at the end— what it was, was it burn out? was it the momentum did they lose momentum from the community? did they lose their community support? did they— I mean what happened? I don't know. It always still had the buzz, like when I came back as a visitor it still had that buzz and there was always a sense of renewal because there were always people that you didn't know who were there cause its just not possible to know everybody who shows up. So I just, I feel like the ending was really sad. I mean there are other festivals that have continued and have transformed and you know just changed with the times I guess you cold say, and I just wonder why Desh couldn't have stayed or lasted. So I think thats a real pity because on one hand Desh was all about being new and innovative and of course being inclusive and all of that and the idea that it was building something — that was really nice. I mean you can argue about it in terms of is it going int he wrong direction is it going in a certain direction that people who were involved in it at different points may not have agreed with it but then I mean, that seems to be the nature of community organizations — theres always going to be a tussle over direction or theres gonna be a tussle over ideology, the fact that

it was still around for 10 or 12 years, but then theres other organizations that have survived, so its a shame it didn't survive. So in some ways, like what I was saying earlier it would be nice to see it come back but I don't think that the people who, people like me or other people, I was only there for a short time, but other people who were part of it would not be the ones to revive it, it would come from a different generation of activists and artists and thinkers, but I don't know if they even know about Desh Pardesh. Like I don't know if people you know, know about it in terms of its impact — you know it was really really important, it was one of the festivals to go to in Toronto and Toronto has a million festivals all year round, and certainly in the spring and summer theres way too much going on. But it certainly was the main festival to go. So yeah I think that — I mean I feel like thats a real pity that we all, we weren't able to keep it going.

AM: Yeah I mean, I've heard the same thing from several people actually. And it is something interesting to think on about whether the — what are the conditions that make it necessary and possible.

PR: Yeah.

AM: Something like that. And are those you know, yeah.

PR: I mean it came about because there was a need and so by Khush, and the Salaam, and the Khush boys and you know Punam was involved, Punnam was a real visionary and she's got real, you know, dynamism and so she's a synthesizer. She's basically, thats her role, she's able to do that kind of blue sky thinking, kind of got all the elements together and then you had Steve who was a real hard worker and he was also a really deep thinker as well and so I mean, you had people who could see the potential and were able to kind of realize the potential. There has to be somebody else there. if lets just say if it were to come back, who has that same kind of perspective, but not that perspective, but the idea of the potential and not just all about— I think at least what now see in Toronto is, a lot of the events that take place around South Asian identity; its just based on identity so its all very celebratory in terms of links to India, mostly india and pakistan I guess but its not nearly as dense as Desh. Although theres large festivals they don't — I don't thing they have the same theoretical or societal impact that Desh had.

AM: So you see kind of room for possibility there.

PR: Yeah but I don't know who it would be. Like I don't know who that person or group of people would be. Like somebody has to feel like there's a — that its missing. Yeah. the artists that are now producing work have to feel like that its missing. and then you need someone to do the day to day work which is really hard.

AM: Well perhaps this will be something, well I'm hoping that the focus groups will be an opportunity have a sort of more mixed experience, community organizers artists with people who are younger and less experienced to learn lessons and kind of actually brainstorm about what it is thats missing. Thats kind of my hope.

PR: Yeah. Yeah, well good luck!

AM: Thank you.

[00:39:34]

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 027+030 – Interview with Rachel Kalpana James and Sheila James

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Rachel Kalpana James (RKJ) and Sheila James (SJ)

Interview Date: 26/11/2014
Interview Location: Conducted in-person in Ottawa, ON

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AM: Okay so Sheila, maybe let's I'll just start with you. Can you describe in what capacity you were involved with, with Desh, kinda the time frame and your role

SJ: I think I started being involved with Desh in 1991 as a performer. I believe I was invited to participate so I think I did some music there. For the festival in 1993, I joined the programming committee. I was involved in 95 on the programming committee. I did a lot of work concurrently during those years. So 95, 96 we produced a play by the Company of Sirens in association with Desh Pardesh that was Canadian Monsoon. 97, I directed Nila Gupta's play, Trunk Valise and Suitcase. I did Jimmy Susheel, which was my lounge act, my alter ego act. And then after that I think a number of my videos were screened at Desh Pardesh.

AM: and what kinda work were you doing prior to what kinda got you involved with Desh? I mean you were obviously a performer there, but how did that kind of happen?

SJ: I can't remember. I'm pretty sure somebody invited me either Sharon Fernandez or somebody who knew me. Because I was a musician, and so I think I was identified as the South Asian Musician. And I had done a lot of work with some of the women of colour musicians in the city, and the queer women of colour musicians and so, I think that, that was, you know, how I got connected with other people who were doing, sort of feminist, progressive artwork so I think that's how...we connected

AM: And Rachel, can you describe a bit how you got involved

RKJ: The first year I was involved with Desh Pardesh was in 1993 when Sharon Fernandez asked me and a couple of other South Asian artists to give some feedback on an exhibition that she was going to be programming, a visual arts exhibition called Insight. It was South Asian women's art. Then the next year 1994 I was hired as the coordinator of Desh Pardesh, and that is the year Desh had been incorporated as a non-profit, so I remember that one of the reasons I was hired besides being I guess South Asian, and an artist, was for all the skills that I was bringing, particularly skills I had with a Bachelor of Commerce background for the new organization. In 1994, I continued, the work of visual arts programming beyond my job as coordinator, in that we created the Visual Arts Studio, and that was like the first juried exhibition at Desh Pardesh and

that's also when we started paying artist fees as well. And then after that in 95 similarly I helped coordinate the visual arts component of Desh and in 96 I helped to bring on the next curator for the visual arts at Desh and that was Amina Ali who created SAVAC like the name SAVAC, and got the first project funding, and then after that I think I participated maybe as a juror with SAVAC. I think I did a few photographs for Desh for some of the programs and stuff like that. Later, I was not involved in programming or anything like that. I can't remember what year it was maybe 94 or 95 when [5:00] I co-created Avec Pyar which was the zine for Desh Pardesh, and then I participated in the SAVAC show at the Art Gallery of Ontario which was called Private Thoughts/Public Moments and, the next year 2001, I was invited to come in. And I took over as the managing coordinator Desh Pardesh and that was 2000, and that's when I incorporated SAVAC. I was the managing coordinator of SAVAC, and that's when we incorporated and uh, That's also when Desh Pardesh actually filed for bankruptcy. In my position at SAVAC I helped Desh Pardesh try to fight that bankruptcy and strategize ways to basically go move forward with further funding, and unfortunately that didn't work out with Desh. But SAVAC was able to incorporate as a separate organization and go forward and then I was with SAVAC for six years after that.

AM: I'd love to hear from you both, from both of your perspectives,? What intervention Desh was making into the arts scene at the time? Like what, what wasn't there that Desh provided? What was exciting about it to you? Rachel, maybe you can start?

RKJ: I'm just looking at an old program that says "history in the making". For Desh Pardesh, it was a historical moment for sure in the early…1990's. And for me, I would say was someone who was able to have an opportunity through a lot of grassroots work that had been done before I joined Desh Pardesh. It was an artistic movement, it was a political movement, and it was a place for people to come together of a certain generation of South Asians who were living in the diaspora, to talk about, you know the general idea of, I guess, of identity, and what it meant to be growing up in the West, but it was also a platform for many progressive movements, feminism, and liberal politics.

SJ: Well definitely all of the above, everything that Kalpana says I agree with. Basically nothing like that had happened, right so if you were a person of colour working in the arts, there were very few areas where you can meet like-minded people, right. So that was one thing that it created these amazing opportunities not only to do your work, but to meet other artists. And I think that the political ideologies were very strong, so I remember the mandate of DP in 92 and I think that was 92-93 when Punam came on board. It was very strong, putting an anti-imperialist mandate, a feminist mandate, a left, a socialist mandate, a queer (but we didn't use queer at the time, right) but it was queer positive, queer friendly, like anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic mandate. So all of those things are really attractive cause it was very holistic like the political voice was looking at our world with a critical voice and it was even critical of what it meant to be South Asian. So it actually, we took apart you know the large imperial power in South Asia and what did it mean? And it also meant we had to kind of proactively be inclusive right, of all the minority voices within the South Asian diaspora so that, that was really good. Oh yes, and the

anti-fundamentalist. That was a big part too, right. So that attracted me because that was very bold, and I was already working with a feminist theatre company so we were [10:00] already doing some anti-racist work obviously feminist work and very pro labour work, but this brought it home because it was now South Asians you know leading, and talking about this from a position of having been 'othered'. And that was very exciting, right. And it was everything, right? It wasn't just art on the stage, it was panel discussions so you were bringing together scholars, and academics, community activists, and organizers, and artists and then opening up to the floor so you had lots of robust discussion, and you know, arguments and dissenting voices, you know, but it was really, honing.

RKJ: Passion

SJ: A lot of passion yeah, and really honing that critical voice you know, what does it mean to, to try to change the world, and so there was lots of idealism. Idealism as well as a lot of people working really, really hard.

AM: It's interesting to think about the moment in time at which Desh kind of emerged, and what was happening politically, and also now that we're in a kind of post-9/11 time which is one factor, but one huge factor in terms of what rights mean what identity means. What, how we kind of experience the world. Do either of you have any thoughts what it would look like for something like Desh to emerge now...Is it possible, do you see anything like Desh?

RKJ: I have some other points about that, and it's coming from sort of the organizational aspect that I was involved in when I was coordinator in 1994 with Steve Pereira. I think what happened was that in that year was that it had to do with the fact that there were many articles written about you know, critiquing the idea of organizing around the South Asian identity and how that becomes a goal for itself. It was very new it was very exciting it was interesting and it was following you know a lot of academic theories of post-colonialism and post-modernism. And then what happened later on with Desh was that people kept saying it was irrelevant, like it was the same old thing year after year. If DP were to come together again it is about who comes to the table and who has the [15:00] vision. But I also think the structure of and the way that it's setup, and how it's organized could perhaps be something (that like the model could be something), which is thinking about a sort of sustainable organization opposed to a festival, which in many ways was always on the verge of collapsing. And I don't think that it had to with not being relevant, (and that's what people said). I think some was also infrastructure as well, that wasn't able to keep it in line with the politics I guess.

AM: So Rachel, can you tell me a little about what the infrastructure looked like? What did it looked like, you know I gathered that it grew from something smaller to something bigger, but what did the committee structure look like, how did that, how did it function internally? And did it function in such a way that the larger politics that represented were replicated internally, was there an effort to sort of have an Anti-Oppressive mandate? In terms of how people organized together? What was the kind of structure, and form that it took internally??

RKJ: Well, I was employed there for one year, as a co-coordinator, and the structure we had at that time was: there were two paid co-coordinators and there was a board of directors, as it was a non-profit organization, and there were different committees. There was a programming committee, there was a program called brick by brick. We didn't have membership at the time, but eventually membership was created where you would pay for a membership, and you would get certain rights to vote, and vote the board in.

RKJ: You had to be South Asian there were certain stipulations like that.

RKJ: The whole idea was to bring it together. And the other thing ...when you bring like-minded people together you know, there's a lot of energy and synergy that's going on right? So I think that was one of the strengths of DP, like all of a sudden it brought together people not only from Toronto locale, we were having people from you know, from the U.K., from Africa, from Fiji, right? From Australia…

RKJ: All over the world, coming to this and participating. We have RUNGH magazine in Vancouver, like across Canada. People who were very much invested I would say in the organization. So similarly when we were doing the programing too we'd have specific nights. There was a certain kind of passion and energy. And a distinctive-like 'feel' that we would have. But then there was the idea that it should be more integrated too.

AM: And in terms of identity you've both kind of mentioned identity obviously it's a big part of what Desh was about. Was there conversations internally about expanding Desh to include other artists of colour, was there a coalition building in terms of other artists of colour, have either of you

SJ: There's definitely coalition building, brick by brick, coalition building with First Peoples, Communities as well as other people of colour. I know that there was also solidarity between the union movement and certainly the artists collaborations were happening across ethno-racial lines

AM: Sheila, I'm interested in your perspective in terms of funding, because it was a particular time in terms of multi-cultural governement policy and things like that in terms of funding becoming available at the time you weren't working for the councils

SJ: No

SJ: It's actually it was the people, it was the community it was the urgency of needing to have a space for voices to come together to build something, to share, to do, to you know widen the discourse, to critique the discourse, to you know. That's what it was. Why it was special. And I think anybody who went through it, whoever you were, you laughed, you cried, you had you know, had bruises…

RKJ: (laughs)

SJ: And I don't mean physical bruises. So you know it's a difficult when you're in a very politically critical space because I think people are [25:00] trying to express a vision which was a critique of the capitalist, corporate, sexist, sort of society, the racist society that we lived in. So I think the community organizing and doing the work of carving out the space, that was really important. People saw the value in it. So, it was not created by funding at all.

RKJ: And while it was not created by funding (cuz the funding that they did get was mostly from the arts councils), the artistic component of DP was always really important, and that was quite unique to the other multicultural festivals. They were looking at contemporary art practices in terms of film, video, literature, and you know things like that so, … there was a bit of tension that happened once you know in the sense that DP was getting funding, was how much was political, looking at the art ...being shown, ...affected at times too.

SJ: I remember the early years it was very grassroots like we would go in and pick up people at the airport and they would billet at our houses – they would stay at our houses. I think if you had a group on stage it was like $300 flat fee no matter how many people were on stage - like if it was one person or 100 or something, you know it was very we wouldn't call them professional artists but we, but Desh always made an attempt to pay whoever was performing.

RKJ: And tons of volunteers to do, in kind donations and that was the other thing that Desh was part of the arts community so there were you know all the other artist run centres, film organizations and things like that, who you know, in our programs, co-sponsor these ads and stuff. With Mike Harris that change happened towards you know private sponsorship which Desh had a real problem philosophically embracing it, right? They weren't gonna be the 'Scotia Bank Desh Pardesh' or something like that which at the time was quite rare. But it (Desh) started growing for sure, and that's one of the problems that happened with Desh in terms of being able to sustain itself.

AM: Yeah, I'm actually wondering about that, because I noticed in the archives that policy that was drafted about corporate sponsorship and it was amazing to see because being in a time of austerity measures now similar conversations are happening. Do we have to be going to banks for sponsorship? Were you were you present Rachel for some of those conversations about corporate sponsorship and things like this where…
RKJ: I wasn't there no.

AM: Sheila, were you present for any of those conversations?

SJ: I'm pretty sure those conversations were happening and it was a very easy line cuz we were not going to do it, but you know looking through this catalogue also it reminds me of some of the stuff like the sexual assault prevention and it was a definitely a really good forum to talk about violence against women you know so you know, there's so many amazing things that you know

we were tackling right so, but yeah the corporate sponsorship thing, I think it was pretty much a consensus that we didn't wanna go that way ..yeah.

RKJ: And also, I don't think the skills have been developed in the organization for fundraising as well. Because there's other ways to fundraise, besides corporate. So I think that was unfortunately, that's one of the things that didn't allow Desh to be sustainable.

AM: Was the lack of fundraising like other creative fundraising?

AM: Yeah, things I had noticed in documents in going through the meeting minutes, and things like this and when I think to the sort of community organizing that's happening now, I think about the importance of documenting these histories for the sake of, first of all younger generations that are being aware of the work that went in what it means to hustle for something and what it means to actually have to really work at that. So [30:00], I would like to hear from you both about some lessons in terms of that you took from those experiences in terms of how to organize that way how to do? your community organizing, and how to do it artfully.

SJ: That's a difficult question, I mean just, thinking a lot about the art, the discussions, panels. There are a lot of connections with, you know like with shelters, with the shelter movement, like a lot of connections with the union, like a lot of connections so in terms of organizing it was very much a horizontal sort of organization. And then you know in terms of even selecting the artwork like I think in the early days I don't think we made any applications. They would just ask us to perform to go and perform, but then later because it had started growing there was a lot of, a lot of artists that wanted to be a part of, and so then I think we started having applications.

RKJ: There were calls.

SJ: Yeah like there were calls for submissions, and then there were applications, and we would discuss them and then we would try to fit them into whatever thematic evening was, yeah. But I think it was taken seriously, like in terms of every time I participated in committees like that you know...there were sometimes discussions, and differences, but my experiences are always have always been quite good. But again, I didn't take a leadership role. I had a lot of artwork whether it was performance or film or theatre on the stage. I consider myself very lucky in that way, and also just meeting everybody. Organizing was fantastic. We were also very progressive like we organized one panel on invisible disabilities, before disability was ever you know ever out there on the front lines.

SJ: Yeah Ali Kazimi's film, we talked about Dalits and the issues nobody wanted to talk about. I mean not at DP, but the wider South Asian community didn't want to talk about that, and there was also some resistance to talking about caste, you know it wasn't a new world problem. It was an Indian problem, right. So things like that I think you know, we dove into those issues, so I'm going way off track not actually talking about organizing, but those organizing within those things were really important.

RKJ: But I think what Sheila was kind of also alluding to, in order for them to do that, there were these huge networks that were happening, like they were back in the… There were academics that came onto the committees, there were artists, there were people had like dual roles like someone could be an artist and an academic, they were in the union. So what happened was you had this amazing synergy. So today if someone were to organize that means they have all kinds of tools to communicate. but the thing you know, ??? like that, but the thing that happened was that there was that network of ideas happening you know in all the different spheres, and it came together.

RKJ: I think I told you when we had the South Asian women's exhibition there was the article, a printed article in Rungh, but basically, you know, some pushing back as the heterosexual male who wasn't a woman, that he had no place at DP. You know, so those dialogues were fine. The point is that they were still common.

RKJ: Value to the all the things that we're doing, and the discussion and then there would be writing about it

SJ: People performing, people contributing to the panels, people having the skills to set up the organizations, people having the skills to critique it, you know all those things are really important.

AM: And how did you make those decisions? Did you operate on consensus per committee...did you...How did that work?

SJ: It was, I remember it was always consensus was the model. It was a consensus model

RKJ: Yeah.

SJ: But you know I think there were people who were very visionary as well we're talking about committees and stuff. There were specific people who were leaders and you know at times one would defer in some ways right, and to that was that kind of leadership.

AM: That's interesting. So within a consensus model there might be, might be someone whose opinion who would have a certain amount of weight.

SJ: Bearing, yeah. I think that's true. Usually there's somebody who has a strong opinion about something they'll express it and then other people will listen and some may disagree, but then in the end could kind of come up with something. That's okay because people bring different perspectives, different histories, different knowledge. They can be obviously people have different knowledge when we come to the table and for a lot of people it was the first foray into actually learning about these very poignant and personal important histories, and issues right? I think a lot of people sort of… what's the word? Came,

RKJ: and developed during…

SJ: Yeah. It was initiation for a lot of young people, young South Asian people

AM: Like a kind of political consciousness-raising?

SJ: Yeah. Totally political conscious-raising that's what it was.

AM: mmh-hmm, what a special thing...I (laughs)

SJ: Yeah

AM: I'm envious I have to say.

SJ: Well it's like the 60's, people have those consciousness-raising sessions except we'd be doing it over planning a festival. Like there was a goal in mind.

AM: mm-hmm, Sheila can you tell me a highlight, some highlights, and whether it was performances or moments of, some highlights during your time there.

RKJ: A friend of mine who does dance. And the kind of dance, is a mix of Indian Bharatanatyam. It's also very contemporary and she said that she doesn't have a venue for it. So this was a perfect place for her to experiment, to show her work. To me I thought that was very great that Desh provided that.

AM: so kind of like a fusion or some sort of fusion

RKJ: And for many people that's what it provided as well.

SJ: as a great place for young novelists to start out like Shyam Selvadurai, Funny Boy. That was really great.

RKJ: There was a film, 'Something like a War'.

SJ: Yeah. What's her name? I met her in India. I can't remember her name. The film, and it was on one of those nights, (laughs) one of those days, was in a separate program but it brought some amazing works of art, works of social, and political commentary to the forefront so that was about the control of women's bodies, and sterilization, forced sterilization and population control, right.

RKJ: Oh here, 'Something like a War'. Beyond Bollywood. Yeah, Deepa Dhanraj.

SJ: Yeah Deepa Dhanraj was

RKJ: Exposé on population control program.

SJ: You know that was amazing when Meena Alexander came on stage with her doc martens, and her sari
RKJ: So you had those visuals of…

SJ: You had those little moments…I played with Ravi Naimpali and Ian D'Souza.

RKJ: But the thing is you know what Sheila's saying was that there was so many opportunities. There was the launch of SamiYoni magazine. Like there's all these opportunities where all these people do you know do a magazine, put out that play. You had this real nice mix of you know emerging, and established and that was great. You had work that was coming from local, and as well as work coming from afar you know. There are these very strong documentaries …(?) 'In the Name of God'.

SJ: Ananya that was another person with that dance group Ananya…

RKJ: Chatterjee

SJ: Thank you, you have good memory.

RK: She's a very strong feminist dancer. Dance slash academic so she had all those discussions outdoors as well performances, and panels and discussions.

AM: what about maybe I'll start with Rachel, what about challenges that you experienced that you feel like talking about, like experiences through Desh for SAVAC in terms of the organizing.

RKJ: [45:00] I think that one of the strengths of Desh (and maybe it isn't, I'm not sure) was the fact that people had a really strong connection with it. That it felt like, you know, this was a family, in a sense right? …a certain ownership/investment in it. And therefore there were a lot of expectations of the organizations, and sometimes that expectation was that you owed me, right? So that's a difficult thing, and it's not totally just you know, unique to organizations like Desh, and SAVAC. But I think what happens there is that then you have to have a good sort of way of dealing with any fallout that happens, whether it's personal, political or whatever. Cuz people do feel like if there's any kind of breach with those organizations, like they feel like they lost their family you know, it's quite emotional. So I think that in terms of infrastructure perhaps there was you know ways to deal with that, but same time the more you build infrastructure, the more institutionalized it feels, and it doesn't have the same kind of feel so I think that's a challenge for finding the right kind of staff that had the skills. Because it was so much. It wasn't just like skills and running an organization. It was also you know, understanding the politics you know having the politics, and the depth of understanding that was required. So when I came in I was like, you

know, quite new. I think I came in 1994. Like I said, one of the reasons I feel that I was hired, mainly much for those you know, organizational skills, business skills, because I certainly didn't have the political skills behind me. So you know, Desh looking for those human resources was a big part of sustaining the organization I would say, that you know…

AM: Sheila, what sorts of challenges

SJ: Some people were there because they were attracted to political vision, political and community organizing. And some people were there because more of the art practice. And some people were there because it was a good place to pick up people. There's all those things you know and I think sometimes those things were in conflict. And because of the investment, like you say, people thought they were owed something. But I think people were thoroughly invested in it because a lot of people volunteered their time and as you said thought it was home right. I'll give you an example of the 'you feel like you owe'. Sometimes you know you feel like you're owed something. I think it was 1994 and Desh was doing an insular kind of event cuz it went from a festival of 3 or 4 days to doing some of these events throughout the year. So there was a call out and people had to make an application. And all of a sudden it went from - you were asked because you were part of the community, or you could say I'd like to do this thing on stage, and they'd just say yeah, sure that sounds great. So it went from that, to actually having to do an application. It was that kind of thinking to why should I put an application in because you know I've been at every festival and doing something at every festival. But then, I really wanted to do something at this event and so my, my, you know my strange creative mind started working. So I said I'm gonna put my application in under a pseudonym and that's how 'Jimmy Susheel' was born because I didn't wanna apply under Sheila James, and have someone reject me because how could I be rejected by DP? It would feel so awful, right? So I put my alter ego, Jimmy Susheel in to apply to perform at this event. And I think that they knew who I was, when you're on the committee. But that does speak to my point of view, my sense of ownership...wondering 'why should I have to do this?' I think you know the feeling was there for a lot of people. But [50:00] also the necessity is there to move into those kind of formalized processes as the organization expanded. We couldn't just be in someone's apartment you know….you know, folding flyers or you know what I mean. So it did more than change, and always when an organization goes through change, there are pains. There are people that go with it, and people that kind of resist it, people that lifted those necessary transformational moments.

RKJ: Another big challenge was, you know in the spirit of what we're talking about, was when Desh was going under, there were very few people who came out and supported it. And yet later on they would say 'oh, I wish Desh was still here' you know. I was there helping to do the fundraising so that year we did a big auction. We earned, I believe, it was over $10,000 dollars. It was a lot you know...mixed up if you look at the ...they never did fundraising before, and we donated all that money to Desh, and we asked for like you know, people to help you know with donations, and stuff. There were a lot of question marks, and a lot of, you know, waiting to see

what happened. So basically, when Desh was doing well, lots of people would you know, jump on the bandwagon, and this is not just this organization, that's just normal human nature.

SJ: Maybe it's interesting you know, sometimes it also has to do with that trajectory right like what it was at this point, and what it was at this point. So maybe at that end point, people had already, you know what I mean, investment had changed.

RKJ: Yeah, I think there was burnout for sure. Yeah, there was that sense of it wasn't what it used to be...rose tinting going on. Because here, questions the kind of organizing. So everyone had different reasons to why it was relevant and wasn't. It was the fact of systemic racism, and all these problems still. There are so many problems. And these are great forums for you know, as Sheila was saying for dealing with sexual assault, dealing with disability, dealing with you know, issues of the day…that are not solved, unfortunately will be there for a long time.

SJ: I think we need more organizations like this.

RKJ: I totally think we do.

SJ: And having art that is unapologetically political is very rare. I mean it's still being done, like documentary filmmakers do it very well. But to actually have the space like that, it would be very relevant, and so that's my vote for whoever wants to take it up (laughing). But you know you have to make an application to get funding.

AM: So maybe one of the last questions I have for you, actually, how do you think that Desh – let's start with you, Sheila – how do you think that Desh made you as, as an artist, an arts administrator, all of your different hats.

SJ: Definitely had a huge influence as an artist, and as a social activist and political activist. As an artist I had a lot of opportunities. I also was stretched because I would got to Desh and see a film, and think "oh I think I want to make a film" and I would do it, right? We were involved in that South Asian Sisters in Solidarity, that was a little theatre piece. There's always that possibility of new forms, right. And then, in terms of activism, you know, I was very, very much identified as a feminist, but it just made me stretch in so many ways, like it deepened my understanding, especially with, around, sort of more anti-imperialism and kind of connecting those histories, the history of South Asia with the history of the diaspora. And you know, I never thought about fundamentalism until I went to Desh Pardesh, and I learned about all of that. So it was very much a deepening of experience artistically and politically for me. As far as an arts administrator I had no inclination to go that way, so it didn't influence me in that way at all. That was later.

AM: What about you, Rachel?

RKJ: For me, a lot of it had to do with my personality and my role as an artist. So I was very much in my own kind of world. So when I joined Desh – and this has very much to do with Sheila, who got me a job in the Company of Sirens, which was a feminist theatre company, and she got Sharon Fernandez, who helped me get my illustrations out in sort of a feminist press that she was involved in, and you know the Women's Art Show. So it got me out of my shell kind of thing. And it introduced me to this whole world of artists and activists and ideas and histories that I would never have probably have indulged in as much… I would've been in my little corner. So for me that very much influenced the kind of work that I made after that. You know, I say in my artist's statement to this day that I was inspired by South Asian heritage and my immigrant history because that's the overall sort of perspective and history that I'm taking it from, and it gave me the opportunity to meet like-minded people, and learn new things. And it also created that network, and through that network there were the artists that got together and created SAVAC. And it was felt even with Desh, visual arts was sort of off to its own and no one would go to the visual arts show, it was sort of off to the side or something. But we got our little group together and we were very much into the visual arts, and it was very much important to sort of have that in the visual arts group and you learned all those skills of how to apply for a grant, and how to talk about your work, and how to support each other, and how to get opportunities, so you know that was really important for my development as an artist. And I ended up taking over the management – the growth of SAVAC and what it meant was that idea that many of the issues that we were dealing with at Desh Pardesh, we were able to tackle that at SAVAC with the idea of systemic racism and with visual artists having access. And so many artists have come through SAVAC. And one of the things I do wonder is why other organizations didn't follow that sort of, structure and create these kinds of organizations to help.

SJ: You mean like SAVAC?

RKJ: Yeah, I mean SAVAC. And like Desh, too, because you know, we were able to benefit from the fact that because of Desh we had a certain amount of credibility for one thing, and even after that we were able to enter that world of the artist centres. Like, we were able to be taken within a certain program, and we were one of the first there. And you know, there's not many, considering how many artists of colour there are. And some people would say it's irrelevant if you say, I'm not an Asian artist, I'm an artist, but you can only do that up to a certain point because the reality is there and really, it is about the resources and the access and the opportunity in the face of-

SJ: I wanna say one more thing about Desh which was really important too, because I know within the South Asian diaspora there's all these different waves of people and issues, and different ways that people relate to issues – one of the really interesting things that happened as well, was, the highlighting of various groups and issues when they arose. So for instance, you know, the civil war in Sri Lanka, and a lot of the issues of the Tamil women. So there was this small Tamil women's group, it also brought in people who were very new to Canada and having gone through very violent experiences of war, and it also gave a voice to a lot of people who were living that and articulation to some of the political complexities around that. And that's

something that also gets forgotten in the mix, you know, some of those things that are really important.

RKJ: And that's sort of what was also part of the second wave of SAVAC was the immigration that happened from Pakistan. We had all these artists that came in. So they've not, you know, faced civil war but there's still the thing as an immigrant to certain countries. It's very hard to get involved and into the system so it's like you know, people like Tazeen Faisal, and Riaz. All these artists who could contribute almost right off the bat of arriving and having opportunities. And we did it by you know, creating those networks. And they can be as limited as just about artwork, or can be as broad and rich and diverse as Desh was.

AM: and some of those people are still around

RKJ: That's right.

AM: And it sounds like so many moments of amazing feminist moments of organizing… that's what I'm hearing a lot from both of you, and so much like, sisterhood, and women working together, and obviously there was a mix, gender-wise, but it sounds like such amazing feminist work to me, and like that gives me shivers, actually. Is there anything else that either of you would like to say about Desh that we didn't talk about, or

SJ: No, but I like what you said, I think there's a lot of credit to the founding members and the people who sort of moved through it and there's so many people, and yeah.

RKJ: And there were so many, like you said. The networks were all these different organizations like the Women's Bookstore, and there were so many organizations that supported us.

SJ: What are you gonna do now, are you going to start a Desh Pardesh?

AM: I, I'm curious as to whether – cause, a couple of people said wouldn't it be wonderful if we could put on another Desh, and I'm curious as to whether there's enough interest across the board if people want to do that and

RKJ: Well you know that Desh had spawned off many other sort of, you know there was Diasporadics in New York, there was Art Wallah in LA, many organizations like that, but nothing was ever like Desh, was it?

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 029 – Interview with Sharon Fernandez

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Sharon Fernandez (SF)

Interview Date: 27/11/2014
Interview Location: Conducted in-person in Ottawa, ON.

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AM: Okay if you could kind of describe to me a bit in what capacity you were involved with Desh, vaguely, it doesn't have to be exact dates but around when? and in what capacity?

SF: Okay I was part of the women of colour community in Toronto in 1985 and was involved with Desh in 1988 when it did its first event at the 519 community centre. I think it was called Salaam Toronto…I can't remember, like I said its 20 years ago, right? So, but I think thats what it was, When I was in the grassroots women of colour, there were not a lot of women of colour at that time that were South Asian that were very visible, it was me and Punam—sorry no not Punam, Prabha was in Vancouver at the time, there was me and Prabha Khosla that were involved with women of colour, mainly black women, caribbean women and some south east asian women.

AM: Okay and kind of throughout the time that you were involved, what was it that drew you to Desh, how were you first involved, kind of you were involved with Salaam Toronto in the first iteration of it— where you kind of involved with the Khush people?

SF: Yeah, we were very marginal at the time in Toronto and were in the left feminist communities— the more progressive communities where you were able to fit in a little bit was really white. So the women of colour, women like myself, that were activists or gay, we would be drawn to connecting with the men of colour over at Khush, it was a way to be part of a community, so you know thats what we did at that time we didn't have a lot of options. you know we were either in the lesbian and gay community —which was pretty white, and we were in the feminist communities that was pretty white, so we did try to go to, you know, women of colour communities where we could feel more at home and we did.

AM: Mhmm.

SF: And it was an era, you got to remember the 80s, it was a very progressive time, a lot of movements had occurred there was a lot of opening up across the board, you cant take Desh out of context, there was a huge context there of anti-racism, progressive left movements, you know. Desh came out of all of those movements— you know in the 70s all the AIDS activism and lesbian and gay rights and things like that, and also Desh was also an arts festival, so also in the

arts there was a lot of challenges for artists of colour— in the arts and cultural communities because it was also so incredibly dominant white cultures. The other thing that was very important also was that there was a lot of racism I don't know if you remember but, there was — and you know its a very interesting time now where we are back to— you know the more things change the more they stay the same, we have a shooting in Ferguson of a young black man and when Desh was formed in 1992— you know Desh started in 1988 informally and then went on for 13 years and it became more formalized and it got NGO status and then it became a cultural institution but part of it came out of the Yonge Street Riots. The Yonge street riots were tied to the shooting of Dudley George, no Wade Lawson (full name: Michael Wade Lawson), and then three or four years later there was the shooting of Dudley George an aboriginal man, as well as Rodney King and so we had race riots in the street as well at that time with the Yonge street riots, so all of these things the kind of racism we experienced as well as the activism and the progressive openings around— so you get this kind of complex situation where its opening up but also, you know strong racist undertones.

AM: So what intervention do you think Desh made into that context?

[00:05:52]

SF: Well I mean, Desh was like a platform. All of a sudden we had a stage, we had a place so the minority could create a platform for people to have voice, for people to be visible, for people to be creative, to be producers, to self express, to interact to be excited, to build from a sense of passion and compassion, you know, you have a very— you know as I said once in a talk you have a very alchemical situation. Alchemy transforms — alchemy is about a container which is community and then the individual expressing themselves, expressing their deeper selves. You know, working through these deeper identities working through the little boxes people put you in, whether you're gay or whether you're lesbian and really, your identity is so multiple and so situational. And you know even though Desh, is a very interesting paradox and kind of an irony — you know it starts as this very singular lesbian and gay thing but it manifests in this very multifarious, multidimensional situationally fluid kind of a process because in a way Toronto was like that, Toronto itself was multidimensional you know, you had white feminists, you had black activists, you had aboriginal activists — you had this whole blend of people that were really progressive and you also had all these artists. So, Desh was kind of unique in that way but you can't take Desh out of the context. I don't think Desh could have happened in New York lets say, or in Mumbai or in any other place, it had to happen in a place like Toronto where, people lived in a kind of interactive way and I mean if you look at myself, you know South Asian but I was hanging out in, the Caribbean community of colour, the women of colour that were Caribbean, so I wasn't just hanging out in east asian or South Asian, so you know that kind of mixing, that kind of openness and that kind of possibility allowed Desh to flourish. Its complex, is what I'm trying to get at, so thats why I'm saying if you're doing an oral history of Desh you can't just talk to South Asians because even though it was about South Asian identity, fundamentally it was not about South Asian identity. It was and it wasn't. It played out where it was talking about South Asian stories but every story had so many identities in it, that it was and

it wasn't. Okay so, even though I cant give you precise details about that time, like I said 20 years ago, you know is a long time ago.

AM: I'm curious about what you were doing in your life at that time, did you have an art practice what was your— were you doing community organizing? like you were talking about the women of colour movement, like what else was happening around you at that time and in your life?

SF: Well, it was a feminist period, you know it was the period of Audre Lorde, it was you know, it was a very challenging and exciting time for women of colour. I was involved with the Toronto Women's Bookstore, I was part of a collective, so I was involved in pushing the boundaries to include more women of colour at the Toronto Women's Bookstore but you're also part of a community that is supporting you to do those kinds of things, no one does anything on their own, they are standing on histories, on legacies, on sacrifices that other men and women of colour have made. So in Toronto I was an activist, involved in the writing community and the women of colour writing community and there was a journal called Fireweed that was doing a lot of ground breaking work in terms of including women of colour that were involved and that were pushing the envelope in that journal and there was the Women's Press there were a lot of people pushing the envelope at the women's press—so I was involved in the women's community really, and the lesbian community that was mainly white at the time and in literature in terms of the Women's Bookstore. So I was kind of like a grassroots-y activist and you went where you felt you belonged, thats why I was there. I was a woman of colour, I was a lesbian, thats where I felt at home, so thats what I was doing. I was also kind of an artist, I wasn't formally trained as an artist but I did a lot of posters, and different things for Mayworks for example, for International Women's Day and Refugee Women, my work was always tied to politics, my poster work and postcards were tied to political movements, so the work was always tied to politics.

AM: So can you talk a little bit about the ways Desh wove art and politics and social justice — I mean clearly it had a social justice underpinning, how did, how was that all woven together?

SF: Well, the politics were the politics we were living. So we were resisting, we were resisting marginalization, we were resisting racism, we were resisting lack of inclusion, we were resisting all these things at the same time that other folks were also resisting. So, how Desh wove this in was just how we lived on the streets and Desh wove this by being really inclusionary. So we had community forums at Desh Pardesh called Brick By Brick which involved Aboriginal communities, which involved migrant workers, which involved workers who worked across class lines, Desh worked across gender lines, it worked across orientations so it worked in this kind of funny complex kind of a way, and part of it was that okay— if you go into the middle of where Desh was in its history— okay lets say 1992, when it got funding to become this little arts organization. It had a board, but then it had all these committees so in total you had about 40 or 50 people coming from the community that participated on— the theatre community, the writing community, the music community, the video community, committees I mean, sorry, they shaped the programming so when you have that many people shaping the programming then you have

so much diversity of opinion and perspective and differences in identities that shape a festival that, the politics comes through that.diversity The politics also in that period, in the 80s and 90s, a lot of artists of colour were doing really radical political work, you know in terms of film and writing because it was a period where people were really really excluded, and there was a lot of racism. So, because of that the work that was included in the program and because of how the mandates were shaped, because it was a radical politic at that time, and the vision was a radical feminist vision— I would say, but you know many people may disagree with me, but that shaped the kind of programming that happened. So if the program is this kind of edgy, interesting diverse — you know the moment you bring people from across the the country, across the globe, you're going to get something really really spectacular. Right? And especially if its coming from the margin, because the margin is always where you have those mirrors of truth. You know, its not something that has already shape shifted into this mainstream, you know watered down on a slippery slope of something else — at the margins you have the raw materials. So, in that sense thats how Desh did it, while art was at the heart of it, more so than identity politics, even though it was a period of identity politics, creativity and radical feminist politic was at the heart of it.

[00:15:05]

AM: So what were some of the issues that were being talked about?

SF: Well—

AM: And performed, and you know through he caucuses whether it was through the caucuses or performances —

SF: Now, you're asking me something that was 20 years ago so I'm not going to be able to give you exact; but I'll tell you—

AM: it doesn't have to be specifics—

SF: A lot of it was, I mean, a lot of it was discussions around identity, for one,? Cause if you're diasporic, or if you're coming from the Caribbean or if you're coming from India, you have a very different identity from each other even though you were South Asian,? So, identity was an issue, , AIDS was an issue, social justice was an issue, feminism was an issue, racism — all of these different topics, you know, class was an issue, um Canadian identity, third generation Canadians that was an issue. So there was all different kinds of aspects of what it means to grow up in Canada…with this lesbian and gay identity and South Asianness and this whole other diasporic context. The other thing about Desh is that Desh was fun. You know that was one thing, the reason it was so subscribed to was because it had this sort of wonderful, charismatic, sexy energy and that energy came from the fact that there was a lot of power there. When you bring people together you have power. So, you know that fun and that excitement attracted a lot of people and not just South Asian people, I mean Desh was a magnet…everybody came to Desh. You know anybody that was anybody in Toronto came to Desh.

AM: Can you tell me a bit more about Brick By Brick?

SF: Um, Brick By — you should ask Deena Ladd about Brick by Brick if you're gonna interview her, and Punam Khosla and maybe Steve Pereira, because you know I wasn't so involved— I was a part in certain aspects but I wasn't at the core of the programming on the committees I was on…i played many roles. But Brick By Brick was a community forum where you were trying to build alliances and cross cultural coalitions because you needed to do that in Toronto. When your communities are more marginal and you don't have the institutional structures — let me give you an example, the example I talked about before ….Wade Lawson, or the shooting of Dudley George , from these incidents people came together, TCAR for example, Toronto Coalition Against Racism, I think there were 52 organization involved in that — white organizations and all kinds of organizations, Brick By Brick was like that, it was coalition building around issues that effect us in our day to day. That was the thing about Desh, it was very about real time, it was very pertinent.

AM: I'd love for you to reflect on some of the kind of challenges that Desh— that you faced within Desh or that Desh faced, whether it was because of the political climate, whether it was because of how difficult it was to organize a festival, what were the challenges Desh faced?

SF: Initially Desh, you know Desh just burgeoned. It was a seed that was there at just the right time in the right place and you know it got watered and it just blossomed. It just bloomed and then when you talk about challenges, you know some of us are very tantric and I'm going to say some of us but I'm talking about myself really. So we have perspective on life that is very circular, about things growing and then fading and I think if you want to talk about challenge, when Desh was in its sunset phase, you know the phase of coming and fading the challenges may have been that it was a right wing government and the environment wasn't so open and the funding was cut because those were the kind of normal challenges that would happen. When you say the challenges, its a complicated question because challenge was instrumental to Desh, when we went into Desh, we never knew what would happen in the five days. How many people would be fighting, how many people there would be speaking out, what kind of tensions there would be, what kinds of people saying whatever on stage or not on stage— you know it was open, risky and very challenging but that was what made Desh, Desh. Is that people could talk respectfully but disagree and have different opinions and be critical and have some kind of reflexive criticality and if you don't have criticality then nothing can move or shift or— and if you don't have passion then nothing can move or shift either. Nothing changes without some kind of force, whether that force is for the good or for the bad, you know what I mean? So, when you say challenge, I would say that the challenges were that you were dealing with difference and difference is always challenging but that is what allows democracy to flourish, when you have those differences colliding because you have to deal with each other, and if there is a dialogue there is always room to move within that, you don't degenerate into you know camps and polarizations. So, challenge is a very important aspect and that kind of — but if you're talking about the larger context of the times, yes there were challenges, in terms of the times

getting more regressive and restrictive and Mike Harris, that blanket thing that happened, but Desh could have weathered all of that, I think that the energy began to dissipate…i think it had its time and it came and it went but some of— and I write about this in the piece I did for the Canadian Journal of Communications, some of it was that Desh, the politics shifted— that we became perhaps more complacent, we became less edgy, we had won some battles we began to get included, you know we fought battles to get doors open and maybe some doors opened and we walked in and then after that you become less…you're less….you've won the battle that you were trying to fight and you're less sharp, maybe I don't know. all I know is that we are in a different time but a lot of those challenges are still there.

AM: So can you talk — you mentioned a cyclical, the idea of things being cyclical, can you talk a bit more about that in relation to Desh's existence over time. So sort of like, in your mind was it kind of a necessary moment that Desh ended because it was part of a cycle or could it have kept going?

SF: It could not have kept going in the same way. You know, because yes I think Desh had a moment, it was vibrant, it was fantastic, it blossomed, it supported, it nurtured, it you know defended because it was very activist in terms of defending a lot of the issues that were on the table at that time and it allowed for this wonderful creativity but it could have gone on — but it would have to be different because it was different people. Because Desh was that kind of transforming, continuously evolving thing. So yeah. We're in a different time now, now its all on the internet so. I don't know if you can have another Desh, you can have something else but not a Desh.

AM: Can you talk a bit about some of the highlight from your time there, whether it was in your experiences in doing the organizing or int erms of the artists who came —

SF: I'm going to be very shallow now and say my highlights were all the parties at Desh (laughs) but you have to understand, we were marginal people of colour, you know for us to have that space to celebrate and to have fun, and to see other lesbians and gays and people from all around the world come out to our parties and to dance and you know those were some of the highlights — you know I'm just being silly by saying that but, I think if you ask a lot of people what they remember, they remember the parties at Desh but they also remember the art. The films, the readings from those writers, and the other thing that I remember is the audiences, we were such a vibrant audience, it was such a mixed audience, there were straight people, there were gay people, professors, musicians, journalists, parents, young people — so the multiplicity of identities in the room created this kind of energy that was not to be missed. You didn't want to miss a Desh event, in the early days it was just a not to be missed event, because everything about Desh was exciting— for me anyway. And partly because at that time we did not have a lot of things like that, we were starved in a certain way for venues and platforms and places. And remember Desh was very unique, because it was so international, we had people that were programming and showing films that came from India, that came from Trinidad, that came from London, that came from all over the world, Malaysia, so that is exciting, that's pretty exciting

and their art was like this world class art that is put on stage and at the same time you had local art, you had local poets, you had poets from all across the country. So in that sense, those were some of the highlights…you know it was a lot of hard work but when you're passionate about something the work doesn't seem that hard, because you're also connecting with people, so it was a lot of fun. I don't know if you will hear that from others

[00:26:40]

AM: Definitely, yeah definitely. Well kind of the…also the fun was in the festival but also in the organizing itself. You've kind of mentioned a little bit about the — working with other artists of colour and Desh not being this homogenous identity. Can you talk a little more about coalition building and the role that Desh played in building coalitions with other artists of colour and activists?

SF: Okay, because like I said its a long time ago, I think what you need to go back to the programming and see the kind of diversity of programming that took place at Desh and the inclusion of issues. The thing about Desh was that it was a festival but as it grew, throughout the year it did programming, so you need to look at that and look at the relationships, the networks that were built up between a lot of mainstream players and Desh Pardesh. You know, as well as, sponsors like women's studies, like social policy councils, like AIDS groups, the kind of different coalitions that Desh built, the kind of networks that were created. Because when Desh, the festival happened we had maybe between 2000, 3000 volunteers, you know we had a lot of volunteers that wanted to be part of Desh at the time, as it grew and as more and more South Asians in Toronto grew .. as you know in 1988 as I said, I was one of two lesbians that was South Asian that was visible, visible, that went out in a community of lesbians and gays, there could have been thousands of South Asian lesbians out there that we did not know about but those in that day, in terms of being active, and being out and being out, there was just me and Prabha and Punam over in Vancouver, but it was just me and Prabha. In terms of coalition building, when you have that sort of social justice framework that is very diasporic remember, we didn't just base it in the local, we were very local but we were very very diasporic, and looked at issues across the board. So that kind of left politic necessitates coalition building, you know? And at different moments in that trajectory, Desh had a 7-year trajectory

AM: We'll just pause for a second.

(phone continues to ring, and then turns off)

AM: so you were just talking about coalition building and then right at the end what were you saying?

SF: Something about…

AM: Well you were talking about being —

SF: Diasporic?

AM: Yeah, diasporic, you had just been talking about there not being many South Asian lesbians out…well you were saying it wasn't just a local thing…

SF: Yeah, well I was saying that that kind of coalition building happened because of our lived experiences— what was happening on the street with us, you know when there were incidents we would all come together because we had to, cause if you didn't come together, you could not effect any kind of change, you couldn't be present, you couldn't go out to a march you know what I mean? so coalition building was kind of a necessity, we were very much in real time at that period because— like what I was trying to say was that we were so little, so few of us, that we had to build coalitions. Like for me, I was a lesbian but I had to go to Khush, if I wanted to do something different than out in the white mainstream lesbian community, I had to go to Khush because it felt comfortable, it felt interesting, it felt funny you know? It was fun. So, we didn't have a choice in some ways and then also we were motivated but this kind of politic of social justice. I mean you can call it left or whatever, but it was really about social justice and dignity for all.

AM: I'm interested also in— so we've kind of talked about for sure a lot of the kind of impacts within, but what kind of ripple effects do you think Desh had upon…because it became quite a well known festival, it was as you're saying, a lot of people would come, what kind of change do you think Desh brought to the kind of art scene in Toronto?

SF: Desh…brought access …for example Shyam Selvadurai you know he is now a leading Canadian author, I mean he started at Desh. So you know it created a space for all these emerging and artists that had not had that access to be on the mainstream, on a main stage, or get that kind of visibilty… what Desh did was it brought a kind of legitimacy, because it was covered by mainstream press, it was covered by the arts community and a lot of mainstream people came to Desh. So you got exposure, you got a platform to get up and read your work. So I mean Desh had great impact…I mean Desh could only happen in Toronto from my perspective, like you said it influenced a lot of people, because what it did was replicated in the US. In New York, in California, I don't know if it was in San Francisco or Los Angeles where they started to try and do similar Desh forums, they started their own version of a kind of multi-disciplinary festival, arts festival based on South Asian identity. So Desh had a huge impact, but it had an impact at so many different levels, not just on the artists or on the arts community because of creating this platform and saying to the arts community and saying look we're just as good as you, if not better, some of us, so its time to sit up and take notice, but also the activism, the young activists that got nurtured in that space, you came into that space and it was a political space. I mean the truth is all our lives are political if we want to ignore it we can and pretend that it doesn't exist that politics don't exist but for some of us who are at the margins we feel it a lot more so we know it exists, so it gave room for that kind of young activist to celebrate and to also be affirmed and it also dealt with issues and supported issues and you got to talk about issues,

you know? In that sense it had all those different kinds of impacts. Who can say what the impacts are in a certain sense? It informs your whole sense of who you are so how can I tell you really? If I was a young South Asian lesbian, in one of these suburbs and I never had access to lesbians and gays and I come into Desh how can I tell you what it means to me, you know what I mean? the impacts, some of the impacts are so unknown, while some are quite known, I mean Desh created that kind of space for people to connect, to gain access. It crated a space for people to resist, it created a space for people to be proud, you know to gain legitimacy to be seen as very exciting, the work that was showcased —people came for that. It was interesting work.

[00:35:41]

AM: Now I know you just said that it might be hard to sum up, but can you reflect in some of the ways that Desh shaped you?

SF: Umm…i guess its very difficult to say how Desh shaped you, you know in so many ways it gave you access—it shaped me in that I had access to a community, and you know communities are not these generic, wonderful things, communities are fraught, contentious difficult entities, but within that difficulty there is a lot of possibility for growth. So, I appreciated that ability to grow, that ability to enjoy, that ability to work, because Desh was a lot of work, so you gained a lot of skills too, organizing is you know, a difficult thing, so Desh shaped me in that it helped me get a lot of different skills in terms of organizing, and doing things in a grassroots kind of way with very little funds, doing big huge events, you know. It gave me also a platform, there are many times that I went out on stage and spoke. So, so, in many different ways—you know Desh gave me some wonderful memories as well. So when you say how does it shape you, I cant really give you a coherent answer—it was not just Desh that shaped me, my identity was never just South Asian lesbian, I never was that fixed, I always had a very situational, fluid identity Even though I would go into one space and identify with it, and be part of it, it wasn't just Desh that shaped me personally, I'm sure that Desh did shape a lot of people but for me, it was the whole women of colour, especially black women, that really shaped me more than lets say, Desh. Desh was just this wonderful add on to something that helped to shape me, but if you were to ask me, was it a South Asian mentor that gave you the way you thought or you know — Desh afforded all of that because we had all kinds of people at Desh but I would say it was Audre Lorde and she's a black lesbian feminist, so that the complexity of Desh.

AM: Final question is about lessons learned, so if you were to take some lessons from the organizing, from the work, and take it forward into today, then what would some of the lessons be? About how to do something like this well, about how to organize this well, how to work in community well?

SF: Well I think you have to be where the energy is. You can't create something out of a desire or wish or something in your head, you've got to go to the ground where the energy is. And you know, Desh came out of a resistance to isolation, right, the Khush boys, they felt that they wanted to reach in and reach out and that's why they started Desh. And they wanted to have fun

too. And then it morphed into some other things. So if you want to ask me about a lesson learned I would say you have to go to where people are feeling the need to resist, and there within that, use the arts, use community and use heterogeneity because that complexity of being heterogenous — that is what gave Desh the strength it had. You know even though it was South Asian like I said, even though it was about gay identity, even though it seemed like it was in a box, it did not act like it was in a box and that was its strength. So that is a lesson, never do anything that tries to give you this very limited window into who you are, because you're so much more and its so much more complex, and its so contextual, and its so fluid, that you couldn't do it unless you created a framework that was as multidimensional as Desh did. And it allowed so many voices, and so many perspectives to shape the content and to shape the stories and you know I mean we have that now, happening with the internet, right? if you look at the internet and you look at open source and you look at all of these different ways, maker and myspace and whatever, its all about people, collectively shaping, using their narratives to shape something.

[00:41:22]

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 031 – Interview with Shelly Bahl

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Shelly Bahl (SB)

Interview Date: 17/11/2015
Interview Location: Conducted on Skype with Shelly (based in Brooklyn, NY).

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AM: Okay. So Shelly, I gather that you were involved primarily with the visual arts collective as part of Desh Pardesh. Primarily as it became SAVAC. Can you tell me a little bit about. I know it was a long time ago but even just the years that you were involved and the kind of involvement that you had.

SB: Okay. Um. I think the very first year that a visual art exhibition was organized (0:00:56) at Desh Pardesh was in 1993. That was the year that I first participated as an artist. My contact was Sharon Fernandez. I head about Desh Pardesh and I was in my last year in the BFA program at York University. Somehow, I can't remember now how I was mentioned with Sharon. 'Yeah, I'm an emerging artist' 'Do you want to participate?' So, that was my very first and I wasn't really involved with organizing the exhibition but I was a participating artist. (0:01:39). That first time. I believe it was summer of 1993.

AM: Okay, the first one you were a participating artist is what you said? Okay. And so kind of following off of that, how did you become more involved with the collective.

SB: So at that time, I participated on the exhibition, I attended related Desh Pardesh activities, programs, and then that summer I left for New York for the first time. I was doing my Masters at NYU also in studio arts. And so, I wanted to be more involved. So, I stayed in touch and basically wanted to propose activities and programming. I think the following year there was another exhibition but I was in New York, I didn't participate in it. But, I had said that I wanted to do some sort of programming. So, I believe in 1995, I was back in Toronto and was part of an exhibition. I also proposed a panel discussion and it was focused on the role of the South Asian artist in the contemporary art world.

(0:02:56)

And so, I organized a panel, I participated in the exhibition. Then, simultaneously made it clear that I wanted to be more involved as I was coming back to Toronto. I believe that soon after, I just became more involved with coordinating the exhibitions as an artist as well as related programming. I became part of a loose, we didn't call ourselves a committee but it was a very loose collective of the visual artists, primarily Toronto based that were helping to make it happen

on an annual basis after 1995. More or less. So, then in 1997, the first grant was, we'd gotten project grants before, but our first operational grant through the visual arts committee that I was involved in, the collective, and the grant came for Desh Pardesh to kind of launch SAVAC. It was through the Canada Council for the Arts and I was involved initially with actually searching for a coordinator. We met with a number of people. But, the money was really low and nobody really wanted to do the job (0:04:21). So then, I was asked if I wanted to do the position on a short term basis and I said sure. I think I had some other part time teaching gig. So, I took it on about two days a week as the first, I guess, part time paid staff person. That was in 1995.

AM: Okay. Can you tell me who were some of the other people that you were organizing with as a loose collective of visual artists as you described.

(0:04:52)

SB: One was Kevin d'Souza, Pamila Matharu, and, I believe possibly, Neena Arora. I don't know if she came in at that point. She'd been exhibiting with us but I can't, I can't remember if she was involved at that stage that we got the first grant and we were trying to find someone to do the job.

AM: And, just to kind of rewind a little bit. You said that you attended some of the Desh Pardesh events and you were also, you had done your Masters, or you were, I guess you were doing your masters in 1994.

SB: 93 to 95 I was in New York. I went to Toronto usually in the summers.

AM: Ok. So, in terms of your experience of the arts & culture scene in Toronto, what could Desh mean for you as a South Asian visual artist?

SB: It was like a whole other world. Because, when I first heard about Desh, I mean, in the art program, first at York University then NYU, we had zero exposure to any artists of colour. I mean unless you took a historical, art history class on South Asian historical work. You had no exposure or comprehension that there was any sort of living art being made and its relationship with contemporary practice. (0:06:38) So, it was just, a very intense and beautiful kind of education. Because, there were artists and activists and very progressive politics all kind of rolled together and I had zero exposure to that, even as an undergrad, even in an art department. Interestingly enough, even coming to New York immediately after participating, there was nothing like that even in New York. So, I had like this little taste, of this very progressive arts and politics, activist scene and I'd get to New York and its pretty, pretty close to non existent. I went looking for something like that. The only thing I found was, because I wanted to become more involved with organizations because I thought that that was a way to build a community and also ways in which to present the work that we were making. So, in New York, there was a group called Godzilla which is an Asian American arts network but I believe there were only a very small handful of South Asian artists involved with it. I went searching high and low for like

a very progressive radical kind of art practices being done by the South Asian community in New York and it just wasn't happening.

(0:08:16)

AM: Mhmm. And at that time, I gather from looking at a bit of your work, some of what you, I'm not sure if you are still working with similar thematics but you were working on looking at the exotification of South Asian culture in your art. Were you already working on those thematics or was some of that inspired by the people you were surrounded by, through the collective at Desh?

SB: I could definitely say. There were like, I didn't have the language because nobody within my art department was thinking about art making from that perspective. It felt like the seeds of it were there. I was trying to explore it visually but even, you know, so then the language began to grow and visually the language began to grow. I would definitely say it was in that period of my last year of undergrad so then we are talking about then we are talking about 93 and at the end of it I made my initial contact with Desh and then the visual arts sort of aspect of it and then going to New York. So then, it was just this perfect serendipity and moment where things really began to grow. So, yes, I would definitely say that that kind of contact was a huge part of it. (0:09:45)

AM: I understand just from a little bit of conversations that I've had and some of the research that the visual arts collective started because in some ways, would you say that visual arts were a sideline at Desh? Would that be accurate?

SB: That would be very accurate yes.

AM: Ok, so what were sort the early conv– if you remember, those early conversations around ... I know you were involved with that first exhibit. But, what were those conversations like around the importance of visual arts within Desh and, how to kind of work together?

SB: Yeah. I think that the first thing that came up was that with a festival format, visual art is not a great fit. Visual art shows generally, they tend to be a different kind of preparation and lead up. They need a different kind of physical space. A lot of it would be logistics of space and the fact that visual arts works, especially if you are dealing with installations and delicate things, you know they can't be inside of, let's say, a theatre format where you'd be having people up on the stage. Right? And so, in realizing that people who perhaps deal with performance and other media don't really quite know how to professionally, there's a lot about professionalism, they may know how to really put on a great show on a stage, but, the attitude was "hey, with the visual art just kind of stick it up on the wall in the corner." As people who not only make art but we also, it's really key how that art is presented. So when you actually realize that there are a number of you that could really push to say, well no, visual arts can't just kind of be in the corner of the theatre. It needs light, it needs space, it needs something else. And, so I think that's where, when those conversations started that the work is just not getting any visibility or it's poorly

displayed or, it's just unsafe for the work. People may knock it over. That's where the search for the, the idea for, a search for a professional gallery space started. So then, I think, and then, because the majority of people involved with Desh did not have that expertise. They were like "well what don't you guys find a space and we'll try and make it work." So that's where those conversations started (0:12:38). Even the show that Sharon did was, I believe at Art Metropole and was my first professional show outside of the University waters.

AM: and what was that like for you to have that, sorry to interrupt, that kind of first show in a context that was, you were talking about art school there wasn't much exposure to anything outside of maybe the Western canon. What was that like for you to have your first show in more of a, let's say, in an environment that spoke more to your context.

SB: It was, I mean, it was exhilarating but – one memory that still sticks, that is still, my work, I was doing painting at the time, standing next to my painting is this [inaudible]. So to have that be your first public presentation of your work and to see you are not just showing your work to your peers, in terms of the student body, these were the people you wanted to be like, professional artist who were out there doing things. (0:13:51) Some of there were obvious someone like [inaudible] was already a name I knew. So that kind of way, as an emerging artist is very exhilarating to be in that context. And say ok there's possibly a place for me here.

AM: Mhmm, absolutely yeah. (0:14:14) And I'm wondering, Shelly, at that moment in time in Toronto, can you speak a little bit to, say early to mid 90s, what the sociopolitical climate was like. So, I mean, early 90s it was still Bob Rae and then mid 90s Mike Harris, so in terms of the political atmosphere but also outside of official government what, what kinds of movement building were you around at that time?

SB: Yeah, I mean, I had a pretty sheltered kind of existence in the art school. It was kind of a bubble. It was really just about art and I was not very politically active other than supporting campus activities. So there was an awareness, you know, I was at York, I believe in 89. There was some sort of art & activism related to Tiananmen Square. To more, interestingly enough, more global issues rather than the local. More of an awareness about what was happening in Guatemala, what was happening in Tiananmen Square. Everyone was pretty much trying to ignore what was happening, I think. No one was really happy with what was happening in the local sort of and the national political scene. So, I think, part of it, and maybe it's also this [inaudible] of the art school atmosphere was you try to look at these broader bigger issues rather than coming down to the local. So, and I think a lot of my focus was really on thinking about the larger sort of art world, my place in it. I was also very involved in the music scene and more like... I was working, you know, there's a radio station, and interestingly enough that was possibly my link to Desh if I remember correctly. I used to work for CHRY, which is going through its own upheavals right now. At CHRY, I did a music show that focused on sort of, I guess it would be Indie and experimental music and also, some arts coverage. That was also the place where I started to cover South Asian contemporary dance. I feel like maybe my link to that led me.. because there was no awareness there wasn't really a South Asian contemporary arts

scene.. But there was dance, I was interested in dance and dancers in some of my work. I feel like maybe that was my link to Desh Pardesh, interestingly enough, through some dance programming that I covered.

(0:17:30)

AM: Hmm, interesting. So did you get a chance to see some of the work by Roger Sinha's dance company and [inaudible] I know was also...

SB: Yeah I have! I can't remember exactly which year because some of them would perform in different years. So sad but a lot of it kind of overlapped in my mind as to when did I see them dance. But, yeah, I've seen them all perform over the years and definitely in those early years. That very exciting. But I was actually more interested in women and women performers. So, and you know being a woman artist you don't have a lot of models. So, for me, it was always very much more interesting to see who are these women? How they fall on their sort of their creative paths? Is there something I can model myself on? I was watching what the guys were doing, I was more interested in what the female contemporaries were up to.

AM: I can't remember the name of the woman but there was a woman who was dancing with Roger Sinha's, like, she was dancing some of her own choreography and some of his. I'm forgetting her name right now but I'll try to remember. I know some people have comment on her performance at Desh. It sounds like such an exciting time in terms of, one of the impression's I've had about that period of time, which is still true to an extent, in the kind of mainstream art scene's reception of South Asian art is that it's expected that there will be a kind of a particular kind of traditionalism and that we can't just exist in the current moment and be contemporary people and artists. That in some way there is an expectation of particular kind of the sari samosa, like. You know..

(0:19:30)

SB: You know everybody has to have classical but not [inaudible] or [inaudible] training .. If somebody came in right out of ballet, it would be interesting to see the responses we'd even had had at Desh, right? Interestingly enough, I think most people came out of some sort classical kind of training. Maybe it would have been same as [inaudible] to come out of modern dance or ballet.

(0:20:02)
AM: So Shelly, I would love to hear more details about how the collective unfolded. So you started as a loose knit collective and then it became more established and then eventually became its own non profit. Can you tell me a bit more in detail about what, how did that happen? How did you guys come together in terms of visioning and a basis of unity. What was that like?

SB: I would say that one thing that I tried to do as soon as I was out of school, I had these big plans to be in New York and to make a place for myself here, was that after having that very short but intense connection with at that time not SAVAC but Desh Pardesh and the visual arts show. Then, immediately after going to New York and trying to find this a similar community there and connecting with Godzilla. Godzilla kind of became my model for SAVAC. So Godzilla, the way that they would do things would it often a fair amount of these social gatherings that were just basically held in people's lofts, etc. They had a formal steering committee that would you know plan things for the collective, they had, people would initiate things like one friend of mine Polly Todd made a connection with a journal and everybody was asked to edit an entire sort of issue on Asian contemporary art practices. It was curated by Godzilla. So, watching all these things happen primarily Godzilla in New York as well as watching some other Art. I had also had worked in some galleries in New York as an intern. So when I came back to Toronto in 1995, I really kind of was gong ho. I would love to sort of channel all my energy through a group similar to Godzilla but focused on South Asian art practices in Toronto. Right, so, that's when I started to reach out to the other visual arts I met as well as the director of the Desh at that time was Arif Noorani. Have you spoken to Arif yet?

AM: Not yet. (0:22:33) We're finally in touch but not yet.

SB: So, Arif was my point person for Desh. When I was hired to be with the guy who was there, and so, meaning that, as I sort of came back to Toronto I actually was involved with two collectives. One that was this loose form that was already kind of in the works with SAVAC and then with another community, because I was involved with galleries such as A Space in Toronto. Through A Space and then a number of other people who were of a pan-Asian heritage wanted to start something similar to Godzilla in Toronto. In Toronto I was involved with the pre-SAVAC, I was working with a group of asian artists and curators to form what we called Zen Mix and later that turned into Zen Mix 2000 because we were towards doing programming up until the year 2000.

AM: And that was, just to clarify Shelly, that was the collective that was connected to Ace Space?

SB: I would say it wasn't connected it was sort of. No, it wasn't. But some people who were involved with the A Space gallery including myself and another woman Marilyn, we formed. There were like four of us initially that started Zen Mix. Sorry, to clarify, that was also through, there was a group called Asian Heritage Month group. (0:24:21) So I would say it was more affiliated. Though we were independent, it was affiliated with the Asian Heritage Month.

AM: And this was pre-SAVAC?

SB: I would say maybe around the same time. I think maybe 1996 Zen Mix formed with this Asian Heritage Month.

AM: Okay.

SB: And there was overlapping. SAVAC people were doing things with Zen Mix. Mainly through myself and, I'm trying to remember, because I was involved with both. So, the idea was to build opportunities for artists involved with both collectives. Because Asian Heritage Month was doing annual programming around April and SAVAC was still doing annual stuff with Desh. The idea was that this would give us more than one time a year to show our work. (0:25:25) Just to give that history that there were, at the time where there were a number of collectives, these were the two that I was involved with and there was some overlap. So, going back to SAVAC, I would say somewhere between 95 to when we got that first grant in 97, I was just involved with that, the artists, the group of artists would change depending on who was around. But, Rachel Kalpana, Kevin d'Souza, I've mentioned, Pamela Matharu, Neena Arora, during those two years all of them were involved to some degree.

(0:26:12)

AM: And when you say those two years you mean 95 to 97? Or 97 on

SB: yeah, 95 to 97.

AM: Sorry, it's just helpful to have some of the details, like some of the details I can find in the notes of Desh but and I know it's, I don't expect it to be fully accurate or anything like that don't worry.

SB: I can't believe how long ago it was.

AM: Oh no, I'm so impressed with people's memory, it's really *laughs* impressive.

SB: yeah, it's sometimes it's a thing like omg why can't I remember.

AM: At that point, so pre the, before the operation grant, where was the collective operating out of?

SB: Um, Desh Pardesh had an office so we would occasionally meet up there and occasionally just meet up in a restaurant or café. Desh was very open, it was like we were, SAVAC was like a sister organization. What they liked was that if we were, because we were getting project funding, not in that first year but I feel like the years afterwards I think we always got a least one project grant. It will say in the materials but I think it was an Ontario Arts Council grant. So, and it was just specifically, I think it was anywhere between 2 to 3 or 4 thousand to put on a show. So, what was great for Desh was like 'alright, great we don't have to put our resources in it. here's your budget, go do a show.' (0:27:48)

AM: Sorry, at what point did SAVAC get its own space?

SB: So, in terms of space, what happened was when I was hired in 1997, I worked out of the Desh Pardesh space. I had a desk. That was across the street from in was called the Darling Building, from where we are currently. We were in the Darling building, had a great loft large workspace there.

AM: Is this Darling Foundry?

SB: Yeah. But it was also called the Darling building and there were some galleries and things in there for a while. What's in there now?

AM: You were just saying that when you were hired you were working out of the Desh Pardesh office which was in the darling foundry or building.

SB: And then, I believe, we were all going to be kicked out or something like that. I think, maybe, I can't remember for sure, but maybe Desh had to downsize the office. it was a really large space and I feel maybe there were a couple organizations sharing it. And so, then , one of the SAVAC artists was working in the 401 Richmond building and I actually found the space for us through you know just in conversations with her. Because, she used to use this as an office space, she had a small business with somebody else. And she wasn't sure if she needed it. I don't remember all the specifics but basically we first started subletting from her. We were concerned because it was such a small space and it was, again, to clarify both Desh and SAVAC were moving into this office. That office space now became the center for both. It started as a sublet with Sharona PLAKIDAS. Have you been in touch with her, is she on your list?

AM: No, Sharona, can you say her last name?

SB: S H A R O N A, her last name, sorry, [inaudible] I think it's PLAKIDAS.

AM: Can you say that again?

(0:31:39)

SB: P L A K I D A S. And she was actually for a time on our steering committee so you should speak to her if you can. She's actually in Greece but she comes to Toronto often and she's on facebook and such. So, Sharona, kept the lease on that space. I believe we started subletting from her and then over the years ended up just taking over the space.

AM: And, yeah so, go on

SB: And Desh moved in and basically, Desh had most of the space and we just had a desk. Basically. Similar to what I had in the other space.

(0:32:23)

AM: And, at that point you already had operational funding at that point is that right?

SB: For SAVAC yeah. But it was a one year financing. It was only through Canada Council and I believe it was like 16 thousand. We had that for one year to do programming and hire somebody. So I was hired at a really really obscenely low rate. And then, just to keep .. The idea was I was pretty much doing half volunteering and half salary and then, basically, the projects we had proposed in that grant were really not that feasible. So, I proposed, I basically ended up scrambling to put together programming for that year. The idea .. I invited some people to guest curate. I invited people to write some essays. Then the key thing that I wanted to do was to have some sort of formal structure other than me as the one person making decisions. So put together a steering committee. So that was the main structure was that. We weren't thinking of having a board because we were still under the Desh board. The steering committee would sort of lead SAVAC initiatives. (0:34:05) I was pretty much the main person sort of proposing programs and initiatives and grants. I would bring it to the steering and they would give their input and then I would go out and implement.

AM: and, at that point, just to get a kind of like clear understanding of all of it, was the steering committee made up primarily of people who were also involved with Desh or were you now tapping into a whole new kind of group of people?

SB: I think we were all people who were involved in that very loose collective of artists. There weren't that many of us. There were probably maybe somewhere between 5 to 10 would be an exaggeration. Somewhere between 5 to 10 people Toronto based who were around and interested in visual arts programming. And sometimes, like myself, I was away for two years. I believe Alia Toor who was away for a period and back. So, at any one point there were maybe 5, 6 people around. We would just sort of pull them in. Everybody was involved with that overlap of the Desh show and then now the SAVAC initiative. Though the term, the name SAVAC has been used I believe in one or two exhibitions previously. Like SAVAC presents, you know. But that's when it really began to operate as SAVAC.

AM: In 97?

SB: I would say, yes. Where before it was just, at the time of the show, it was, I think the reason being the logistics. When we applied for grants, we had to have a collective name. It was mainly that. We never walked around talking about SAVAC. We were talking about the Desh show. Around, I'd say 97 we started to really visualize and build an identity for SAVAC.

(0:36:22)

AM: And what was that identity that you were trying to build? What was the vision?

SB: The vision from my perspective was to do year round programming, very very experimental progressive work, and just really highly professional. The goal was to take the work and get into some serious exhibition space. So that, the idea is to have that sense of community in terms of how you operate but in terms of the work that you are presenting, it was definitely, it wasn't meant to be an all inclusive project. Because the idea was really to curate and push very contemporary progressive artwork. So, the notion of a curatorial vision became more important.

AM: I think I understand what you are saying. Kind of like, you know, it's not just public access anyone can exhibit. It's like we approach things in a community minded way and we wanna program high quality work.

SB: Yeah so then to even encourage people one of the things that happened very early on is getting a lot of people who are new and [inaudible] coming in and saying "oh I heard about SAVAC, give me a show" and yet the work was really bad [inaudible] painting. So, it was a real conflict because we wanted to pull them in, but the idea was then how do you then sort of say that. It's almost like despite the kind of work you do we would like you to be involved. The kind of work you present may not be the kind of work you are making. (0:38:28) Encourage you and if you are interest the kind of curatorial vision we have. [inaudible]

AM: Sorry, one sec. There's something, a weed whacker outside. It's very loud let me close the window ok?

SB: Yeah I hear it.

AM: Can you just repeat what you were saying about curatorial vision? Do you remember?

SB: Yeah, I guess, a hard thing to put into words but the thing is .. because I specifically was interested in very contemporary arts practices, and so were, I guess, the handful of other artists we were involved with. But then, we would often have people who had no connection to Desh and SAVAC but felt that maybe it was a place for them. But, the kind of the work that they were doing is not the kind of work that we were interested in championing. So, maybe some would say that's quite elitist and perhaps it was. But, you know, we thought that the purpose of SAVAC wasn't to show everything and anything. We had a particular kind of vision. We wanted anybody to be involved but there was a vision. And that vision being challenging work. Work that would sort of defy your expectations of what you think South Asian contemporary art is. Not things that would fall into kind of stereotypes. Work that was not commercial. Work that was not touristy. Especially for artists coming from parts of South Asia where that was the kind of training they were getting.

(0:40:37)

AM: I think I really hear what you are saying. I think that's something that SAVAC still really strives to do.

SB: Yeah. It's a really tough balance because you don't want to be elitist. Not want to be exclusionary but you can't show everything. And, but we would always encourage artists that's where member shows started. And doing things that were like mentorships and workshops. We would put senior artists with maybe more emerging artists and maybe the new immigrant artists too. To find ways to sort of build that connection so they could understand what is it like why is my work not suitable for SAVAC. Trying to explain what we meant by contemporary practice. What kind of issues we were exploring through the arts. That the art, we weren't just doing decorative art practice that it was art, not necessarily art about social change but art for social change. That most of the work we were interested in showing really had, was dealing with contemporary issues. Whether that being political, social issues. So that, you know, it's a tough conversation to try to have. With artists who were just like "show my work".

(0:42:07)

AM: Mhmm, yeah. I mean that still happens. *laughs*

SB: Yeah, it's still. It's an ongoing thing. We try to be respectful. Sort of, the people coming from all over. That's why I find other ways to include people who are doing different kinds of work. But, I hope, that that, and it seems to me that the curatorial vision has always been not somewhat been consistent, but it's always been really, I'd say really progressive. Right?

AM: I'm really curious about what it was like in those early days of trying to, because you were working within a gallery space, trying to access galleries. What the reception was like in terms of the outside of South Asian art world but the kind of like more mainstream, I mean mostly white art world. What was the reception like and how was that for you working with trying to get gallery space and dealing with curators and galleries.

(0:43:16)

SB: And also trying to get funding and being taken seriously as an artist run centre in Toronto. To me those are the three things that feed into each other during that time.

AM: Yeah, so its culmative.

SB: So I was doing this part time. You know, I took it real seriously and was like: you know, I'm gonna come in and this is my role is to make SAVAC like a very serious arts run centre. Because we didn't, one of the things that we came up against for all the funding sort of bodies. So I'll start with the funding, that was our first thing. Right? How are we going to sustain ourselves. Is the way the funds, the granting bodies are set up we fall under artist-run centres and they generally are centres that have that kind of overhead to think about. Right? And I know that there were some SAVAC members that were really seeing that as a goal. We should have our own gallery, we should be able to run that space and do exhibitions year round. My vision for it was very

different. My vision right from the beginning was really about, and again, I will give credit to Godzilla a little bit for this position, of really starting to think about accessing spaces that already exist and the biggest that was in my was I don't want to create a little ghetto gallery. I don't want a space where every South Asian artist who goes through let's say A Space, Mercer Union, or anywhere else, well they can just start saying: "oh you should show at SAVAC." Right? And it's a really great way to, you know, sort of push everybody into one little ghetto. I really wanted the existing spaces to kind of have to deal with us. And that was the most important thing. That's where in conversations with various funders, as well as the other artist run centres that were there, I sort of began, that was kind of stalling point was that: Okay we are going to be almost more like a curatorial collective where in partnership with the existing spaces in Toronto and across Canada. We'll really build our programming and you can send artists to us but we are going to develop programming and send it back to you. And you are going to have to show the work. So that was really kind of my vision and part of it was also very practical.

(0:46:09)

We don't have a gallery space. Running a space is huge overhead. And here we are.. and we were also paying. I think we started really low. I think 400$ for the space and maybe SAVAC paid half of that. And so, that was the kind of.. comparing that with the overhead of running a gallery. Right? So, in that's the way I sort of began to meet with all the funders. Really pitch SAVAC. That we have, look at our past shows through Desh, we done all this great .. and because we had that one grant from Canada Council it made all the difference because people began to take us a little more seriously. Okay, well not only did we get a Canada Council project grant we actually had an operational grant. And so, using that as leverage to TAC and Ontario Arts Council. Also, within that year we developed I think three or four really solid programs that were well documented. Because I think some of the previous shows the problem was we weren't documenting the shows well. So there weren't many images. This is pre digital cameras everything was slides. So we had to have someone take really good slides. So, we were able to do three four more shows that year, to make really good documentation, include that in the grant and say, look this is the kind of work we show. Because, again, there was some question that's it's gonna be like a little community gallery where anybody can come and hang up anything. And so, the real push I wanted to make was that these are serious artists, they are doing amazing work. It's the kind of the work you are not going to see elsewhere. Give us money to do more of this. So, that's, kind of in that first I would say year, two years, the push was to really focus on the professionalism and again, focusing on the really experimental work, and that fact that we do not want to create a little ghetto gallery we want to be curatorial collective taking the work and collaborating with these existing spaces.

(0:48:25)

AM: Mhmm. I think that's such a , I think it's one of the huge strengths of SAVAC actually still in a way. And a lot of people maybe don't understand it immediately but it's really an important piece. What you are saying around, you know, actually not wanting a sort of small like very

particular gallery that sits by itself in this way. That actually entering into the mainstream art world ...

SB: Yeah and that was just really, and you know, it was kind of a vision, I would say, definitely articulated over a period of time. Because for a while I was like wouldn't it be great if we had a gallery. Well, you know, doing these really interesting projects with existing spaces, right? Why not. Yeah, so, I mean it was definitely not a thunderbolt that just came at once. It definitely was articulated that vision over I'm guessing a period of two years in that coordinator position. And, it was actually the – it was interesting, we started to, you know, we had that first grant and then we were invited to come to meetings with other artist run centres in Toronto. And there was a lot of skepticism on the table. "Like seriously, who are you guys what are you doing here. We run galleries." You know, right. "You don't have a gallery. Why are you part of this particular group?" Right? So, you know, but then I think over time what was really amazing was I would definitely say within a few years we were serious. People just.. it happened very quickly I think. People started to take us seriously. Part of it is, I think, yeah, we started to get that funding and people were a bit skeptical but then they started to see the shows. And then, the other thing I was really big on is documentation, documentation. So, every show was professionally documented. We tried to do as many catalogues. It was always about trying to get a good writer to do a, you know, an essay. So that beyond just the show, that there would be something that you can look at today. Right? You are going through the archive, you are looking at materials that aren't just a postcard. Right? So, I think, that's the kind of stuff I'm really proud about is just that we were able to, with very limited funding, still do interesting materials. We did a project called 'Taking It To the Streets' which was a beautiful like, small book publication. I dunno if you have a copy of that. But that was sort of the fanciest publication we had done.

AM: It's called 'Taking It To the Streets'?

SB: Yeah. (0:51:31) And it was a project that was actually done along Gerrard Street. The Indian neighbourhood along that strip. So artists actually did projects in public spaces. And there were some great essays, colour photographs, it was like for a us a major publication. And, so that I believe was done in 98 or something. We worked with designers. Just finding ways where it wasn't just about the exhibition but it was about creating an archive of materials so that people could look back and have images, texts, have some context for what we were doing. Because also early on, the shows were just about 'hey we are South Asian artists here is our work.' Which makes sense when you are starting out but then within I would say, the big shift in 97 on, was that they became thematic programs. Along a particular theme that was curated, we always tried to do as many calls for submissions as we could. Do we are started to get international participants. So, goal was to have a combination of things that we curated in house as well as call for submissions we'd get things from every... similar to what Desh was doing. I think sometimes we would do call for submissions through Desh Pardesh. So, you know, when they would have their annual call they would just say "any media including visual art" and if anything visual art came in they would just pass it down to the SAVAC desk. So often times, thing that we got were,

especially early on 97, 98 were things that were coming in directly through Desh Pardesh and then handed over to SAVAC.

(0:53:47)

AM: Um, Shelly can you tell me a bit about, you were there until, you were there as a coordinator until 97? Is that right?

SB: I would say 97 to 99.

AM: Oh sorry, from 97 to 99 is what I mean. So that was around the time that Desh was starting to kind of fold. I mean 2000 is when it actually folded. Were you around for that and do you have anything...

SB: Did you say 2001 and is when it folded?

AM: It fully folded in 2001 and I think it had like one ... seems like a bit of a slow death from 2000 to 2001 from what I can tell. Do you have like knowledge of that? And how and why that happen?

SB: Yeah. I was there for the early part. The decline, let's say. And so, again, you have to refresh my memory a little bit too. But, would you say 99 or from 98 in terms of when some of things started to go down.

AM: I mean, in terms of official documentation definitely there were struggles as, I would say, from the mid 96, 97 in terms of funding cuts and things like this. Then, it's unclear to me, to be honest, whether, like I definitely, I can gather that there was, there were problems as of 98, 99.

SB: Yeah, that sounds right to me that 98. Because I feel like, when we, because I also base it on the mood. right. So when I got us the space at the current office and we were like 'Oh! Desh is going to grow so how are we? How are we going to survive in this little place?" At that time, it was really, we thought it was in a period of growth as the mother organization. So I guess that we thought of even being there as a temporary thing, right? There was always a lot of activity with Desh but um.. it was just kind of a weird moment because I feel like within that two years where I was in that shared office, the dynamics began to shift. Where suddenly, you know, SAVAC was like a growing strong organization and with Desh things began to implode. Because around the time we were in that space we were not getting any financial support after 97 from Desh. We were paying a portion of the rent, we were there, but we still saw ourselves as an extension of Desh Pardesh. It's still hard to put into words but it's interesting how the dynamics shifted. Even with us because suddenly we started, we got, I think in that first year I got us Toronto Arts Council, Canada Council was already there, and then Ontario Arts Council funding. So we were kind of not like it was a lot of money but it just gave us a sense of we are legitimate and that we not only, not only are we legitimate we now have to kind of prove ourselves. So that, because all

this money was given to us with the condition that we actually had to prove ourselves. So, we were really focused on that. Because I wasn't involved with the Desh board, but you would hear things. We were in a shared office space. There were members, I think Rachel J* I think to some degree involved with both and became more involved with both because she took over the position after I left. She was very involved with helping Desh try to move forward. Because I think I left before things got really bad. At that point, it was just, I can more just give an observation that I just got the feeling, you know when they say the ground beneath our feet is shaking. And, you know, you would here a lot of gossip about mismanaged funds and board members who would come on and say this is too much for me I'm leaving. I think there were, when I was there, if I remember correctly, the key people involved staff wise were Vashti Persad, Fatima Mullan.

AM: What was that, the person last's name?

SB: M U L L A N or U N.

AM: So, it's Vashti Persad and Fatima Mullan. That's interesting because Fatima's name, I don't think has appeared so far.

SB: No? She's Vashti's partner.

AM: So Vashti Persad and Fatima Mullan were coordinating Desh at the time?

SB: This is what I need to clarify, I feel that maybe Vashti and there was Amit Pareet. Amit Pareet came a bit later. There were a lot of staff changes. So, I know, Fatima was there, what was her exact role? I'm not sure. I think, Amit and Vashti were the coordinators, if I'm correct. Fatima had a role. She was always in the office. *laughs* I'm trying to remember what her exact title was.

(1:00:03).

AM: No problem, I can definitely look that up.

SB: And I'll give you the exact spelling of her name. Fatima and then .....but they weren't.. ok. Her name is spelled F A T I M A, MU L L A N. I dunno fi she came in on the board and then was staff. You know, I'm just having visuals of the three of them and I'm wondering if toward the end it was just Vashti and Fatima, I'm not sure.

AM: And so they would have been on during those 97 to 99 years approximately. You were working alongside them basically.

SB: Yeah. we were alongside. When we were at the pre existing, to backdrop a little bit, when we were at the Darling building, after Arif left we had two people who were coordinators for

Desh, and I'm blanking on the guy's name but the woman was a filmmaker, do you know the name of the coordinators before Amit and Vashti? The woman was a filmmaker and the guy basically joined Desh and went on paternity leave.

AM: And went on paternity leave? hilarious. Ok. Let me just see.

(1:01:35)

SB: I sort of feel that's where, with all these staff changes, you know. First there was Michelle Mohabeer who was one. That was sort of a disaster.

AM: Yeah, she unfortunately didn't want to talk about her role there at all. She only wanted to talk about her role as a visiting artist in Desh. Sorry, as a participating artist. So I actually didn't get any information from her.

SB: Okay. So yeah that was a really, I think a very,

AM: Yeah, I have Amit Pareet here as staff 1999. And then, I have Andil–

SB: Yes, Andil, yes. That was the guy who went on paternity leave. I think so.

AM: Really. Maybe. He. I didn't know he had kids. Arif was coordinator ok, and then, okay. When was Kaushalya?

SB: Oh, Kaushalya Bannerji. Euhh, gosh.

AM: Maybe earlier no?

SB: I think maybe earlier. Maybe the time Arif was there. Maybe it was Arif and Kaushalya?

AM: Oh what about Kulwinder Bajar.

SB: K B was involved with SAVAC, not with Desh and she was first on the steering committee when I was there. And then she, we had somebody after me for a very short period that didn't work and then Kulwinder took the position, for again, a very short period before Rachel James*.

AM: And what about Nadia Junaid?

SB: Euhh. I know she involved. I can't tell you the years. Not with SAVAC but with–

AM: With Desh. I have possibly a coordinator in 2000.

SB: You have that down? Could be yeah.

AM: Yeah sorry, I'm just going through here because it's not actually always clear based on the notes. So it's kind of, I often have to wait until I talk to somebody but... Vinita..oh no.. Vashti I have here. Vashti. Yeah. Late 90s.

SB: What about Fatima?

AM: Fatima let me just see if I have. I have, yeah ok, staff 1999 to 2000.

SB: So yeah, that sounds right, staff. I don't know what her exact position was. (1:04:32)

AM: Oh, and then what about Fatima Amarshi? Is that the same person?

SB: No.

AM: Does she? She didn't change names? 'Cause here I have that she was the executive director of Desh from 2000 to 2001. That she was hired as it was going down.

SB: Oh, yeah, that's somebody else.

AM: And that makes sense to you timeline wise?

SB: Yeah, timeline wise that makes sense.

AM: Ok, sorry, go on.

SB: So, where were we.

AM: Just trying to get a picture of what things were like. You were there not right as it was ending but at the beginning of the end.

SB: Yeah. So you know just, it was just in the air or office chit chat about funding issues. One image that's kind of very clear in my head and I don't, it was the period when, I think it was Vashti who was there and I dunno who was with her, Amit was working with her or someone else, but all the previous Desh Pardesh, the festivals, had a lot of really good buzz and good, did a lot of good pr. So, I believe there was a big article and I want to say it was either in Extra or like one of the mainstream publications. But it totally thrashed the festival and the organization.

AM: Wow.

SB: And it was interesting because to me that's always stood out as the point where things started to go down. So, first we were kind of shocked. This was, it was almost a sense that well nothing could go wrong–not nothing could go wrong–but that that it, just that, there were always that

could take things up or down but there was no real sense that things could collapse. Something about, I don't know why, around the time of that article, coming out and then the mood changed. The mood in the office changed and yeah. So that was just something that's always kind of stayed with me. And that might have been around 98 ish. (1:06:50) Maybe later, it was even 98 or 99. So, you know, I feel like there's just a shift in the mood and then, I mean I did get the sense that there were people who either weren't fully committed to what Desh was about. Being able to carry that vision, you know. So the early years you had people who were doing it out of a passion for the work and it was primarily volunteer. It's always the case when you start to have staff people, there are people who may do it because they are very passionate and you may have people who are doing it just as a job. And that's an issue SAVAC has faced, definitely an issue Desh was facing in those years when the people who were there from the grassroots level who had brought it up were just completely passionate about it, when those people were no longer involved and moved on to other things they were doing or had to leave country for various reasons. I think, I really just on that surface of observing it and being in that hot house is that there were people there who were not necessarily committed the vision. There were people there who kind of liked the hype of Desh but were not also committed to do the hard grunt work. And, a combination of people who were there who just didn't have the expertise, you know, who maybe were just didn't have the experience or expertise to run a non profit arts organization. In that, encompassing board members, staff people. There were a lot of rotating doors. It was that unfortunate bad mix where you don't have the key people in the leadership roles who are going to really push the organization to the next level. So those were some of the hard things that I was just observing. (1:09:11)

AM: And, Shelly, in what context did you, so you were there until 99 at SAVAC and still sharing the office.. in what context did you leave SAVAC?

SB: I basically had other gigs. I was doing this part time. I also was teaching part time. Then, in that year 99, I got a one year, one and a half year doing a curatorial residency at the Art Gallery of Ontario. So, I, you know, just, there's no way I could have done both. So, I think, I also felt at that time that SAVAC was in a really good place so I felt good about giving that opportunity to somebody else. And at that point we were able to commit to paying, I started out I was getting 7.50$ an hour and soon after it went up to 15 but I felt like to be able to get somebody to commit to a part time position but you want somebody who again has those professional skills, you have to be able to pay. A portion of that was the most we could do at that time, right? 15$ an hour but all these things tie in together because some of the people you want or not going to be able to come work for you at that price. So, it was the economics and being able, there are not that many people in Toronto especially for SAVAC it's very media specific. You need somebody who has some understanding of visual and media arts. Especially, if you are doing the curating, because part of the job informally became that curatorial visioning of the organization. So, you have to know the artists, you have to know what's going on in the contemporary arts scene, and you know what are things that we are doing that either fit that narrative or that are different and how to position those narratives. So, meaning that it was tough to have somebody who maybe let's say was interested in the larger, the Desh vision but didn't really understand the specifics of

visual arts. Or even have the other key part is who had the connections. Especially we don't have our own space, we need people in these positions who already have connections, who will build on these connections to get us into spaces. Visual arts is always about space. So, when you think of it from that perspective it, you may do a call for, a job call, there may be a handful people who are suitable for the position. So, it's a very scary thing because the idea of if you have the people in place who are passionate and/or you know have the skills and also have the network to make things happen. So, and a lot of it isn't that kind of glamorous hanging out at openings. (1:12:36) But I think, people especially now going back to Desh, we had this beautiful buzz internationally about what Desh buzz but on the ground who is actually able to make that happen? It's tough. And does everyone support the same vision. How inclusive is it? You know, I think because it was started with people coming from a queer perspective and focusing on the progressive politics, not everybody who wanted to be involved with Desh or SAVAC support that. And so, how do you still stay clear of those conversations, or do you open up and have these very different perspectives. So those are I think all of the things. Both SAVAC and Desh Pardesh.

AM: Pardon me?

SB: I think both SAVAC and Desh struggled with those issues.

(1:13:46)

AM: And, Shelly in terms of, so you went on to do the stuff that they do and you were doing your own work, did you have further involvement with SAVAC until you moved to New York?

SB: Yeah I mean, I like to keep everything overlapping. When I was in AGO I did a collaborative project with SAVAC. I continued my work with Zen X 2000, which was a project that was only supposed to go until the year 2000. So we did programming up until 2000 and then there was the SAVAC AGO collaboration that I sort of spearheaded that was a project called Private Thoughts Public Spaces.

(1:14:39)

AM: Private Thoughts Public Spaces was a show that you collaborated on with SAVAC at the AGO?

SB: Yeah, so I initiated that.

AM: And that was SAVAC's first and maybe only ___ at AGO right?

SB: Yeah. Yeah. So my work at the AGO was to bring in basically a non western perspective to the contemporary department. And so, and because my primary focuses was on Asian, loosely asian contemporary art and so, I was always trying to find ways to get collectives I was involved with, it's always about that, it's about how do you invade the institutions that exist. And how do

you take over these spaces and make them your own louder than all those already inside.* Yeah that was a great project and it definitely had it's ups and downs. A lot of push back from the museum. You know, that's a whole other thing but SAVAC was involved with that. In the end, it was really important to do.

AM: Mhmm. So, can you kind of like as my closing question or questions can you describe the ways in which your experiences with SAVAC over the years both as a loose knit collective and as a more established organization how those experiences, positive and negative, shaped you as an artist, an arts administrator, and/or in your own life?

(1:16:25)

SB: Sure, okay! I just wanted to ask one more thing. Do you at all, I dunno if you are at all covering the work of the board directors because I was continued to be involved with SAVAC. I came back as a staff person for a few months while Rachel was away and then I also was on the Board of Directors. So, I dunno if any of that. But that's more about SAVAC. But you want to focus more on this period between..

AM: I'm more interested in focusing on this period for now but perhaps if we end up doing a round two in any way if I'm in New York. Maybe we can have a conversation about that?

SB: Yeah those are later years. That's more in the mids 2000s on. So that's a different period. Ok, alright. So yeah. in terms of, I feel that SAVAC like such a and Desh Pardesh are such a huge part of my own personal artistic development. Because of just my meetings and connection with the artists and institutions all happened at that time. I was really trying to understand what does it mean to be an artist? And especially an artist today and you know, having access to institutions and also understand that this entire education that I had, that I thought was progressive was completely Eurocentric. And that continued even, strangely enough, while I'm in New York, which is supposed to be a very open space. In terms of and through my entire art education that is not euro centric has been completely self taught and it's been self taught through organizations like Desh and SAVAC. So it is part of my education, it's part of my professional development. It's also key to me understanding that things have to work at a collective level. And that, as an artist, for some people maybe it works to be completely an individual whereas for me it's always been the combination of individual and the collective. And interestingly enough, we talked things that happened 20+ years ago but at the same time for me I feel like even in my art practice, my own art work that you were talking about earlier some of my artwork even today deals with a lot of the same issues. And then even in terms of my collective art practice, what people would call social practice, is being involved right now and on the board of directors in New York of SAWC which is a South Asian Women's Collective. Yeah and pretty much, a direct continuum of the work I was doing with SAVAC, I really focus on interdisciplinary art across mediums and focused on women artists. So, it's just really interesting, it's me, it's from an earlier phase in my life and at the same time it's very directly a part of who I am today. I always try to balance that individual, the collective. You know. I think as an artist, one thing, just having seen what

happened even SAVAC and Desh with founders and people, the key people who had that vision leaving. I feel that it's so important what we are doing of having this, let's just call it, intergenerational conversations and participation because that's how the organization continues to live. It can't forget about the past, it can't ignore the future. And I feel that's the the one thing is that I would hope for SAVAC to continue to always do is to continue to always look back at all the amazing things that have happened, also look at the challenging times but then also use those to continue to grow.

(1:21:04)

AM: Mhmm, yeah absolutely. Um thank you so much, is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to speak to before we close.

SB: Um, I think we are pretty good. I mean there are so many more separate conversations. I mean we've mainly spoken about the early years of SAVAC. Similar to like Desh where there was great work being done in terms of the work we were presenting, the people we were involved with us, there was a bit of a high. And then as we began to grow and as people, older people leave and people come on board, you may or may not share that vision and you may or may not have that expertise, you know that's where sometimes things, even through SAVAC there were moments of extreme difficulty. I just really hope that SAVAC continues to grow. That can be a whole separate conversation. I feel that I'm still quite nervous. So even the questions I was asking at the beginning like where's SAVAC now. Even if I'm not involved on a day to day basis it's still very close to my heart and the last thing I would want is for SAVAC to not succeed. Yeah. I feel that it's always just very____ that I feel that it's just a couple of slips away and I don't wanna be like...not to say there is great work but I don't know how you can sort of put an organization like that under issue of secure footing because that ground is never really secure. And maybe a lot of it just boils down to the financial aspects. if you don't have the resources to have key people running organization, how you can you, move forward? If you get a batch of people who just don't have the vision and the expertise what happens? yeah.

AM: I'm sorry go on.

SB: Yeah, that's it, that's it.

AM: I mean, I really really appreciate what you are saying in terms of looking to the history in order to kind of be able to move forward in a good way and I think that's really like part of the motivation behind this project also. it's like recognizing that all of the people that were involved that made the organization what it is and that it's so important to draw on those experiences and continue to in order to like actually be, actually thrive not just survive.

SB: Exactly, totally.

AM: Yeah, I'm gonna stop recording now is that ok. Do you want to put your video on for one second so we can see each other.

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Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 032 – Interview with Shyam Selvadurai

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Shyam Selvadurai (SS)

Interview Date: 13/05/2015
Interview Location: Conducted in-person at OISE in Toronto, ON

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AM: Okay so actually before we start talking about *Desh Pardesh* I'd love to hear about what you were up to in your work life and creatively prior to getting involved with *Khush* or *Desh Pardesh*.

[00:01:10]

SS: Well prior to getting involved with *Khush*. I was just – I mean I joined Kush just as I was getting out of university and so I hadn't – I kind of thought of I wanted to be a writer but I didn't really know. I mean I graduated in theatre from York University and I think that I just around that time I mean you were part of history but you don't know that you're part of history, you were just living your life in a way. You have no idea that something historical it's happening around you, except you receive it. And I think what I'd started happening was that whole identity politics movement. And so I had met Nelson, the head of *Khush* at a couple of Pride events and he had invited me to come along to one of the meetings or to come along to my house, you know come for a party or whatever, and I think that is how I got involved with him and it was sort of, kind of, an immediate a sense of relief that people were like you – were gay, who shared similar cultural backgrounds, and also to be around men who represented the kind of physical look that you liked, but seldom found in the bars because one is conditioned I think quite early to find certain people attractive based on your background, and I had grown up in Sri Lanka. So it was just a really wonderful thing I mean the return of big differences within Khush, it seemed very Ishmaili dominated, so being Sri Lankan felt a little outside of the whole thing, but you know I was used to negotiate being Other so it wasn't such a big deal other nurse and then I mean I made some good contacts and friends there it was nice to go out together and do things and boyfriends there and so I just and then Ian – Ian Rashid at that time was starting to do that was part of Khush – Salaam Bombay or–

Both: Salaam Toronto

SS: And I sort of got involved in that because I was very I was one of those people who obviously did the sword of grunt work I mean I actually like going to work because they gave me a chance to get to know people and better when you worked with them and so I was very much involved and you know hanging saris and putting up the chairs at the 519 and all of this kind of

stuff and so that was the beginning of it that first thing didn't really look up promising I mean it looks like any other kind of cultural event except I think there was drugs shows if I remember right I think so but maybe I'm remembering wrong but it didn't feel what it could have been when it turned out to be and then Ian was working at Deck Film and I was working at Deck film, no he was working upstairs at Fuze magazine, and then the Euclid was there and do you know the Euclid was downstairs the Euclid theater and then I got more involved in that – this is getting better and then I was involved in another event and I thought gosh my memory now things run into each other. I think there was a dash for Dash or something it in 1990. there was wasn't there, yes and it was the Euclid. I remember that. and then I left and then I became very close friends with Steve Parera, whom I genuinely, who's probably the only real friend friend that I took out of there. so and then I left Montreal because I wanted to write, I wanted to write, I wanted to become a writer by then, I knew I wanted to do this and so I just went to Montreal for a year-and-a-half and all of it was a failure, because it just didn't work it was the first novel. and then I started funny boy when I was in Montreal but by thenI was coming back here and it was very clear that this was quite an exciting place to be if you were salvation or even non-whites and English-speaking and Montreal seemed very dull in comparison and so I came back, I mean I also ran out of money and I moved into my parents basement and I think I got much more involved with Desh Pardesh on the side I think I was on the committee that year, and I was also doing things like we did the first Pride, people of color float which was very difficult to do because there were so many agendas to negotiate but we did pull it off, and then that year, that Desh, so it would have been in February or March 1992, is that right?

AM: Could be.

[00:06:31]

SS: It could have been because I remember it was winter but I remember that has the most memorable for me because it was at that event so that I read from Funny Boy for the first time. The first or which it been published in the Toronto South Asian Review and the reaction was just, I think people were very surprised because they knew me as his kind of young person who did all the – he was hanging around – is on the committee and doing this and that and even on the committee that year. All I remember is hanging sarees and doing a lot of the grunt work again and enjoying it for the same reason that I enjoy doing that stuff because you got to know people and hang out and laugh and all these kinds of things and so it was sort of a very memorable moment for me because the reaction was immediately positive and I had never read from funny boy before and people really got it and I remember going down from the stage and just the kind of applause you know and the people's faces as I went to the back of the theater to sit down and I think I was trying. So then just to go back a bit I think as an artist, what began to happen is that I begin to realize as I was talking to other gay men – other South Asian gay men the possibility of a sort of Sri Lankan gay romance between Aaji and Shahani in the novel and that sexuality that I had felt in Sri Lanka was possible to depict in work because other men were telling me their stories in a private away you know and I was beginning to see that it could be rendered into fiction. So I did it. I did do that and then the novel came out and then I was in the next Desh

Pardesh for sure but I was in no longer serving on the committee and by then I had met my partner to who is was white. And then Desh somehow then became a kind of inhospitable space for somebody who was you know in a mixed raced relationship but perhaps I felt somehow torn between these two things. I mean it's on now easily negotiable but then it was kind of it was different people had much more strict ideas about what they should be and the place of white people in these organizations and even in the lives of these people and on some level I believed in the and now I found myself with somebody who is white and it wasn't really – I needed to refigure what I was thinking and believing and meanwhile those around you don't share the same kind of thoughts and attitudes but now when I look back on it, it really was a birth of sorts, of ideas and cultureand I mean it really did change Toronto I think during that period and changed Academia certainly and so I think there were extremes and people did take positions because it was coming from a long period of Oppression and people were angry and feeling unsafe around white people and wanting to create a safe space and I remember sorry (drinks water) I remember that first person of color float that we did and I remember we used to meet at the Trinity Temple Church to discuss it and I remember this lesbian who was I don't remember what her race was came with her white partner and somebody asked the woman to leave and it was a building moment it was a difficult moment for me because for all my politeness and sort of humanness Felts of course she should stay she is this woman's partner but Another Part Of Me felt like she should go because we have had enough of having to negotiate ourselves and having to in white spaces and having to speak under the white gaze under the white opinion we live our entire lives like that so I should remember that incident and being really torn by because there were two really different parts of me In conflict. But obviously I was happy that she went because I was struggling to understand all of this stuff and you know it's not like that with the white Community was cutting us much slack because around that time there was also I'm the stuff around Nelly's where are these women of color ganged up on – well Gang up is wrong – but check power against June Colword and called her racist and it was unbelievable that this woman who was supposed to be this kind of like Paragon of social change and what's it, Casey House, was now being accused of being a racist and I remember that all the editorials and all of the commentary whether it was written by white people or non-white people was completely in her favor and that also there was all that sort of talk about who can write about what and I remember Timothy Finley writing that if he wanted to write from the point of view of a teacup or a teapot he would write from that point of you and I thought, yes it is what it is to you as an old white male. That we are – that the difference between you and me is just the difference between. I mean I'm just a teacup or a teapot for you and thinking gosh you know you and everybody who represented the white our world was so powerful and dominant to someone like me and who had the space in the globe and mail and the other papers were not understanding that it was not just a question of writing from the perspective of a teacup but it was a question of culture and for me it was of course coming from a Sri Lankan privileged background I recognize power very easily and if it is question of power and financial privilege and what we were really ultimately asking for and we made a mistake I think not completely focusing on that was that we wanted a piece of the pie. We wanted the money. We wanted to tell our stories so that we could be living artists, to that we could live as artists, work as artists. And that somehow got immediately diluted in this idea of who speaks for who and lost its umm – and something was lost. It was very clear to me

coming from the outside that that's got lost and got ridiculed and got to be the whole point of identity politics. Was that you – if you were… you could only speak from your rigid point of view, which of course goes again to create of instinct and the way that we work as artists but what we were really talking about with power and privilege and whose voices got heard.

[00:14:32]

SS: but somehow that despite the kind and I think it is very typical of the Canadian community and I think the British way of dealing with things is to push back hard in public but then negotiate and Grant things in private, so of course the Toronto Arts Council was giving us money to do desh Pardesh and the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Arts Council overcoming forward to give us money to do this and there was a lot of publicity around this Desh Pardesh, so then there was this and of course it got taken up by Academia and then you were suddenly being published and you know oh these people or being published, so there was this kind of back-and-forth relationship that one had with these people because they were on one hand it was clear that they were saying okay something is wrong something needs to be done here I remember that there was a riding through race there was a PIN Conference that set the whole ball rolling, where they had they were leafleting the pamphlets saying that pin was racist and Joan Carr until someone who's leafleting to fuck off basically (laughs) and that of course made her the big (inaudible) of the identity politics movement. I think rather unfairly at some level but interesting Lee I remember saying that yes something needed to be looked at here and I remember thinking yes she out of all of them saw it and understood that something needed to be and I don't remember her exact words but it was something along that line that there's something here that needs to be looked at I admired her for that you know she was on saying I'm going to take on your cause she was not going to take on our cars because it was on her cause but she was saying something needs to be examined. So I just have jumped all the votes but as you see it was kind of like everything was happening simultaneously and in memory also you don't really remember straightforward chronologically you move back and forth. So that I think with how it was for us. I mean it was, I look back on that period And I feel very happy that I live in that time that experience there because it has really shaped me as the way I think as a writer but as a human being and I think it I think that all of that identity politics made me hold her as a human being I think that I was fractured before and somehow I brought everything get together in this very I think that there was this I think that ultimately for me there was a time that existed before identity politics really, I mean really through Desh and Khush and there was a time after that and the time that was after that seem to was seems a more integrated person.

AM: I'm really interested in picking up on what you were saying right now about the wholeness and being able to express yourself in your art in a different way and you spoke earlier about being under the white guys constantly I guess one of my questions is what was not like to be part of a festival that in some way maybe try to operate outside of the white gaze.

[00:18:11]

SS: (laughs) Well apart from exciting, it was very exciting. It was you felt that you were learning as you went along it feels very important – sorry I have to cough (coughs) – but I think we were lucky to have Punam – because I think Punam really was like ahead of us she had already on some level processed all of this information and in a way actually processed it and she's a really smart person and I feel like she's already process all of this information, so when she was a coordinator during whatever term, you were again for me is an artist as a very curious person and as somebody who is interested in knowing what they don't know, I found her intimidating and on some level distant but at the same time very fascinating I was always interested in the programming meetings and listening to what you said even if I disagreed with her. No I don't really think we should do this or that but I found a really interesting and I think for me she provided a kind of some sort of solidity some kind of vision that ultimately became – that is the vision of Desh Pardesh is Punam's vision of it and I think that she showed us how you could bring together all these disparate parts – gay, lesbian, you know worker's rights, blah blah blahs anything and I think she showed that it was entirely possible to program this stuff in one festival and I think because she was so adept I think she really had this kind of futuristic take on it. Because for all of us I mean for me certainly, it took me awhile to get there but I felt that she showed me. It was clear to me that she showed me. It was clear to me that she knew how to do this, and I was intrigued by this and ultimately grateful that she was able to, that she had this Vision because it was the vision and it is the vision of Desh Pardesh, it was my vision too because that is what I wanted to be people to do – I wanted to write this novel that I was writing that integrated all of these parts and that was different from the South Asian literature out there that was monolithic in various ways and I think being at Desh Pardesh and Khush gave me some sort of courage and voice audience if you will and I didn't think that I was doing anything revolutionary at the time or Cutting Edge I just thought that I was doing this thing that incorporated all of these parts so I think that under the white gaze it didn't matter at that point I was sort of out of the white gaze I was not interested in them, because we didn't need to be interested in them we didn't need to see corporate funding for example we didn't need to justify ourselves, Toronto Arts Council seemed on board because Sharon Fernandez was there. And it seems like you were being understood more than understood allowed to do your own thing.

AM: Mhmm. And so were you around for the early there's no conversations you talked about Punam's vision, where you are around for those conversations kind of what the festival would look like and could you tell me a bit about what those conversations look like I mean it is a long time ago–

SS: Yeah I won't even remember the conversations

AM: Like what was the vision of Desh from your perspective.

[00:22:13]

SS: Well I mean it was coming out of Salaam Toronto which was very I mean Khush was sort of a South Asian boys hanging around and ya know have sex but you know have fun and if they

like to date each other which is great. I mean I really want to have parties and it was just really great to be able to do that and I think that it suited the membership and it suited us what all of us desperately needed which was to feel like you know who won Earth wants to try and have an organisation where it's all Gloom and all of that people we're just having fun and enjoying themselves but I don't think that was the vision for Desh. And I think because I listen to some of the talks too, you know some of the archival stuff and I know there was conflict and I think that Punam ultimately wrestled the festival away from that vision of Salaam Toronto and made it less saris and samosas and made it more political. I think I was just so on board with what she was doing in some way that it doesn't it wasn't really a, I mean as an artist how could you not respond to what she's doing because guys at Khush artist except for Ian and Punam is not an artist but she is somehow, I don't think she is an artist. But there was something, you could not help but respond. And there were all sorts of other I think the difference actually the big difference for me between being a part of the organizing committee and I hate to use the word organizing with Salaam Toronto because I don't think I was part of the organizing committee but you know being around them and doing stuff they weren't artists being at Desh, you were suddenly around everybody was an artist or trying to be an artist, so it was just a completely – it was a different way of seeing things – people were seeing things like you were and it was immediately clear to me that what happened was that I became slightly alienated from the Khush crowd not in any sort of angry way, but just that I suddenly saw that these people are closer to what I imagined or how I feel or how I think than those people, so it wasn't for me a big thing. I was aware that it was going on, but I can also shut things out if they don't interest me or if they are irrelevant in a way. And you know we were trying to put together a festival and so we just went on with it.

AM: and you sort of gestured to this a bit, but what do you think was the impact on the Toronto arts and culture scene outside of Desh

SS: I think that the odd thing about art is that and more specific you get the more universally you end up becoming and I think that it's impact was that even though it was so south Asian in its focus, its impact was greater family because he was gay and lesbian and workers rights and there were all sorts of other elements I don't even know what they were but it was suddenly it was bringing in a lot more people I mean I think people were genuinely interested in and coming from all cultural backgrounds and I think it signaled to motion the other art groups as well. Like in terms of Latin American group I think there was a black group, so I think that is what it was its impact. I think when it starts to grow in scope it became more and more impacted it became more parts of the art scene but I think more than its impact was produced people that went out into the mainstream art world ended things untied now some sort of language and skill with which to do it. I think that's what it really did.

AM: and so for yourself as a writer so you were sort of if I understand correctly you were still in your undergrad when you first were involved with Khush? or were you–

[00:26:53]

SS: No I finished my graduate, yes I graduated from school.

AM: You were graduated, sorry yeah. So from the time you started being involved with Desh, Salaam Toronto until later on, how would you describe that shape to you as a writer – the experiences with Desh?

SS: Well it shaped me I suppose – it showed me how politics and art could meet in a very holistic way that the word did not need to be, what is it agit prop – agitation propaganda theater – where was strictly about the political agenda, that it didn't need to be about the political agenda to be political. We are political. Every action we do is political in some level, and that again I learned at Desh, you know. And for years of York University never taught me that, I never thought like that it didn't even cross my mind that everything one does the way one lives is political. But it could be seamlessly integrated into a story about a young boy growing up in Sri Lanka and coming to terms with his sexuality in that they didn't need to be outside of the Art, we could be within the art. I think that is the main thing that I got out of it as an artist. I mean a lot of the programming was awful (laughs)

AM: (laughs)

SS: It was pretty awful but it was sort of now when I think about it, gobsmackingly awful and funny, but not intending to be funny but funny but it had so much heart to it and it had so much, I can't explain it, I mean there were so many poses in the whole damn thing. There were so many people posing as artists or were not artists who were not really even trying to be artists, but who wanted the stage to do their bit, to scream politically, but you know it was all part of the whole thing and it was the energy in the hall on the stage I was thinking about that you can't really it was of a time it can't be replicated now because we live in such a corporatized world, it just can't be replicated because we wouldn't give space to those people on stage now because they were awful, but in their awfulness was something wonderful at the same time where they rambled and went over time but then somehow ended up in an interesting place. Art is much more has to be slicker now unfortunately. So I mean the end it was kind of it was about the energy in the room I think mostly and there were a few people who were good but mostly it was about the energy in the room and a kind of just a sense of community and fun I suppose

AM: You mentioned at some point that Desh had an influence on Academia, could you speak of it more to that?

[00:30:52]

SS: Well (coughs) I think that more than academia, Desh, I mean the whole identity politics movement changed academia in the sense that I went to school and I never studied a non-white writer and I remember wanting to do a paper for my mother in history course on Theater history course on I said Black Theater Canada at that time I can't remember what it was called

but the professor said I don't know how to help you with this, but go ahead and do it. So and then you know come the nineties and now there is so much presence of diversity in the courses and everybody wants to take the queer course and South Asian course and I teach so I'm quite aware of just how diverse the students read whatever their race is and that is the result of identity politics. It is identity politics the blew this kind fresh air throughout academia and yeah I mean identity politics stretched beyond color to include queerness as well. I mean and yeah it's sort of another burst forward for the women's movement. I mean it was all there together at the same time and then of course it's really radicalized people because it was something really awful that was going on that was not being treated in the way that it should be.
and when you just mention that you teach now I'm curious about in your experience with your students now in the way that you see young people coming up today as young people of color as artists as writers, what possibilities do you see for them that might be different from then or what are the similarities? what kind of context for the emerging in as writers would you say?

AM: As writers?

SS: Or well as people making art. Well emerging I suppose into a world in which the novel, I don't know if it's dying. I don't know if novels and short stories are dying but there certainly seems to be an attrition to it because people are not reading in the same way, people are very distracted by the sort of media, and by the internet in particular and phones and texting and all that. So, since people lives in the midst of their own drama, their own story which they display constantly to the world for and it's for this great neediness, so in that context the artist has lost some sort of credibility because everybody is an artist everybody sees themselves as an artist and the idea of the expert has also lost credibility sadly in the humanities, not in the sciences. So it's in this world that people are trying to do creative writing and create non fiction and nonfiction all this kind of stuff but it keeps going on it keeps going on and I don't really know what to make of it because I mean it is interesting now that the e-book has flattened out the sales and has a dip as well and young people as well surprisingly are turning to the physical book. But where they getting his books I think it's second hand bookstores frankly, so again there's no profit for us there's no way to make a living, so I think what is in this situation of trying to work. I don't know what to say it again people but I also feel that it is there a world. I mean I now fifty so, I feel it is their world and they need to kind of make it as they see it. But I also know that something like Desh Pardesh can not ever happen again. This thing will not happen because what drove it in terms what volunteering. Who is a volunteer that drove it and it was the part of it that volunteerism gave it its greatest energy and the recent people volunteer the reason that I volunteered was that if you wanted to meet people and you wanted to hook up with South Asian guys you needed to go to or you needed to go to Desh Pardesh and now all of that happens online so that primary impulse of sex, let's be honest, is now removed from volunteerism. You don't need to volunteer to get it off anymore (laughs). So I suppose on some level, so because of that Desh just can't happen again and yeah that is just as. It will never happen. It was a moment that was pre-internet technology and now we're in a different era it can never happen again like that

AM: So with the internet technology age and with you know you said you spoke about the things that are lost with everybody becoming an artist. Do you think there's something to be gained in everybody becoming an artist?

[00:36:32]

SS: Nothing. I don't think there's anything. I think that – I think that, no I don't think there's anything to be gained. I think there was nothing to be gained for the people doing it there is nothing to be gained for – certainly nothing to be gained for the artists because, you know so your mom likes it and you're aunt likes it and your boyfriend likes it and your husband likes it and you know you get all of these likes on Facebook, but what does it mean it means nothing, it means you wasted your time when life is being lived out there and you are kind of not present in it. Anyways now its all proving to be very bad for your brain and your sense of psychic well-being, this absense of being present in your life, or being physically present, because everything now is to be recorded and presented to the world and I know well what that is like because when I go and when I travel and I hate to do that, but if I have to do a travel article to pay for my travel, you were seeing the world very differently a you are viewing the world for its different kind of narrow lens because as a journalist you have to get your damn story which is different from traveling in the more amorphous way of letting the whole world come to you and that is what these people do and so everything narrow lens, so everybody in the Louvre wants to photograph themselves with the Mona Lisa, but everybody misses the Da Vinci outside of Mary meeting Elizabeth I think it is with John the Baptist and it is such a gorgeous picture, but you can just stand there and look at it because nobody is interested in it. That one so they can put it on Facebook and whatever it is and send it out to say. So I think people miss life and so I don't I don't know what it is doing I don't. And I'm not being a Luddite about it because I find the internet just very useful, God as a writer in terms of your research I can't tell you what it's like to be able to research a more kind of historical novel now, to be able to research online is just phenomenal, it is just incredible and so doesn't make me a better artist no no what makes me a better artist a better writers, is reading. So do you see what I mean there is a kind of dichotomy it is quick and it is easy to do something like research and God I love those PDFs because you can mark them up and find what you wanted fast from the comment column and that's wonderful but it does not still make me a better writer. And that time saved, it has to be curated now I think and I'm very good at that. I've learned, that is why does taking us so long to have this meeting because I think that I need time for daydreaming, I need time to make my lunch in a very slow way it is not just some crappy music or what am I watching now, I'm enjoying the crown while I am eating. It is all kind of things that I think are important to me as a human being to sort of enjoying your life but also important as an artist because I think daydreaming is a very important part of being an artist and being a human being actually and it is now being proven to be true that you actually need – your brain needs to needs this down time. And we don't daydream very much anymore because the internet does not allow us to do it, or we don't, we are seduced by the internet. The internet has no power over you really, but you are seduced by it and it does not allow you to daydream.

AM: I'm with you 100% on that one. I have taken to now just listening to music when on transit and looking out the window, making sure I do that, because otherwise it is taken up with the phone or – but I do read actually on transit, but out of curiosity what are you reading right now. Because I'm reading an historical novel, called restoration and it is really good. I mean it is really interesting, I'm really really enjoying it a lot

[00:41:17]

AM: nice and I actually had a question, I gather that you did a residency at U of T last year. Can you tell me a bit about that, was it something about Desh Pardesh?

SS: Yes it was, they asked me to do a panel.

AM: Oh a panel.

SS: On anything that I wanted. So did it handled it started with a reading for my novel The Hungry Ghost because the Toronto parts take place in three identity politics and so you get a clearer sense of Shivant struggling in the gay world I'm trying to make sense of it to deal with race, his race and all that in a world where there is no language deal with it. So I started I was first one I read from the book and then after that it was Sharon Fernandez who did who talked about Desh Pardesh and about the sort of moment at the time and then it was Sharlene

AM: Sharlene Bamboat.

SS: Sharlene who did the kind of talked about SAVAC, but also about what it was like for her to do it. And I think that was the three of us, wasn't it? Yes. I'm sorry it's because I have a terrible memory, I'm honestly, things fade fast. It's nothing to do with age, I've always been like that. So, yes it was, for me, that was very inspiring to really look at that history through these peoples points of view. And there were some people from the old Desh crowd in the audience, but not many, I think whatever, people have moved on with their lives and it was very, I think people were there the fact that they were very taken up with it because we are all now actually the same age and you know we are all sort of being through this you know and so I think it crossed – it crossed boundaries because it was about the moment. You see and white gay men were also having their moment because they were dealing with AIDS and you know, needing to be radical around it and assertive and all of this kind of stuff. Hmm it was.

AM: So what is it like now, to close, to revisit all of this. Are their emotions that you notice come up in thinking about that time or what does it feel like?

[00:43:46]

SS: Well, I mean you know, I suppose is that I have a great deal of nostalgia for that time. I don't want to – I have always lived my life very fully – I don't really want to return to that

place. For no other reason other than I am quite happy where I am right now but I suppose I kind of miss you know being with Steve and living on Roncesvailles and it was a no place you know and you know, I miss being like that. I miss – I miss that but I don't wanna go back to it. I think that when you were young and when you're in your twenties anyway everything is still sort of new and terrifying and fun and you know you laugh do later on. I don't know why that is but it is the case. Yeah I think as I said earlier I am very happy to have lived in that. But I do not hold it out to young people or hold it over young people now and say well you never have a lucky enough to live like this and blah blah blah you know I don't feel like I don't think like that I don't feel like that because I just have this sort of strong belief the people in their twenties now or just living, will live longer than me and are the future and so I don't really I have no interest in that in saying isn't it terrible now we live in such a corporatized environment blah blah blah blah blah blah which I have already said and which I don't hold our era somehow superior to people who are living now in their early twenties I just hope that they find a way to just live as vividly and as interestingly and that the internet is providing some sort of real contact Beyond I don't really believe in this and virtual reality virtual groups and all of that I don't think it is the same you can't really know human beings until you've met them face to face you pick up so much. Two animals basically pick up I think a lot from each other I feel like so I just like there is a kind of authenticity to their engagement as artists and as people and put activists that go beyond the internet so that is what I hope for them but as I said it is not my life it is not my future, probably will be dead in 30 years and whatever it doesn't matter (laughs).

AM: –that's a great way to end. (laughs)

AM: Is there anything else about Desh Pardesh or lessons that you took away? Or anything else that you would want to add that we didn't talk about?

[00:47:10]

SS: I think that's it. There is an alumni for this and we are all now about my age I think that when we meet each other in the streets or out at events or whatever, I think there is a recognition of family there. I think that that is just there. And so when you meet them it's like there is something special when you see them now there is really something special. Certainly there is something really special when I run into them – a kind of happiness you know and that you feel when you meet family you like. (inaudible) Even family that you don't particularly like, but you still I think but everything away, to the side and you know – I like that, I love to see them at my readings, I love when they come, or when I encounter them on the street. And there was something there there's just something there and it's so I think that I feel very lucky to have had that and to be able to feel that way about these people when I meet them. And when you get older all those earlier conflicts and huffs and Tantrums and whatnot or forgotten, you just sort of – that is a nice thing by getting older, you face the big exit, a lot of that falls away.

AM: Well I would say that you are far away from the Big Exit (laughs)

SS: Well you never know, you know. Big eyes that could be today. (snaps) I don't know where are you going to put this thing in the interview but I'll just tell you, it was interesting as an artist and a somebody who like for lack of a better word a humanist to try to justify that idea that oh you should only speak for your experience. I was determined to do that and I was pushing against – I really sincerely believe that but the more that I became an artist the more that I practiced as an artist, the more difficult it began to be to hold that position and I remember having discussions with it with my partner, or even with my editor, where I was realizing that I was losing ground, that whatever saying on some level wasn't making any sense then – it ceased to make sense. And so when I finally abandoned the idea, but kept what was essentially in my head, which was power and access, then I really understood what was going on and I understood what I think was really important was the critical establishment, there should be enough criticism in the critical establishment from people who are watching watching for this stuff and viewing it from outside and I suspect that Has lost ground somewhat unfortunately. I think that there is a place for authenticity, a strong place I think there is, a question of why is a white person writing this stuff what is there agenda, I think there is a question of criticizing them for not getting it right or and for exploiting the situation, but that I think over time is being neutralized and lost and fortunately, we don't really talk about that anymore in the papers and it's not very discussed and we don't talk about that period. And so I think that became to me suddenly the more important Focus the idea that everybody can write or create whatever they want, but who gets published whose films are shown and what, who are The Gatekeepers and how is the gatekeeping going and is anybody critiquing the work on the idea of why is it being written and what is the agenda of the person who is writing it.

[00:51:46]

AM: Will actually that piece resonated with me when you first started talking about it because I was thinking about South African art. Have you heard about this human zoo reenactment. so there's this white South African artist who is creating a human zoo with all black humans in the zoo as an Art Exhibit and really important conversations need to be had about that, but rather than conversations about who are The Gatekeepers, is the person actually engaging with that history in a meaningful way, the question was just should a white person be allowed to do this or not.

SS: Yes.

AM: And it does miss the point actually.

SS: Yes.

AM: Like that version of identity politics that I think it's still really rears its head a lot, actually empties all of what is important and meaningful. and I understand that reaction, in the reaction comes out of hundreds of years of colonization and racism, but it's like can we actually have conversations that are as important as artists?

[00:52:45]

SS: Yeah, but also the frustration also comes out of the frustration I think the conversation comes out of the pushback comes out of the fact that despite the end of apartheid, it is the white artist that are still the gatekeepers and I don't know – how many black South African writers do I know who have been published internationally and being shortlisted for Bookers and stuff – nobody, I can't think of anybody. There is a cape coloured guy who has been shortlisted, but really honestly this minority you still speaking in the world for the majority, so I can see that there is a lot of anger and problems, but you know it is really about as you said power and access but it has become about this conversation you see, but actually I think in a strange way, if I was still look back now from the perspective of Desh Pardesh looking at this argument from – this particular thing from the perspective of Desh Pardesh, I would say in some way this argument this pushed back even though I think it is the wrong approach to take, still I think is going to create the right approach because I think in addressing this in this very kind of really stark way I think it's going to address in some strange way the other issue I hope. Because that is the way it was with Desh Pardesh, we were going on about those who speaks for who and identity politics and all that. Sorry voice appropriation is what it was. Voice appropriation we were going on about that but I think it was a way of keeping something up front that he needed to change I think came out of this voice appropriation argument and debate, but ultimately for me as an artist, I was glad to get out of that room.

Not a Place On The Map: The Desh Pardesh Project

DP 036 – Interview with Zainub Verjee

Researcher/Interviewer: Anna Malla (AM)
Participant: Zainub Verjee (ZV)

Interview Date: 18/06/2015
Interview Location: Conducted in-person in Mississauga, ON.

AM: I was wondering if actually before we start talking Desh Pradesh, if you could tell me a little bit about what you were up to leading up to your involvement with Desh. I gather you were a part of the western front? Could you tell me a little bit about kind of 70s, 80s? what kind of, what you were doing?

ZV: Absolutely. Okay, I'll start really early on. Because it's related to my work with the arts. I went to Simon Fraser – I came to Canada in 1973 and I went to Kaplana College (maybe: Capilano University?) and from KC, I went to Simon Fraser.

ZV: I had to take literature and different things. so when I got to Simon Fraser, I had actually become quite bored with the sciences and moved to the social sciences. But really ended up having a degree in business, but all my electives were in the fine arts and really early on I had introduction to contemporary jazz video. You know visual arts architecture, a sort of variety of things and at Simon Fraser University I was quite involved with different aspects of the arts through my studies but also through theater. I auditioned for a company called Institutional Theater Productions and I actually got accepted and Institutional Theater Productions was founded and directed by Leon Pownall who is the very well-known Canadian Theatre director and he was working with the University of Victoria literature program and what they were doing was theater for the inmates at Matsqui prison which was the maximum security – medium Security Federal Prison in Matsqui, BC. So I started with theater and working with inmates and one of the first plays that we did was Mack the Knife and Albrecht, and I really got into the ideas of theatre of the oppressed and Augusto Boal and you know, I was also part of theater stuff that was going on at Simon Fraser and at the same time experimenting with the DO. So I graduate out of the University and it's a very hard time economically in BC. Graduates aren't getting jobs, etc. At the same time as at the University you know I was meeting people like Sarah Diamond, who is now the president of OCAD and we became really good friends. Ken Lam who is part of the Vancouver School and visual arts and founder – debated founder – of the Aural Gallery. We became a group that hung out and explore ideas and talked a lot. And shortly after I graduated I went away for one year to see my mother, but when I came back I started working with Sarah Diamond on the women's labor history project and got knowledgeable about video and then in 1987, I was hired by Women in Focus--which was a feminist artist-run center in Vancouver. I

was hired on one of these summer youth internships for 6 months and then was hired permanently as the distribution manager of the film and video collection. So, the Women in Focus had the floating curatorial gallery, which really meant that they invited different curators to curate visual arts and I distributed the works of women. So that was a whole engagement with the media arts, it really began then for me. A range of really experimental work and documentary and you know sort of really political and social issue work, they're all so you know, there have been a lot of experimenting with technology and people were taking out for two packs and really into reading and trying to get space at Rogers. It was kind of a wonderful moment in those early days because it's the beginning of artist-run centers. Things are really happening, the women's studies departments were being formed at the universities, so there was really this kind of social gender race coming together in some ways, *Women in Focus.* What was also at the same time happening, was sort of this rise of identity politics. I lived in England I was quite influenced by what was happening in England and I sort of realized being part of those discussions with Patrick coming in the sword of decimation of culture with the council the Brixton riots the race riots and the kind of whole mobilization of what was known as the Black Mobilization Movement. Black was the organizing category for Black people and South Asians and people of colour to come together. I was quite influenced by that and in my own work I had started of course publishing writing on the arts and being published in Fuse and Parallelogram and realized that in my work actually no work by women of color was being distributed and so Lorraine Chan who worked at the National Film Board at the time, and I were having a conversation at some event some film screening. And we were like we should have a little event and show the work of women of color, because it just wasn't present and hence the seeds were born for Invisible Colors. So we met and we started to sort of look for the work and there really wasn't very much. So, what we finally realized there was like 8 works or 10 works that we could identify or locate and then we realized that to show 10 works would be great, but that maybe we need to go a little bit bigger and then we formed under the auspices of the National Film Board and a focus group formed invisible colors and we put an advisory board together which included Aboriginal women and women of color and begin the work of invisible colors which ended up being which manifested. In 1989 we spent the year organizing and raised like $500,000 in 18 months to put on this event which ended up being works from 52 countries over a 100 and ten works being shown a huge symposium on [inaudible]. That work was really historically significant because it was not that other things we're not happening in Canada but the magnitude and impact of that one singular event was so enormous in terms of opening up the dialogue in terms of green to the for real kind of tensions between the white feminist movement and women of color. It also was knocking hard at the funding agencies doors such as a Canada Council for the Arts and that kind of influence on the formation of a racial Equity committee and it was a highly successful event in that not only did we bring all these women to the table and we had a dialogue with them, with each other we screened the works and we had a media literacy school program and also made money and I think what and this is where the breakdown sort of started to a car because at the same time that all of this was going on *Women in Focus* was having you know financial difficulties and legally the money. I'd come through Women in Focus because they were the non- for- profit artist-run center it couldn't come through a crown agency. The National Film Board, they were the actual custodians of that money and took it which led to you know a lot of things but there were some

internal issues going on. There was a lot of tension between the women of color and the feminists, which you know, and shoot for about two to three years which will finally led to the close down of both and it was horrendous. It was you know so fraught, with tension and it came down to sort of some hardcore essentialisms that emerged that were really devastating to both the survival of the things the *Women in Focus* and obviously invisible colors but anyway that was a really interesting moment where you know the really hard on both economically, legally, culturally, morally, this kind of face off occurs in Canadian history. After all of that it happened, I had also been doing some work at the front and then was hired as the Director.

AM: That's the Western Front?

ZV: The Western Front. And so that's from the shutdown of Women In Focus, an invisible colors, to being the director of Western Front and sort of you know really engaged with my art practice and continued writing but while all of this was going on. Obviously, we were always in dialogue a discussion with what else was happening in the country such as Salaam Toronto. We were trying to show Ian's and Kaspar's work, "Bolo Bolo" and you know there was all that kind of production and so there is a real sort of interesting, South Asian community in Vancouver. That was kind of leading you know, that I was mentoring and leading there were lots of people that were a part of that, that became part of that, there was always Sharma, Salaam and Jamal, and you know the writer. Oh no what's his name, he teaches at the Okanagan Ashok Mathur we were all sort of engaged with the whole sort of writing race across difference. So like it wasn't just the visual arts or the media arts, it's like we were engaged in all of those discussions and you know Invisible Colors happens. I started writing really speaking out and I was appointed to the Vancouver Art Gallery's programming committee for Women because my thing was on race and gender and you know we really actually took on the Vancouver art gallery. We formed a little collective called "Local Color" in which we all came together and really publicly took on the Vancouver Art Gallery for their complete lack of showing art by people of color right? Which led, had its own personal repercussions because it's institutional and we can never question the institution because they have the power and it's because of their actions they immediately remove me from their boards and committees, but it actually empowered me. It actually gave me more power because they were doing exactly what we expected them to do they just fell into that and because of the kind of that work I was doing in questioning that institution and questioning policy I was appointed by Gordon Campbell to the Vancouver Arts Initiative early on which was short of really about the future of arts in Vancouver and you know the cultural planning and at the same time I was appointed by (maybe: Durian Mahtzari?) who is the Minister of Small Business Tourism and Culture to the BC arts board and we actually works towards and signed off on Bill 12 which formed the BC Arts Council. We were responsible for the formation of a BC Arts Council. As you can see, I was really involved in shaping I guess cultural policy as much as I was being an artist and critical writer and critic and you know a sort of multiplicity of things, but that is always that's what we had to do, all of it we had to write about it we had to make the work we had to administer it. We had to organize it and I mean it was very much part of the norm because nobody else was doing it we had to do it anyway after I was at the Western Front for you know 90-99, Director from 91-98 and then in 1999, I went to work at the Canada Council

of the Arts. And left while at the beginning of 2006 I was seconded to the Department of Canadian Heritage for a year and then I moved to Mississauga but even at the council I was an officer in the media arts when it came to it I was the one who was seconded and pulled out to develop the (inaudible) – because Canada Council and the department of Canadian Heritage had signed an MOU for the culturally-diverse you know programming for the equity office. And I actually developed and wrote and designed the grants (inaudible) – I was pulled out just to do that – had to do it in 6 weeks in which I had to meet with the community. All the board but that is the kind of work that I do so they just took me and so I went to the Department of Canadian Heritage it was also because I was also looking at this whole idea of you know a transnational Canada and digital culture you know the programming is just not responsive to the changes and then I came to Mississauga as the inaugural director to start up a division for culture and make this city's first master plan for culture. So that's sort of one very quick swipe and I probably left out lots of things, but you know they might come up later or we can think about something else that you want to particularly know about.

AM: As your kind of very deeply engaged in the media arts. The development in particular and promotion of women in media arts and women of color in Media Arts through the film festival and through the other work that you're doing and then you were talking about, you know, you were engaged in some way from a distance with Salaam Toronto or you knew it was happening. So, what was it that you knew about first let's say Salaam Toronto, before we talk about Desh.

ZV: Yeah, well I knew that it was you know really organized as an activist, this thing and from my understanding at that time I think it was around queer politics and we were where aware of let's say Ian Rashid's work, because you know one of the issues that people of color or queer community had, is also how do you come out not to the Canadian community but to your own community, families to your parents and sort of all the taboos surrounding that. So caught between and activism and on one hand but yet you know finding this sort of safe spaces in which to articulate and talk and make your work so we were totally aware of what was happening. We are always, there was always some dialogue going on not just Vancouver and Toronto it was happening wherever those communities were located right because people were wanting to come together people were looking for and creating the spaces to have those discussions to find kind of. I mean from my perspective maybe looking back maybe they were safe spaces that we were creating right so I was aware that Ian was doing – and I think they were obviously other people behind Salaam Toronto, but my sort of connection to it was through what Ian was doing. And then I think at the same time or perhaps around the same time my chronology might not be exact here but Rungh had started up, so they were starting up, so they were starting to write about things and there were other things going on here. And then sort of how Desh was sort of emerging also and what were those conversations and so yeah, that would be what I can say about it.

AM: And were you involved with any the conversations as Desh was emerging. Were you involved in any of that process of visioning what Desh would be about?

ZV: No, I was not involved in the visioning of Desh as such, but would I say no. I should say that the movers and shakers were definitely having conversations with us because it was a really South Asian contingent in Vancouver and there were a lot of conversations going on back and forth right. But I think none of us were invited to sit on an advisory or you know, I think Toronto was trying to make its own thing happen. And I was on an advisory but we were invited definitely to participate in panels and show our work and you know I know at least coming three or four times for different events as a participant in some way. And whilst things were as Desh was sort of emerging and growing an articulating itself sort of caught in its own tensions there were always discussions about what was happening. Because you know there were also tensions huge tensions right and it seemed often that there was just un-clarity around the mandated vision of Desh and there was so much power struggle around it right and I think it was all because people wanted a space, a voice to be at the table. And maybe Desh wasn't representing them in the way they wanted to be represented and so there were all of these struggles going on and in fact everyone had a space at the table but we were not able to see it objectively at the time because it was such a ripe moment and all these things that happened they were so exciting and it was so pushing the boundary and we were really finding our voice in some way and a way to participate as activists as social workers as artists and somewhere in the intersection of all those things and one year it was moving too much toward this. There would be this kind of pull back towards this and actually none of that had to happen but it had to happen in some way right because I think there was room for all of it, it's just that it was perhaps and maybe you know I can say this in retrospect was there wasn't enough experience at the table yet in terms of actually how to manage and run and work and organization in a particular way because it had all of the potentials of becoming really big and it did but then it dies. And I think really that's the way I can speak about it.

AM: Can you tell me a little bit more you said the phrase the moment was right can you tell me a little bit more about this socio-political moment that you are speaking of?

ZV: Yeah, it was really such a moment's in Canadian history. But it's a moment where it's about the identity politics and received that moment to be a part of that discourse and to intervene in it and have a voice and it's so I think that it wasn't just a group of artists it was a real intersection of society in are different labors coming together to actually talk about those things right. Because it was never just about being a person of color just being Queer or just being an artist because as I said we had to do all of it we had to write about it, we had to be activists, we had to be creative. We have to fight the battles we had to make the work we had to show the work we had to talk about the work we had to intervene in Councils we had to intervene at so many levels. And is the moment it is not there now not in the same way not to say that we are not still doing those things but it's not present in the same way it's a very different kind of much more neo-liberalized governmentality or mentality. Although it was all started then but we still felt we were still able to find the spaces to speak that I do not see today in the same ways I'm not saying we've been shut down but we can't occupy the space in the same way and you know it's like you take on the Canada Council for the Arts and you see what's happening there today, it's arts for everybody and

its culture for people of color and Aboriginal people. It's like being ghettoized, lumped. it created those spaces, but we were not looking for some ghettoized things, right? And they have become institutionalized and solid in there – Not to say that they should disappear, but they need a better vision they need better lead people in there to be rethinking these things. But the community is not engaged in that anymore in the same way it's been accepted I think to some extent.

AM: What has been accepted?

ZV: That those offices – The Aboriginal Office and the Equity office – sit there and that's our place to go. I don't think I got the same kind of questioning is going on. It might be going on but not with the same occupational space and investment into that. I mean we were occupying literally and physically, the national film boards offices in Montreal. Like we took over the director's office, right? Sat down in her chair (laughs). I mean those sorts of things were happening. And this is not the time for those things. There are different ways to go about it but I don't see the, at least I don't feel and see, that same kind of. I'm not saying that people aren't fighting the fight you know, it's just the moment is so different and the thinking around it has to be very different and how we approach it or how we take it on. It cannot be what it was then. That's not how we can do that anymore. I don't know if I'm being clear to you.

AM: Yeah.

ZV: But it's a certain kind of activism and occupation of space and place within our struggles and within wanting a voice and wanting to be seen that we were able to really. Like looking at invisible colors also it's interesting. I told you we raised $500,000 *then* for women of color in eighteen months. The Canada Council didn't come in. They gave no money to it. But it was a really interesting moment globally because all of the concentration that was on Women's development and that's where we got the money. I mean, it was CEDA, and NORAD and all these were the countries – I mean the institutions – and that's how we raised the money. And then the Canada Council came to the event, to see you to check it out but it wasn't even supported as a Women in Focus event which is ridiculous but you have to understand what was happening what is happening globally. We are not so isolated here sitting in Canada as these little communities we belong to – we are a part of something and I think that kind of look that kind of take is not happening and it's still about being very now – Because then there was that moment right, that occurs and then there is a heavy cultural policing and essentializing that happens and then everything becomes really politically correct you know within the larger country and really exaggerated within our own community you really could not speak. A person of color could not speak about Aboriginal people, right? It was shut down. You just couldn't do it and white people were too scared and if they did they were taken on and it really was not useful. It was not useful at some level, but then the sort of political correctness was really absorbed by our communities and now it's like still – you can't speak - and we don't. Anyway.

AM: I want to sit with this for a minute. In terms of what identity politics looks like today and

how it plays out as compared to have it was playing out as was kind of first emerging as a spoken kind of identification anyway as a way of actually looking, actually claiming solidarity claiming Sisterhood claiming all of these things. Because you're saying the moment is different now and obviously it's different in a multitude of ways but in terms of identity politics specifically, do you see differences? How would you compare the two moments?

ZV: Well what was that – somebody asked me a really interesting question. Why did invisible colors happen in Vancouver? and not let say Toronto or Halifax? For that matter where a lot of black communities reside? And so then, you know, it was like, well it happens because I'm there working in particular space – not just that – it is also because of the influence of colonialism. I grew up under the color bar, I grew up in England, I'm really like the whole sort of Thatcher, Reagan, Brian Mulroney are all entering the stage. Thank you. At a sort of geo-political level, what is happening. That was the influence, right? And that is what – and it was also a post-colonial discourse in terms of the way we were looking at it. And we were looking at Black British writers, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy and what were they writing about and you know, those were the influences on me. That is what I was bringing to the table and the articulation of these things. Now, twenty- five or twenty-six years later. Almost three decades are passing in which there are different moments to grasp here. It's not that you know we've all given up or that there is no resistance or that we've lost our agency it's just that how the agency how we articulate the resistance or how it gets articulated or how we occupy this space. Is we'll just have to be right if it, because our thinking in some ways and I think we talked about this while we were eating, was to list the political correctness the inability to imagine in a different way. We have kind of almost become. I don't want to say that we've become stuck there. We haven't – I don't think we're having enough discussions in particular ways that would job the imagination or thinking of even how to approach or even articulate our place again. We had a lot of power in that moment. Put it that way and I don't feel like we have that power now and it's not – it's very much because we are living in this very neo-liberalized state right. It's not because white people said no you cannot have it or we are not just taking it but it is more complex. And I think that, but there is always agency, always space to resist, to re- articulate, to replay to reposition, to re-voice or voice differently, you know. You see it in the art community. it's like how even the whole move away from like how artist rent centers has become so institutionalized and at the same time, artists are no longer interested in artist-run centers. artists are interested in the market. Right? They want to all belong in the market, which is, really not what the space of artist run centers ever was. So you know the sort of shifts, that have occurred globally and how even art is being commodified and you know all of that stuff. It's all about yes we need to make the money and we need to earn a living but you know it's like I think they see that that is solution and that will be their panacea but it won't. I mean you have to be Damien Hurst if you want to be famous. You have to be that famous. You can't just be. So it's kind of interesting sort of this huge oh we have to go to the art fairs and all the biennales, and growing and there are new curators and do you know it's really quite kind of wonderful to look at it, as this sort of (inaudible: breaded?) circus that is going on. So you know, and then for example, where is the space of Artist Run Centers? Of course they exist, of course they're getting funding but they are getting funding to keep their doors open and not do too much. Without a huge amount of difficulty and we were

talking and yet there is also this issue because it is public funding and because of the same peers coming to the table, yet there is not enough competition. There is not enough creativity and imagination because it is so so contained in some way, right?

AM: Yeah, and I think when we think about neoliberalism, you go to the schools for example and you think about the ways in which, I mean you are engaging with university still – you are doing your post Graduate Studies, is that correct?

ZV: Mhmm.

AM: At York, but even earlier at school. Let's say people who are going to art school at this point. I wonder, because I know even in doing, you know a liberal arts degree, it is now a product that you are getting from the University. It is not–

ZV: It is not learning.

AM: It is a product and students who seeing it as a marketplace, right?

ZV: Yeah is a complete marketplace. They might as well just be technical schools, because it's all market and branding and products and yeah–

AM: And you think about what that breeds?

ZV: Yeah its very utilitarian. It's instrumental it's all of those things. I actually never went to art school even then, I didn't go to art school by that time and I'm kind of grateful that I learned my art outside of art school. But that is exactly what is happening. The thinking it is all about looking after number one. but again these are all very broad, general statements obviously because it's never for one moment what I say is that we don't have agency or that there is no organizing or resistance because it is always there.

AM: Absolutely

ZV: Yeah, and just how things have got shut down and you know like Rungh was shut down. There were lots of literary magazines – ours shut down because it was impossible right. Even the art magazines went after the other (inaudible). And also advocacy bodies for the arts have shut down. Canadian conference for the arts. This government – one after the other – just shutting it down. So yeah it's interesting, I guess I would like to ask you maybe a question if you don't mind. I mean how do you see, you're representing SAVAC and you're here on SAVAC's behalf – I mean, how do you see the place of SAVAC in all of this?

AM: I mean it really spoke to me what you were saying the sort of like the sad disappearance of artist run centers significance because of the way neoliberalism plays out in the arts world. The biggest role SAVAC has to play right now is in actually providing a lot of what we do at this

point, is providing mentorship to young artists who were trying to figure out what is the lay of the land. What are we up against. What does it look like. How do we apply for Grants. How do we do these kinds of things and then to actually because we operate without a gallery space, making these interventions into I mean mainstream galleries and actually being in spaces. not necessarily the AGO, I mean it has happened in the past.

ZV: It has yeah.

AM: That hasn't happened in a while, but – and actually engaging a diverse group of people in artful conversations around what this moment is that we are in. Like a lot of the work that we do and have showcased does speak to neoliberalism and speaks to a kind of transnational approach to actually understanding this moment. I think – I actually personally think that the mentorship piece is huge – in terms of like next generation of people coming up and trying to make a place for themselves as artists as community organizers, as people who are – you know –trying to figure that out. Part of this project to me is actually we need to know the histories. We need to understand the various – I mean it's not going to be a history – it's going to be various stories about this period of time in the nineties, the late eighties to 2001 kind of thing. Because so much of it I think, this generation in this digital age is about – is actually about forgetting and is not looking to the past to look to the future and to me, that is so vital. So…

ZV: Yeah, that is a huge cultural amnesia. That is one of the reasons for doing those publications that I talked about and I think one is called "After the Amnesia" is about addressing that. And you know, it is incredibly important that there be – you will have many narratives and obviously but there is a way to think about that history in a moment of time and how it can be written. That is why I was interested to know if you were doing essays right, or and ask people to write essays about what that was at that time. But I think it's – it would be really, anyway.

AM: I think it would be a wonderful and in terms of the project which we can talk more about afterward, but you know, it was set as a particular set of – you know interviews, and creating a website, and I'm trying to actually apply for a grant to make it a multimedia interactive website, so it is actually exciting to engage with. The mentorship piece in the third year, so like actually pairing up established artists with emerging artists

ZV: That is great, I love that. That to me, is a really a wonderful piece of the project.

AM: Yeah, I'm really excited about that, but also very open to input from participants, so that is something that we can definitely talk about.

ZV: Yeah, and maybe it's something that you know, we can start thinking about and looking at getting the funding and something that I could actually maybe – I would love to edit that as an anthology of collected essays about that moment and get some different voices – different articulations about what that was. I mean, the project was great, but how do you leave this project. Yes, you will have the narratives and the interviews, but how do you pull out and even

make sense of what I'm saying, let's say – you know – the other people that you'll be interviewing. We have all participated in very different – well I have distantly because I didn't live here, I wasn't on the organizing committee, I wasn't on the board, or staff or you know, but I was definitely a voice at the table that was an influencer, that was a respected voice, so – but you know, it had its own machinations going on that I wasn't part of too – I was physically distant as well.

AM: Will you tell me a little bit more detail about the kind of – like your first direct interaction with Desh Pardesh? And one question I had was an addition. I wasn't sure if you were on an Arts Council, on the Canada Council at a time when Desh was operating – were you interacting with Desh as a while you were working at the Arts Council.

ZV: Yes. I think yes.

AM: So would you have been involved with any of that?

ZV: I would have been involved. No, I'm trying to recall. Now, let's start earlier on. I can't actually call a date of when I was you know part of the conversations. I know I came to a lot of them and I know I was a participant in panels and things and yes I was working at the Canada Council for the Arts when there was a proposal at the table but you know as an officer you have no say, you have all right to represent an organization because you know about it but you can actually it has to remain really impartial to it. You can't, but I'm pretty sure – I think – now that you mention it, I think there was a proposal at the table. And I think it was near the end, and I think when Desh was in difficulties – is you know – and I don't recall if I got the grant or not. I can't tell you. and it would have been but I worked in the media arts, so I don't know if they put any project to the media arts section because they weren't just doing I think media arts, it was like so much was going on. Yes, so I don't work all the moment the year or anything like that. I mean I know it starts with our connection to the South Asian community here and then I'm talking about the Queer community and you know Kevin D'Souza and what's his name, Pereira.

AM: Steve.

ZV: Yeah! Steve, yeah and you know Punam and Prabha, oh there are so many people. You know, let's say someone like Prabha and Punam are not coming at it from an arts perspective, right? The arts were part of it but as I said, there was intersections of you know labor and activism and art, that you know and all of it was going on. There were all of those discussions right? And then near the end, I think when I was asked to do – to curate and write the program for Retro Desh, I have a whole file here on that (paper shuffling noises in background).

AM: So was it Kaspar who contacted you?

ZV: Well, you know I'm going to read you a very funny thing.

AM: Would this have been around 2000?

ZV: No, 97.

AM: Retro Desh was in 97? Well it was when you were contacted?

ZV: Well, 96, I think 97,98, it was earlier. Maybe I won't read it, maybe you should.

AM: No, no.

ZV: Maybe you should just read it, for yourself. Because you can see things – you can see something is going on here.

AM: Do you want this recorded or not recorded?

ZV: Well no just read it first I think and then you'll see.

AM: Okay, it seems to be recording just fine again, let me just double check. Hello Hello. Hello. Sometimes the mic stops working. It seems to be.

ZV: Can you hear me?

AM: Yeah I can hear you just fine.

ZV: Okay.

AM: I just wanted to be sure because occasionally it will cut out and just record straight from here but now it's recording from there. Okay. Turn this down again. Okay. So, can you tell me about your experience you ended up curating Retro Desh, and I would love to hear a bit about what your impression was leading up to that from your experiences from afar and from taking part in Desh. What was the vision of the festival and then a little bit about your experience of curating.

ZV: Well you know my I mean we were always quite excited that's something like Desh. What's happening because as I said, it was for that moment. Those were the things that were happening that were really exciting and I think that you know because it was not solely an art event but it was intersection of politics culture and activism, you know I think, and so many things were at the table but I think you know you sense that things aren't going well or you wonder about things when in very public for a at particular event, at a particular festival and they don't have the date now exactly, but early in the nineties, where you know the politics and you know were getting sort of laid out on the table any sort of very public manner and a very sort of essentialist way that was actually quite damaging and not constructive and not really, I mean I mean I understand that people have very strong political agendas and you know activism along particular political

lines but for a festival organization and sort of you know organizing and administrative and board governance structures that we're not able to really even understand. I think was really problematic and you know we saw and ours sort of rolled out in a very public way and attacks against people who had been invited to present their work and speak and people were being told – were silenced. So when that kind of stuff starts happening, you actually kind of know that things are not running smoothly because in order for organizations like that to survive you need to have very clear mandates and governance and management. The politics cannot be played out at those tables. The works and your politics and what you doing about it as an individual or as part of a community can be played out, but not in the running of an organization and it's not that it was only happening at Desh, we have seen it in artist-run centers, we have seen takeovers, all kinds of things going on, but those were Desh's. So, I think earlier on, I realized that Desh was losing sight of what it was really about, or was not able to articulate it and manage it through its programming and it's daily workings. And then so by the time when I'm off to curate something, and then asked not to curate it, and then asked to curate it, I just saw it as a reading of exactly the same problems and it seemed as if they had continued and maybe even deepened but only with the new people being brought to the table with a kind of amnesia already, said in about the history and what it was supposed to be about and nobody had the skills to take it out of that and make it something else. I now remember participating in panels and to you know and being invited to work and I think there was one in particular year when we all experienced a round of this kind of very you know debilitating unconstructive kind of you know public humiliation almost right going on and it was just like really sad I thought and it was very gendered based, you know it was, I think the men. I think it was men and class was under – was being attacked, right. Whether you were Queer or not Queer, whatever, it seemed to me that men and class were under attack, which was ridiculous right. Because, I mean, so many of those people were on the front line of so much activism, whether it be queer issues or healthcare or working conditions or whatever it was and miss-readings of class and privilege and art I think, was my experience of that. So anyway, when I think it came to the Retro Desh invitation, and seeing this sort of do it – don't do it – and you know, invited, uninvited, re-invited. I saw it, but I just decided to do it and just continue without asking. I didn't want to get engaged in the machinations of what all that was about. I saw it as a great opportunity to actually go back and talk about the work – the art – of people who were making work, that were addressing some of the really sort of really interesting explorations around questions of identity and race and gender and then actually the techniques that they were using in the making of the work, whether it was film or video, in sort of creative interventions and subversions. So yes, I did curate it. I think I thought, there was you know some struggles still going on with him, which it never really received, you know, it didn't do. I think it didn't make the tour, you know? There were a lot of things that fell apart that didn't actually happen and then when it was shown, I think it was shown at VTape or somewhere and it wasn't advertised – people didn't come. And there were lots of things going on that I wasn't actually really aware of. I mean, I could read between the lines, but I just decided that I've been asked as a curator, so I would just curate the program and they sent me a copy.

AM: And it was all film and video?

ZV: Yep, it was film and video, yep it was all film and video. And I was seen as a film and video person because that is what I primarily worked in and you know, Invisible Colours, Women in Focus, my own work was video based, I was talking about film and video I was publishing on issues of race around film and video, right. So, I think that is what I can tell you and then interestingly, you brought up the Canada Council thing, but you know, , if you hadn't mentioned it, I probably would not have even remembered because it was almost like, I think the very last Desh that I participated in it actually had seemed to have lost complete focus in some ways. You know it seemed to be everywhere and nowhere and it was quite kind of confusing, I think. I think I had come to speak about funding for the arts. I was one on a panel, I might not, now don't – I think Hussain Amarshi was sort of moderating and leading it and there were lots of people, but add that from across the country and at that time I meant a lot of interesting young people from South Asian community that were also trying to find a place somewhere and didn't know where and how they could fit there or did they have a place because they had not taken it on. You know a decade had almost passed things were changing very quickly and they said "Scene it". Is this really exciting thing for the community, but I think there was at least from my outsider view, was that they didn't find a place for themselves there. Had they and had they been mentored and brought in, in a certain way, I think Desh would have still been going because they would have taken – you could have passed the torch on. I mean, that's how I saw it.

AM: In a certain way, do you think it's her to say that your perspective would be that, had Desh changed with the times more and actually developed because you say it kind of stagnated? Is that what you're saying?

ZV: No, I think the ongoing political battles within the organization did not allow it to look out and see what was happening and respond appropriately and it had this aura you know it had a name it was known, right. I think young people really wanted to belong to it, couldn't find a place within it and I think that the organization, and I don't know really where all of those breakdowns really were, and I can only read it between the lines like I said from that letter for example or you know witnessing it, but even years later just from those letters, they weren't able to really pull themselves out and look at it and they were so caught up in their own kind of power struggles right. Without really seeing the bigger picture, not just the survival of an organization, it's like what organization potential was and what it could have been for a new generation of people, because those young people were really on the ball and I remember spending like three days with you know and when I say young people I would have been in my late thirties and I'm talking about people who were twenty years younger than me, and really energetic and really asking good questions, and really like wanting something and not finding it there. You know I think it's been two days running around with them I think I was exhausted afterwards (laughs), I didn't it was just like so great, they were like let's go here and let's go there let's check this out and let's go to this club and let's go and eat, but all the time it was this kind of trying to explore and understand you know: what was happening, why and where could they fit in? where could they, where was their place in this amazing thing but they didn't have one in a

way. Now this is just outsider view, you might find someone who was working in it, just say we were doing all of these things, so I don't know what Zainub – if they heard me, they would say I don't know what you're talking about, but that was my perspective. That is what I was seeing.

AM: Well, I think that is very relevant because I think part of what I'd like to hear from you and all of your wealth of experience and arts administration as an artist as a mentor in a lot of ways, what are some kind of lessons that you've drawn from your years of experience including watching things like Desh rise and fall, including watching you know the film festival rising, like what are some lessons that you've drawn from that in terms of ways to organize, whether its..

ZV: I mean, there's always okay first things can never run without money right and you always need a really good governance structure a board needs to understand what its role is and how that separate from management. So there is the running of the organization and the governance and the management and those need to be tightly run ships. You cannot stay off you have to keep to it I think there needs to be flexibility within an organization and open this so that new ideas can keep coming in and experiments can hap`pen and you know dialogue can happen you know because those were I mean that is what makes any place continually exciting it is the new things that are always thinking and reimagining and I think that was happening was that we were not able as a community and I say that very broadly speaking to move out essentialist and fundamentalists sort of politics and positions. Right now I'll give you an example. Okay Invisible Colors happens and so explain my perspective and I'm coming from Kenya, I grew up in England, and influenced by what is happening when Thatcher dismantle our thing, Brixton race riots, the black British movement, and you know, we were having discussions like okay should we show Women from South Africa.

AM: You were having this discussions within the film festival?

ZV: Those were discussions that we're going on right within the organizing committee like should we show white people from South Africa. Now it was like you know that kind of really skin tone like race at the skin level (laughs) kind of discussion right? To who could it actually belong? Good mixed race come to the festival? Would they be considered a person of color? I mean those kinds of conversations are really devastating, right and not really useful in terms of having a discussion about what was actually happening and why we were even have any those discussions – why were we reduced to having to discuss skin tone. Was somebody dark enough to be there? That's really problematic right and it was partially because people's experiences were so different and I actually kind of put a stop to that. I just saw it as a really dangerous ground to be walking on which would destroy what we were actually trying to do which was open it up not shut it down and not start a whole other process of offering, right? We were trying to open up not shut it down and it was really in my experience – my lived experience of having grown up in the color bar – I mean I am fourth generation Kenyan, but obviously I'm not black. You're going to now tell me that I cannot be the founder of this festival because I'm not black enough. Those are the kind of ridiculous conversations that we're going on, so I kind of shut it down and always pulling back to what we were mandated, what our vision was and what we

were mandated to do and really articulating it's in very specific ways which did not allow for these conversations to slip in and these positions to sleep in to shut things down that is really important and I'm not saying that we have passed and I'm not saying . Of course the festival occurred, but you know there was some not very nice things happened at the festival because some people decided that some people shouldn't be there. I don't know why they felt they had – you know could decide that, but we had to kind of be really you know careful in not creating alienation and other nests and other kinds of Othering which were already which was exactly what we were fighting against and there was quite amazing solidarity between Aboriginal people and us – it was not like only aboriginals and women of color – it was not like that – it became like that after and I think it became like that because of anyway what happened was really quite powerful and the fact that we had raised so much money but not only that but made money it was unheard of right. and that you know it was the economy of it to. So but in terms of going back to bed and what I think so my experience but I think it's about it's not petty politics you cannot have that type of politicking without intellectually understanding really what is happening and really wear these conversations have to be taken at a much higher level and then there is the kind of running of an organization and a way of articulating who you are and to your constituent and to bring it along to bring people with you. You cannot start dismantling it even before you have begun – I mean that's where it was like even from an activist perspective it's like okay we're in solidarity but actually we're not because now we're going to kill you – we're going to kill each other here. I mean it was horrible right, so that is I think. I mean I really don't know inside what was going on, but it was not healthy – I mean I could feel it was not healthy and then later I could feel that the younger people weren't. You can't ask an eighteen year old person to come in and start running a beast that has been happening for eighteen years, ten twelve years, which is been troubled and has been handed over that's all what I mean by like bring people in you meant or you give them space you let them have their voice I mean they were so many ways to bring people in along political lines along activism you know everything that the festival's good for you. You know positive culture activism I mean thoughts but those voices where I felt the younger the young people I kind of really wanted to belong to something and it wasn't there it was empty they could not find how to belong in it I mean attending events was not belonging, but it's deeper space of belonging because they were all scared they were all exploring they were all young people they were exploring coming out there were trying to get jobs they wanted to practice learn art they wanted to challenge everything they were questioning but there was no – that was my observation and I really say that from an outsider perspective and as I said you might talk to the next person and they would say well Zainub got it all wrong. That's my take on it.

AM: As a kind of final question, at least in this piece, maybe we'll talk again but what is exciting to you right now in terms of community organizing that is happening in terms of artists and young artists things that you see around you that you involved with that you see as having a political force behind it and I don't mean you know what I mean by political I don't mean capital p political, but I mean a real kind of a movement? Like what kind of movement building around you in art spaces?

ZV: Well I don't think there is like a movement or one movement but I see a really interesting resistance all the time and everywhere globally it is happening I mean the Idle No More was really amazing. In that it came together as Idle No More not because I think that it can take over Canada and you know it's not naive and neither are they but you know what was the other one – my mind is – Idle No More and The Big.

AM: Related to Idle No More or you mean Black Lives Matter?

ZV: No, I mean a big sort of global. (speaking to someone off recording) What was that?

AM: Occupy?

ZV: Yeah the occupy and why they fail. I'm interested in also in why these things are failing, why is the left failed for example. Why are we so liberalized today, what has happened? On a very personal level I mention that I was born in Kenya and the color bar I mean my work or my you know has really been around identity around issues of race and identity in so many ways right and I think that will always be there for me. I'm also Muslim and post 911 that has become at the new front for me right. Yes I think I mean I think they were so many opportunities now even at the existing spaces to re-articulate and rethink them and bring people together. In particular kinds of ways and I would love to do that I would love to work with SAVAC and it doesn't all have to be bagged it can start really small little things that are re-articulate and reimagine things. I think not enough of that is happening and that is what I would like to see happen and I think I've decided in fact that I'm going to get involved again. I'm going to physically and mentally and intellectually come back into those spaces because and I'm writing about them and I love the mentoring. That amuses me being one of the biggest, I mean it is such a gap and it create so many other things, but and it, you know that pieces really important and if we don't write those histories as part of the Canadian cultural fabric the generation and ten years won't know anything about it. They are going to do it. We have to do it and when they see that we have done it, they will also do it. They won't just do it like that. Some will but you know, these are all part of the mentoring process because it is you know it's about that kind of cultural memory, the passing on and the passing on over generations and Millennia and it gets embedded into your DNA – it has to be like that. it has to be that deep, that meaningful. at the core, unshakable, unmovable, it has got to be indelible. That's how I think how I feel about it (laughs).

AM: I think that's a great place to end.

ZV: Thank you.

AM: Thank you.