

CreateNYC: South Asian/Bangladeshi Community Workshop

March 18, 2017

Participants:

Nadia – BIPA

Mahfuzul – Queens Village; Jhal NYC

Naimul – Kensington, Brooklyn

Hasiba – Arts & Democracy, Kensington

Zaid - Social Practice Queens

Naem – New York-area Bangladeshis/Bengalis list, Notun-York; historian and artist

Annie - BIPA

Basma – Bronx-based performance artist

Mapping Assets

Extensive work on mapping assets in place, examples including:

- Khan's Tutorials – offers Hasiba free space for events
- Sites identified after referencing the network of BIPA shows
- Restaurants – support nourishment, after shows, catering, booster sponsorships
- Marketing/promotions – printers, Muktohdara Bookstore

Recommendations:

- First step in our own planning is to create a working document and begin mapping.
- Create an arts directory.
- We need our NYC narrative/heritage being embedded in place. Bengali community in public space, monuments, public art.
 - Something permanent, like Jackson Heights Diversity Plaza.
 - Pursue “second name” in a part of the city, like the cultural district model.
- MOBA (Museum of Bengalis in America)

Representation/Presence in the Greater Field

- Pan-South Asian orgs are often the few brown faces in the room. - but they are a very important resource that helps us get *into* the room, and because of “insular”/“community” ‘comfort zones,’ not enough people know about them.
- Queens Museum, who is progressive in this direction, even started without brown faces.
- The Whitney Biennial, only three South Asian artists, despite presence of two Asian American curators
- Vice media. How many non-white faces are there? They have Bangladeshi stories, but told from others. That's not considered the kind of work we do.
- “As long as arts remain so white, we'll be in the place we are.” – white hegemony.

Recommendations:

- We need to be aware and present in the broader arts and cultural field
- This concept needs to spill into the assets we can see on the map.
 - We should always be knocking, eager to make connections, disseminate knowledge, so we can be our own nodes.

Why Insular?

- Do you see part of the Bengali community's work spilling over into "mainstream" art? Why no cross-over? Why the gap? Two tracks:
 - Not seeing people going or belonging...is that why we're not going? Bangladeshi community produces for itself while "mainstream arts" produce for other communities
 - Is there a sense of art as "safe space"?
 - Following the appropriate rungs. No risk and no activism.
 - Clusters are a form of comfort.
 - We're getting all of this community energy, but the danger is that it keeps us too comfortable to leave our own forums. It's a crisis of sorts. We can't afford to just be in our communities.
 - The community also isn't aware and has to care about what else is happening in the "mainstream". Examples:
 - "Muktir Gaan," a film directed by Tareque Masud, had been screened in Queens? (was it Eagle Theater?) and there was attendance, but when it was screened at a venue in Manhattan, the community didn't show
 - Jaishri Abichandani SAWCC, founder of South Asian Womens Creative Collective - similar situation as above; attendance at her show differed based on venue. How do we get people out beyond these "pockets"?
 - Marina Budhos wrote books presenting the Bangladeshi community: Watched. Ask Me No Questions. No Bangladeshi community at her Pen events.
 - Occupy Wall Street's public art, no brown faces – what's preventing it from flooding out?
 - Transitions: New Photography from Bangladesh, a photo show at the Bronx Museum.
 - Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now was a Queens Museum exhibition of all South Asian artists, including the curator.

Recommendations:

- Expand presence in those other spaces in the field/city.
- What can we do for the arts vs. what art can do for us?
- Disarm fear

Examples of Integration/Cross-Pollination

- Naimul noted Get Organized BK!, cultural exchange – 800 people meet once a month at a Park Slope synagogue, with ratio of whites to color at around 1 in 100. We host a “cultural club” once a month, showcasing culture/religion. We hosted a session on Muslim culture. The level of interest was high. From there, the group wanted to know about Bollywood Dancing. And there was a woman in hijab dancing, which dispelled presumptions. Kids didn’t know white people could be so cool. They didn’t know how to be around white people.
- BIPA, bilingualism - Zaid experienced voice work on a BIPA play, “I could invite friends that wouldn’t otherwise be able to participate.”

Language/Bi-lingual

- Bangladeshi community is often cited as an example in debates made for language isolation perpetuating backward economies.
- Keep your Bangla, but learn English.
- There’s no Bangla language/vocabulary to teach issues of justice.
 - organizer Shahana Hanif is an example of someone who is taking this issue on. She has worked with CAAAV, and also is currently in BD and exploring resources and networks to close these gaps and build solidarity internationally

Recommendations:

- Work translated to English opens doors to other audiences
- Change grant language (identified below, under “Stretched: Accessing Funds/Grants Rather Than Self-Financing”)

Work, Class and Legitimacy

- Face challenges of “Arts is not a viable career.” I wouldn’t know unless I worked in a space that’s more white and exposed to those other things.
- Participants: Working class priorities. Survival vs. cultural goods.
- Legitimacy is exemplified in ethnic food culture, which is considered “cheap eats.”
- “Mainstream” examples of work above administered by an upper class, which impacts access to that kind of work

Recommendations

- Position youth to professional legitimacy to capacitate the community
- IDNYC is a positive example, linking economic needs/benefits with cultural event attendance. Draws parallel of arts and culture as essential, rather than a luxury.
- We need to articulate everything that’s valuable in our community. How would you describe what’s there? What matters to you has to be re-framed in another language.

Challenges in Community Organizing

- Post-election, there's a lot is going on. In Kensington, with help from Arts & Democracy, we held events for people to gather. But even with funding, it was a challenge to get people to come out. Those that showed up are already engaged ("Tired of being the one voice."). Local community building is challenged within our own communities.
- There's a generational gap. Challenges the question of whether it worth pouring energy into older folks in the community.
- In ways, it's up to young people that are more exposed and tend to travel throughout the city. How can we get involved more with youth? Youth are growing up in these hard times.
- Cultural activities and events are all independent, so no there's broader framework to do it so artists can get support from the whole community.
- Let's not presume that there's one community, either.
 - Hindu/Muslim/Christian communities. Non-Muslim communities face some barriers, are used to being marginalized and have their own definitions of community.
 - Upcoming event: Bangladeshi independence – through a women's lens - An upcoming event on 3/26 organized by Naree Shongothok (Women Organizers)

Recommendations:

- Have monthly meetings in a physical space to air out stuff!
- I would love to see the city fund people to take groups to big events, especially an opportunity to share experiences with older people. When places see new audiences, they'll curate to those audiences.
- A campaign, "Stand up for your community".

Stretched: Accessing Funds/Grants Rather Than Self-Financing

- People are stretched to the seams. Communities are killing themselves to fund themselves.
- To go on, new groups doing the same thing over and over.
- The problem is that it isn't sustainable.
- The city isn't funding our work.
- BIPA has been around for 25 years, but the organization just started applying for grants three years ago.

Recommendations:

- Why are different parts of the community at odds? More essentially, the city has funds that go to other institutions and organizations because we don't apply. Funding is a way to get paid for this work! And Bangladeshi folks are desperate to find people to support.
- Clear route to access funding resources
 - Orgs should have exposure:
 - A Blade of Grass
 - Connect to borough arts councils: regrants and training
 - Nadia Ahmad: "There is a grant for that" campaign

- Apply for a grant for people who will only connect people to grants. Like how Foundation Center in Manhattan is a means to gain access to social sector philanthropy (some of us learned about it while fundraising for the photography show at the Bronx Museum).
 - Train people to write grants and use community mapped assets to help bridge networks
- Grants should be translated (to Bangla) and more accessible than in “the field” language.

Pursuing Economic Opportunities and Viability in the Field

- Jhal-NYC is a food venture that’s trying to scale up their Bangladeshi street food. How do I get there? Need access to cultural entrepreneurship. (Network’s feedback: Reach out to Prerana Reddy at Queens Museum. They host vendors at Museum events and have experience based on programming at Corona Plaza.)
- There are beginning to be opportunities to connect back to Bangladesh for economic opportunities, including the arts industries.

Recommendations Summarized by Participants

- Four issues of Access:
 - Language skills
 - Money
 - Time
 - Knowledge
- Analysis of funding support comes from community support.
 - We have to be able to organize and make us go there.
 - Comprehensive approach the components of the field to dispel access/participation barriers:
 - grant writing, choreography, taking classes, etc.