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# The Festival of India

Development and  
Diplomacy at the  
End of the Cold War

Rashna Darius Nicholson

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## THE FESTIVAL OF INDIA

*Development and Diplomacy  
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Rashna Darius Nicholson

*University of Warwick*



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# The Festival of India

## Development and Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War

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**Abstract:** This Element is an in-depth study of the Festival of India (1985–1986) in the United States, one of the biggest events ever mounted to promote goodwill between two countries. Comprising more than seven hundred programmes of music, dance, drama, film shows, art exhibitions, and workshops sponsored by over two hundred cultural institutions across over a hundred cities, the festival constituted a prismatic event that refracted the complex forces at play on the global stage during the 1980s. The Element delineates how this multi-sited spectacle of unprecedented size and near unfathomable political, economic, and cultural influence impacted theatre and performance studies. Simultaneously, it traces how two complex historical shifts were communicated to the global public at the end of the Cold War: India's desire to transition from planned Nehruvian socialism to *laissez faire* capitalism and the efflorescence of the model of 'cultural development' that centred the arts in development.

**Keywords:** Festival of India, Cold War theatre, Peter Brook, cultural development, Indian craft, political performance

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## 1 Introduction

This Element is about an exclamation point. Affixed to the word ‘India’ in the promotion materials of the Festival of India (1985–6) – ‘an event without parallel in the history of cultural interchange between India and the United States and perhaps between the United States and any other country’ (Desai, 1985) – the sign marked a pivotal period of major socio-economic and cultural change at the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Anticipating other landmark exhibitions such as *Russia!* (2006) and *Armenia!* (2018), the exclamation point’s tonality in the advertisements of the festival superficially suggested excitement, friendliness, and immediacy, trumpeting the explosion of ‘one of the biggest events ever mounted to promote goodwill and understanding between two countries’ (Festival of India USA). Yet over and above infusing ‘India’ with human warmth, the symbol succinctly translated a constellation of highly complex historical processes for the global public: India’s aspiration to transition from planned Nehruvian socialism to *laissez faire* capitalism, the interpellation of diasporic Indian identity, and the efflorescence of the model of ‘cultural development’. This last was characterized by the unparalleled fusion of two hitherto distinct Cold War discourses: technocratic, *wertfrei* (value-free) development and cultural propaganda, containment, or ideological *Kulturkampf* (cultural struggle).

The festival where ‘India became India!’ spanned forty states and over a hundred cities; comprised more than seven hundred art exhibitions, programmes of music, dance, drama, film shows, seminars, and lectures sponsored by over two hundred cultural institutions; engendered extensive media coverage; and cost approximately \$20 million (Trehan, 1985a). Of unprecedented size and near-unfathomable political, economic, and cultural influence, the multi-sited, two-year-long spectacle constituted a prismatic event that refracted the complex forces at play on the global stage during the late Cold War. Providing Americans with ‘a wider and more intense exposure to India’s cultural history than any but the most privileged Indians could hope for in a lifetime’ (Ray, 1985: 1), the festival functioned as a strategic cultural bridge at the critical moment when the Indian and United States (US) governments sought to redefine their relations (Jain, 1988). The phallic point in the festival’s exhibition titles such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *India!* and the Smithsonian Institution’s *Mela! (Fair!)* functioned as a shorthand for Indian and American bureaucrats’ desires to craft a ‘muscular [visual] vocabulary’ of a nation that was ripe for Western economic, technological, and military investment. Fortifying artistic events with, as Elena Ferrante shrewdly posits, ‘the profile of a nuclear missile’ (Ferrante, 2018), the mark – a symbol of the gap

<sup>1</sup> See (Ganguly & Mukherji, 2011) and (Kohli, 2006).

between geopolitical policy and the realization of that policy – articulated a practice of fixing the meaning of India as culturally specific and universal, exotic and familiar, modern and ancient, national and global. ‘Shrimp-pink’ pashminas and camel khadi linen curtains, antique ivory-inlaid elephants and turmeric-infused okra recipes (Brown, 2020) – the signs today of discrete yet cosmopolitan upper-west side wealth – constitute the residue of the deeply desirable visual scheme crafted by the Indian and US governments to enhance state-to-state relations, bolster trade and commerce, and craft and project a more positive vision of India for target tourist markets.

This Element analyses how the translation of values from the domain of geopolitics to cultural pageantry transpired. First, it demonstrates the multi-sided ‘actorness’ essential to the festival’s staging. Blurring divisions between conceptualizations of the actor in international relations and theatre theory, the text recalibrates assumptions regarding the festival’s performance and stage, its audience and its principal performers. In this way, it brings into focus a special poetics of visibility common to political, intellectual, and cultural elites. High-profile statesmen, hitherto unknown foundation officers, civil servants, key journalists, and not least folk performers and theatre artists themselves performed highly codified roles for the success of a two year-long event that ‘capture[d] the imagination of a large part of the American public’ even as they studiously avoided the unsavoury whiff of performance (Festival of India in the United States: 1). The Element traces the undisclosed script enacted by some of the event’s chief actors within a larger diplomatic theatre. In the process, it highlights not only the complex interplay of diplomatic, commercial, and economic objectives that made its organization a bafflingly convoluted affair but also the artful dissembling characteristic of those charged with simplifying ugly geopolitical idiom into dazzlingly attractive, seemingly neutral spectacle.

Second, the Element draws attention to two overlapping modes of performance – zoological and theatrical – which were conceptualized as effective lubricants for transnational political dialogue and economic growth. Consisting of both performing arts and scholarly events as well as exhibitions and ethnographic installations of Indian rural life, the festival echoed nineteenth-century shows that blurred the boundaries between staged science, circus, living displays, and proscenium drama. But this old visual scheme was put to new use in its emphasis on art’s function as a key driver of socio-economic development. The Element studies the complementarity of function of *Aditi, Mela!*, and *The Golden Eye* – three overlapping ‘living exhibitions’ celebrating traditional India – and Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*, arguably the most praised and denigrated theatrical event of the twentieth century and one of



the festival's 'major attractions' (Festival of India USA: 5). Differing in degree and not in kind, both types of performances, while emphasizing staged authenticity and the thrill of the hyperreal, introduced powerful political messages of indigeneity, contemporaneity, and universalism. 'Frightening yet somehow familiar, disturbing yet deeply desirable, lost to us but still dimly comprehended', India, as formulated by state and non-state actors such as Indira Gandhi and Peter Brook, would show the rest of the world still in the thralls of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear conflict how to thread modernity with spirituality, science with self-discovery. Obscuring the unseemly images of poverty, dust, dirt, and squalor studiously depicted in most western newsreels of India, this ingenious dramaturgical scheme that emphasized a shared humanity relevant to all time, crafted a powerful and formidable vision of India and its leadership. As a result, it enabled Indo-US dialogue on economic reforms, pro-business growth strategies, and technological investment, thereby setting the stage for Indian free markets and globalization. So too did it pre-empt the World Bank's invention of 'cultural industries'. The festival – as Rajeev Sethi, cultural advisor to the World Bank who conceptualized the scenography of *Aditi, Mela!*, *The Golden Eye*, and *The Mahabharata*, argued – was conceived to promote 'goods and services with social and cultural meaning, and with huge, booming market potential across the globe' and to 'strategically position the subcontinent's unique traditions of craft skills as a muscular vocabulary capable of supporting the most contemporary imagination of architects and designers anywhere' (Sethi, 2005). The Element delineates how for the first time 'intangible heritage and its service providers' (Sethi, 2005) were promoted by the highest levels of the Indian and US government as cure-alls for unsustainable consumption in the modern world, 'critical drivers articulating [meaningful] economic and social development', and brokers of a new geopolitical vision for the nation. In so doing it elucidates the significant, semi-autonomous interpenetration of cultural performance with the *realpolitik* of state-craft.

### 1.1 Calculated Ambiguity

Despite official declarations of shared postcolonial histories and close bonds of democratic friendship, post-independent, non-aligned India had a complex, chequered relationship with the United States. In the early 1950s, warm and friendly Indo-US diplomatic relations stemmed from the view of India and China – the world's most populous nations – as symbols of the competition between democracy and communism in the developing world. During this period, the victory of the Indian democratic experiment was deemed by the United States as essential to demonstrate the superiority of democracy over

communism in Asia. Much, however, transpired since the 1950s to cool US-Indian relations. Washington's provision of weapons to Pakistan and the US decision to cut off arms to India in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 led to a deeply ingrained suspicion among most Indian officials of the United States' 'reliability as a friend' (Directorate of Intelligence, 1986: 2). During the crisis decade of the 1970s, with the Nixon administration's 'tilt' towards Pakistan over Bangladesh and the subsequent rapprochement between India and the Soviet Union, US-Indian relations were at their lowest (Anderson & Spear, 1985a: 11). Consequently, Henry Kissinger described the 1971 meeting between Richard Nixon and Gandhi as 'the two most unfortunate meetings Nixon had with any foreign leader' (Kissinger, 1979). 'The lack of real warmth in mutual relations' between the two nations was further exacerbated by India's strong condemnation of the Vietnam War, US opposition to India's first nuclear tests in 1974, contested International Monetary Fund loans, and especially the American press' trenchant criticisms of Indira Gandhi's highly controversial Declaration of Emergency in 1975 (Ford Foundation, 1982; Geyelin, 1985: A-21; Nagarajan, 1980: 67). According to a *Washington Post* article, the United States, Indians believed, was intent on sabotaging India's key interests of securing pre-eminence in the region and of being recognized as a major player in international diplomacy (Geyelin, 1985: A-21).<sup>2</sup>

With Indira Gandhi's significant defeat in the 1977 general elections, however, Indo-US relations gradually began to improve. The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee proposed the revocation of aid-restrictions; expressions of goodwill were made during the respective visits of Jimmy Carter and Indian prime minister Morarji Desai in 1978; and the Indo-US Joint Commission, comprising the Education and Cultural Subcommittee, was revived and began to expand bilateral cooperations.<sup>3</sup> So too did the troubled Indian economy in the early 1980s become more receptive to an American helping hand. With domestic inflation at 15 per cent, industrial output stagnant, the outcome of the race

<sup>2</sup> The Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi for a twenty-one-month period between 1975 and 1977 is one of the most contentious periods of postcolonial Indian history. Comprising the imprisonment of Gandhi's political opponents, cancellation of elections, censorship of the press, and suspension of civil liberties, the emergency facilitated an imagined political 'alternative' in the Janata Party in 1977.

<sup>3</sup> The Education and Cultural Subcommittee, one of four subcommittees created to further bilateral cooperations, was formed in 1974 by the Indian and US governments to develop priorities and programs in the fields of the performing and fine arts, education, sports, museums, and libraries. Comprising eminent members from government, universities, and private organizations (such as the Indian 'cultural matriarch' Kapila Vatsyayan and subsequent ambassador to India John R. Hubbard), it was, significantly, the only Subcommittee housed outside US government offices at the Rockefeller funded Asian Cultural Council (ACC) headquarters in New York (Indo-US Subcommittee on Education and Culture).

between food and population uncertain, a balance of payments in deficit by \$3.5 billion, and domestic tensions arising from competing demands, vigorous and serious attempts commenced in the 1980s to 'transform India from a restrictive trade regime to a liberal trade economy' (Ford Foundation, 1982; National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 2). Propelled by disillusionment with the poor outcome of decades of preference for import substitution over international trade, Gandhi, a US intelligence report (1983) argued, had been cautiously reassessing long-standing Indian policies to promote faster economic growth and enhance India's regional and international status (National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 1). Now 'enthusiastic about Western technology and . . . willing to see what the private sector [could] accomplish under relaxed controls', she began to not only adopt deliberate policies to deregulate the economy but also 'expand India's ties with the West . . . to reduce somewhat the imbalance in India's relations with the superpowers' (Ford Foundation, 1982; National Intelligence Estimate, 1983: 1, 7).

Simultaneously, however, an Indian Ministry of External Affairs report detailed that with Ronald Reagan's inauguration, attempts to re-establish US superiority in South Asia through hard and soft power were anticipated (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981: 5). The South Asian region, a US national security report described, had increased in strategic significance after the Soviet expansionary thrust into Afghanistan and the collapse of the Shah in Iran (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 1). Moreover, Reagan's pre-election announcements clarified that aid would only be given to close friends who fought protectionism, and that economic policy, technology transfer, and issues of nuclear proliferation would be 'integrated into the fundamental bedrock of what politically [was] in the best interest of the United States' (Free Trade Endorsed by Reagan, 1984: 5; Nagarajan, 1980: 67). Although US bilateral commitments to India had not been significant in the 'holding period' of the 1970s, it was largely US money that had been channelled to India through the World Bank and the International Development Association (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981). The report therefore expressed anxiety, in the midst of a global debt crisis, that US assistance from all channels would be seen solely through the prism of US objectives and that substantial Republican support to Pakistan ('a major problem for India') was imminent (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981).

In a series of letters to Gandhi in 1981, the political advisor Promod Datta argued that a US tilt to Pakistan could be 'easily countered by intelligent handling of US emotions'. Friendly relations could be effortlessly achieved through 'a process of mutual consultations on unimportant matters only as our

views on important matters differ substantially’ (Datta, 1981a, emphasis in original). ‘A mass publicity campaign’ depicting India’s ‘progress and point of view’, he averred, must be launched in the United States to ‘influence the American people at large’, as the US government gave considerable importance to public opinion (Datta, 1981b). This need for a tactical publicity campaign was further reiterated in the external affairs report that described the exigency of calculated ambiguity: ‘maintaining dialogue and maximizing understanding rather than highlighting the differences’ between the two nations (Ministry of External Affairs, 1981: 9). Consequently, during her ‘virtuoso performance’ in the United States in July 1982 (baptized by the press as ‘Operation Defrost’), the former ‘dragon-lady ... out-Reaganed Ronald Reagan’ by proposing along with bilateral initiatives on themes as wide-ranging as agricultural research, biomass energy, health, and commercial relations, the designation of 1984 and 1985 as a period of special focus in cultural exchange (Badhwar, 1982; Statement for Noon Press Briefing, 1982).

This proposal was readily accepted by the Americans who believed that enhanced US relations with India would ‘weaken Soviet influence in the subcontinent and undermine Moscow’s subjugation of Afghanistan’ while preventing Gandhi from ‘implicat[ing] the US in her increasing domestic problems’ (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 1). The United States, an intelligence report averred, could ‘take advantage of Mrs. Gandhi’s presence [... for] the Festival ... to arrange appropriate high level meetings in Washington’ where the following strategic objectives could be realized:

- raise the level of Indian apprehensions about the long-term Soviet threats to the Subcontinent . . . .
- conclude . . . a memorandum of understanding regarding technology transfer . . . .
- . . . reduce India’s military supply and economic dependence on the USSR [... through discussions on ...] cooperative technology transfer and arms sales . . . .
- . . . establish clear guidelines aimed at facilitating future export license applications for India . . . .
- Demonstrate support for India’s economic development by minimizing further decline in U.S. aid to India.
- Encourage the inclusion of non-proliferation in the Indo-Pak security dialogue. (National Security Division Directive 147, 1984: 3–4)

Thus, long before Americans who had ‘little opportunity to learn about India’ saw the film *A Passage to India* or the television series *The Jewel in the Crown*, preparations began for the ‘year of India’, an ‘unprecedented, nationwide

celebration' spanning ninety cities (Bennetts, 1985: C 17; Reagan, 1983; September PCR Cover Story, 1985). While in the United States, administrative preparations commenced at the Rockefeller Foundation based Indo-US Subcommission, India's First Lady of Handicrafts and curator of Gandhi's saris, cultural bureaucrat Pupul Jayakar, began conceptualizing the festival's artistic vision – the 'total' face of India – calculated to 'leave a permanent impact on the American mind' (Dasgupta, 1985: 12–13).

## 2 'All the Raj: India Is In, and Everyone's Going Subcontinental'

It was almost New Year's and the elite of New York fashion was in a dither. The world was about to enter 1985 and there was no trend. . . . Fashionable folk all over the city found themselves with nothing to wear. . . . So they sat home and watched TV. . . . And that's where the inspiration hit. India! . . . Nehru jackets, turbans, richly colored brocade vests; all began making an appearance on the late-night circuit. . . . Now, it seems we are poised on the edge of an all-out style craze. In Paris last fall, designer Jean-Paul Gaultier showed turbans and sarongs for men and women. In London, Scott Crolla revived the Nehru suit. . . . And fashion mogul Diana Vreeland is focusing on court costumes for her next show at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute. 'It's a mood, a feeling,' says Koos van den Akker. 'People need a story to dress by, and this year it's India.'

(Harden, 1985)

Indira Gandhi's brutal assassination on 31 October 1984 and the Bhopal gas tragedy – one of the world's worst industrial disasters – in December of the same year had done little to dampen the spirit of the 'most expensive and stately cultural diplomacy extravaganza ever shared by two nations' (Sweeney, 1985). From Bergdorf Goodman's and Bloomingdale's special Indian home furnishing promotions featuring Indian designer 'Asha's' and Issey Miyake's cushion covers, to the overnight rise to fame of Madhur Jaffrey's 'curries' and 'stews', to Yves Saint Laurent's and Paloma Picasso's work with Indian craftsmen, to the new Indian theme at New York's hottest nightclub Nirvana One, India was unmistakably 'the "in" topic on the cultural front' (Rea, 1985). 'The Himalayas, the great Ganges Plain, reed-thin holy men, turban-topped snake charmers, the Taj Mahal, the Kutb Minar, the mountain caves of Ajanta, . . . and the pith helmeted Britons snacking on cucumber and watercress sandwiches beneath the giant banyan trees . . .': these and countless other images were on the collective minds of all 'Westerners' (Rea, 1985). Almost overnight, 'millions of Americans had become aware of the richness of India'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Joan Sands, a public relations executive, reported that contacts through media reached 920 million (Festival of India, n.d.)

Thus began a new ‘era of greater understanding for India’ (India, n.d.). Though the elephants stayed at home (despite an express request from the San Francisco Zoo) (Laetsch, 1985), ‘the colossal “Festival of India” . . . like some fabled maharajah’s caravan of elephants – painted with flowered paisleys, bridled with jewels – bearing priceless gifts . . . [began its] solemn march across the United States’ (Sweeney, 1985).<sup>5</sup> Described as the ‘total spectrum’ of Indian culture, the festival comprised exhibitions, film and fashion shows, poetry readings, academic seminars, and department store promotions (Bennetts, 1985: C17). Some of these events included exhibits of: masterpieces of Indian sculpture at the National Gallery, Washington; paintings from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts; the artistic achievements of the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar at the Asia Society; contemporary handwoven textiles at the Smithsonian; Kushana and Gandhara sculptures at the Cleveland Museum; antique and contemporary terracotta works at the Brooklyn Museum; and science and technological achievements in Minneapolis (Festival of India USA, n.d.). So too did the megafestival boast of ‘the largest showcase of Indian performing arts ever assembled outside India’ (Bennetts, 1985; Dasgupta, 1985). In addition to the 1500 stone and bronze artefacts dating from 3000 BC to AD 1300, India, the American press noted, had sent several hundred artists, craftsmen, dancers, musicians, and poets to perform (Winship, 1985).

Accordingly, on 13 June 1985, the ‘massive, unprecedented’ festival opened with Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Zakir Hussain, and a Kathakali dance troupe taking the stage at the Kennedy Center, Washington DC. Arguably, however, the real performers at this invitation only event were the *haut monde* of Indian and US society: the Kissingers, Weinbergers, Schultzs, and especially the Gandhis. As a special *India Today* report detailed, ‘Though the stars of the evening were supposed to be on the stage, it was again Rajiv who stole the show. As the Gandhis and the Bush’s slipped into their box, the audience turned around and broke into thunderous applause and a visibly embarrassed Rajiv smiled and waved back’ (Trehan, 1985b). The opening concert set an influential precedent as to how this elaborate diplomatic theatre was to unfold. More than seven hundred events in towns and cities in forty-three states absorbed high-profile statesmen, bureaucrats, and artists; global media; and thousands of unofficial visitors, everyone suited, greeted, and garlanded briefly metamorphosing into an actor as they stepped onto the stage of international politics before millions of spectators (Festival of India, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> See also (Bumiller, 1985) and (Winship, 1985).

The new Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, who had received an overwhelming mandate for change from his country in the 1984 elections, was the chief beneficiary of the excitement, ‘using the spotlight masterfully to add a new dimension to American perceptions of India’ (J.A.M., 1985: 2).<sup>6</sup> Gandhi’s speech at a joint session of the House of Representatives and Senate was interrupted by applause eleven times; he was accorded standing ovations by both houses of Congress; and he created, according to the Chief of Protocol Selwa Roosevelt, the most memorable impression that she had ever seen of any foreign leader in his handling of questions at the National Press Club (J.A.M., 1985: 2; M.O., 1985: 30). According to the press, what made these reactions especially remarkable was Gandhi’s open criticisms of the Reagan administration’s strategic defence or ‘Star Wars’ initiative (SDI) and failure to keep Pakistan from building a nuclear bomb. Ordinary Americans who saw the visit through a blitzkrieg of front page and television reports were ‘left dazzled’ by images such as a beaming, laughing George Bush and Thomas P. O’Neill, evidently rapturous of the ‘easy confidence, charm, and often devastating wit’ of the young ‘superstar’ of a young nation (Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, 1985). As the US Information Agency director Charles Z. Wick eulogized, ‘This was certainly one of the most successful visits I’ve seen’ (Anderson & Spear, 1985b). The youthful Indian leader, a *Washington Post* article declared, had ‘managed to impress even the most skeptical and hard-bitten of Washington’s power brokers’ (Anderson & Spear, 1985b). In contrast to his ‘aloof and aristocratic’ grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, and his ‘sullen and withdrawn’ mother, the young, inexperienced prime minister had managed to change ‘the direction of nearly four decades of uneasy relations between the world’s two largest democracies’ in four days (Anderson & Spear, 1985b).

Significantly, in stark contrast with Indira Gandhi’s austere televised speech in 1982 when Reagan conspicuously gave the impression of having stepped on something unsavoury, videos of the son’s departure from the White House depict the gleeful US president holding up an umbrella to shelter the Indian prime minister (President Reagan’s Remarks, 1982; Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, 1985; Time River, 2015). Within the optics of global geopolitics, the meeting between the dashing, swoon-worthy Gandhi, with his hip Ray Bans and traditional black Nehru jacket, and his comparatively bland, unabashedly effusive accomplice was clearly one of equals. Gandhi, according to the American press, ‘was a self-respecting, confident leader of a major power, not some obsequious Third World politician looking for a handout from the U.S. Treasury’ (Anderson & Spear, 1985b). No longer ‘a basket case nation of half-naked fakirs dependent on Soviet largesse’, India embodied by Gandhi was ‘strong, independent, self reliant and in the front

<sup>6</sup> See also (Anderson & Spear, 1985a); (Geyelin, 1985) and (Anderson & Spear, 1985b: 14).

rank of the nations of the world in the service of mankind' and would not play 'second fiddle to either the United States or the Soviet Union' (Anderson & Spear, 1985a; Anderson & Spear, 1985b) (see Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1** Rajiv Gandhi and Ronald Reagan share a light-hearted moment. Ronald Reagan Library. Roll no. C29697 (01) Photo 30, 12 June 1985.



**Figure 2** Ronald Reagan holding up an umbrella for Rajiv Gandhi. Ronald Reagan Library. Roll no. C29704(01) Photo 6, 12 June 1985.



How, though, did ‘diplomacy waged with sitars, Rajput paintings, saris, Maurya sculptures, and even an aditi’ lay the groundwork for the Indian prime minister’s *coup de théâtre* and the new narrative that he symbolized of India as promising global superpower anchored between tradition and modernity (Sweeney, 1985)? How did eight-hundred-year-old sculptures, Kathakali dance, and Indian *hors d’oeuvres* nibbled by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the former maharajas of Jodhpur and Jaipur, and Oscar de la Renta soften hard-boiled policymakers, catalyse discussions on advances in computer technology and Coca Cola’s possible return to the Indian market, smooth entrenched differences ranging from India’s non-alignment to the United States’ military support to Pakistan, and create a climate where future crises could be resolved in ‘an atmosphere of true friendship’ (Trehan, 1985a; Trehan, 1985b)? How did musicians, jugglers, tumblers, and artists painting on henna-red village walls help generate the overwhelming new sense that India was too big and too important ‘to be as little known or cared about as it has been by most Americans’ (Anderson & Spear, 1985a; Geyelin, 1985)? Who facilitated, according to ‘hidebound curmudgeons’ such as Wick and CIA Director William Casey, this unequivocal ‘turning point’ in Indo-US relations (Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, 1985)?

### 3 The Administrative Organization of the Festival

Pupul Jayakar, known as India’s ‘cultural tsarina’ who ‘presided colossus-like over the country’s cultural scene for nearly 40 years’, was a busy woman in the 1970s and 1980s (Singh, 1997). Born in 1915 into a Gujarati Brahmin family and tutored privately by an Irish governess before attending Bedford College and the London School of Economics, she helped launch “‘a revolution” in the areas of crafts and handlooms’ in independent India (Burns, 1997: 19; McGowan, 2021: 283). After marrying Manmohan Jayakar, a barrister based in Bombay, she was appointed to the National Planning Committee led by India’s first prime minister and close family friend Jawaharlal Nehru. Eventually she took up the chairmanship of both the newly established All India Handicrafts Board in 1953 as well as the Handicraft and Handlooms Corporation of India from 1968 to 1977, all the while becoming Indira Gandhi’s close confidante and cultural advisor. Through these positions, her instrumental role in the establishment of the National Institute of Design, her prolific writing, her mentorship of some of the nation’s most important artists, and her curation of Gandhi’s politically charged handloom silk and cotton saris, Jayakar consolidated her position as the ‘godmother’ of craft in India (McGowan, 2021: 283; Sharma, 2019). Yet even as she cemented the place of

art and craft as significant economic and sociocultural concerns for the emerging nation, she masterfully deployed India's cultural vastness as a lever of international diplomacy and soft power.

### 3.1 The Festival of India in the United Kingdom

Key to this was her notoriously memorable work as chairperson of the Indian National Advisory Committee for the comprehensive, multi-sited Festivals of India – the most ambitious attempt to convey the cultural achievements of a country abroad for diplomatic, economic, and ideological ends. Subsequently imitated by numerous other countries, the seed of this 'largest manifestation by any state of a standard cultural diplomacy event' first germinated in 1977 in the United Kingdom (Mark, 2008: 207 cited in Isar 2017). Against the backdrop of a recessionist British economy and the United Kingdom's declining trade relationship with India, the British High Commissioner in India Sir John Thomson proposed a single 'blockbuster' exhibition of India's inexhaustible treasures for a major London Museum or gallery in order to redefine the two countries' eroded relations (Durrans, 1992: 28). According to civil servant Niranjan Desai, Thomson's suggestion was enthusiastically received by the Indian administration. In the aftermath of the vitriol of the Emergency, the festival would allow Gandhi (who returned to power in 1980) to address an international audience, including Indians abroad, in a positive light; divert negative media attention; and portray an appealing 'visual scheme' of the nation through which foreign trade and tourism could be promoted and organised (Desai, 1983; Sawkar, 2019). Moreover, unlike cost-efficient Western cultural diplomacy initiatives geared towards elites rather than general publics, people-to-people diplomacy was imperative for Gandhi to sell the achievements of contemporary India to entrepreneurs and consumers (Durrans, 1992: 24). Accordingly, under Jayakar's authoritative charge, the event grew from a single art exhibition into an exercise far beyond art with much greater input from India. While Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher became the festival's joint patrons, the project expanded from museum-to-museum collaboration to governmental cooperation at the highest level.

Between March and November 1982, art exhibitions, performances, music and film shows, and seminars transpired at more than forty locations in London with an additional ninety events in other parts of the country (Durrans, 2010: 27). Described by Gandhi as 'beyond our wildest hopes', audience response was overwhelming (Desai, 1983: 290). A total of 1.1 million visitors waited day

after day over a nine-month period to enter numerous museums and performance venues; Indians settled in Great Britain who brought their children and grandchildren were ‘tearful with nostalgia’; and the festival garnered more attention in elite British circles and the media than any other similar cultural exchange (Desai, 1983; Durrans, 2010). However, the festival’s success obfuscated the intense negotiations that took place between academics, curators, businessmen, and politicians on the best ‘display regime’ for ‘India’ (Durrans, 2010: 26). The British side originally conceived of the festival, in line with Indological approaches, as a series of exhibitions of classical works arranged according to standard chronological and geographical paradigms. However, Indian experts under Jayakar’s lead rejected these ‘stale’ scholarly frameworks in order to demonstrate India’s contemporary scientific and technological progress along with her ‘traditional’ cultural past. Exhibitions such as the Hayward Gallery’s *In the Image of Man*, which spotlighted the values and myths of Indian civilization through two thousand years of painting and sculpture; the Science Museum’s *Science in India*, which traced the history of technology in India from indigenous systems of mathematics to twentieth-century science; the British Museum’s *From Village to City in Ancient India*, which depicted Indian civilization as a mixture of urban and rural culture; and the Barbican Centre’s *Aditi* broke Western stereotypes of a country moored in antiquity (Desai, 1983). The festival – far ‘more than a glass-cased exhibition of India’s ancient glories’ – thus sought to ‘remind a neglectful world, how large a place India occupies on the map [and to redefine] that place for India itself’ (Desai, 1983: 286–87). Neither a ‘convalescent, moth-eaten, cobweb-ridden “wounded” society stuck in the past nor . . . uprooted from its moorings’, India, as depicted by the festival, was a modern, proud, democratic society commanding the third largest scientific-technological workforce in the world (Desai, 1983: 291).

Consequently, in the words of festival organizer Brian Durrans, the Indian contingent was chiefly responsible for creating the format of the Festival of India, of which 1982 was ‘simply the prototype’ (Durrans, 2010: 23). Durrans’ last words allude to the fact that though the nine-month UK Festival constituted ‘the most ambitious projection of Indian civilization ever made in the context of international cultural exchanges of its time’, in the long view of history, it functioned as a mere ‘stepping stone’ for the ‘Everest’ of international cultural diplomacy ‘beyond which there [were] no existing peaks to climb’, the 1985–6 Festival of India in the United States (Desai, 1983; Durrans, 1986: 2; McGill, 1984; Sethi & Mukhirji, 1982).

### 3.2 The Rose Room

Fresh from the enormous success of the UK Festival and buoyed by its ‘unprecedented’ political, economic, and social impact and wholesale makeover of Indira Gandhi’s image (Desai, 1983, 290), Jayakar, now ‘a formidable force . . . hated and feared in New Delhi’s incestuous power circles’, made her way to New York (Singh, 1997). In honour of her first momentous visit to the United States as Gandhi’s special representative, an informal luncheon had been organized on 12 April 1983 at the semi-autonomous Indo-US Subcommittee offices housed at the Rockefeller funded Asian Cultural Council (ACC) headquarters.<sup>7</sup> The objective of the seemingly innocuous luncheon, with ‘tandoori chicken, dal, nan, and rice pillau’ as buffet fare, was to provide an opportunity for government officials, foundation officers, directors of American cultural institutions, and key representatives of the business world and journalism to develop priorities and programmes for the US Festival that would have the widest impact and audience (Tanen, 1983a). The Rose Room that hosted the luncheon and, relatedly, the Asian Cultural Council headquarters thus functioned as an epistemic hub, facilitating the activation of a powerful, transnational network of ‘bridge-builders’ that would play a defining role in shaping policy, public opinion, and not least, what constituted ‘culture’.

In addition to the Indian contingent comprising cultural curator Sethi and S. K. Misra (Development Commissioner for Handlooms and Indian director-general of the Festival of India), invited members included Charles Blitzer (director of the National Humanities Center), Waldo Rasmussen (director of International Programs at the Museum of Modern Art), Martin E. Segal (of the Lincoln Centre), influential John D. Rockefeller (JDR) 3rd Fund officers Porter McCray and Richard Lanier, politician Bess Myerson, Tom Messer (director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), and Beate Gordon (director of the Performing Arts Department at the Asia Society). Subsequently, Jayakar embarked on a packed schedule of meetings with journalists Dorothy Norman and Diane Vreeland, Evan Turner (director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art), Democratic Party member Jane Harman, diplomat Winston Lord, architect Edgar Kauffman Jr., Martha Stuart,<sup>8</sup> textile designer Jack Larsen, and Marvin Traub (CEO of Bloomingdale’s). The professional diversity of individuals indicates the all-embracing, mammoth vision for the US Festival and the scale of the Indian

<sup>7</sup> As the US, unlike India, did not have a dedicated Ministry of Culture, the US Subcommittee office funded by the United States Information Agency (USIA) assumed much of the work of coordinating cultural and scholarly exchanges by painstakingly piecing together programmes with private, government, and foundation support.

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear whether Subcommittee records misspelled Martha Stewart.

and American teams' work in orchestrating an event of near-imponderable size and complexity.

Following her significant tour, a further visit to India of a US delegation under Secretary of State George Schultz, innumerable USIA memos between the two countries, and official announcements by Ronald Reagan and Indira Gandhi, a whirlwind of activities commenced. Initially, Jayakar spearheaded the establishment of the finance, museum, education, and performing arts committees comprising the who's who of Indian and US culture (such as Zubin Mehta, Elia Kazan, Alvin Ailey, Julie Andrews, Leonard Bernstein, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Martha Graham, Dustin Hoffman, Lucille Lortel, and Yehudi Menuhin for the performing arts committee) (Tanen, 1983b). Thus, in a matter of weeks, US Subcommission officers were engulfed in the enormously strenuous work of coordinating and dismissing meetings and requests by entities as diverse as the Guggenheim Foundation, the White House, the New York Mayor's office, and amateur yoga aficionados keen on making a quick buck. Simultaneously, they began soliciting funding from corporations with substantial capital investment or interests in India such as the Coca-Cola Foundation, Ford Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Smithsonian Institution, Tata Chemicals Limited, Taj Group of Hotels, Johnson and Johnson Ltd, and Philip Morris Inc. to name but a few. Closely knit networks with the cream of American society made it possible for Subcommission officers to seek support easily and directly from tycoons such as Srichand Parmanand Hinduja (founder of the Hinduja Group), Malcolm Stamper (president of Boeing Corporation), Prince Shāh Karim al-Husayni or Aga Khan IV, Reuben Mark (CEO of Colgate Company), and Donald Kendall (CEO of PepsiCo International) (Folder *Festival of India Potential Funding*, n. d.). As programmes had to be laboriously pieced together with corporate, government, and foundation support, the organization of the festival was, according to a US official, a 'terribly complicated endeavour' (Tanen, 1984b).

### 3.3 The Indian Diaspora

Meanwhile, the Indian contingent of the festival not only arranged the difficult transportation of priceless museum artefacts located across the subcontinent but also mobilized support from the Indian diaspora. In 1975, the Indian government began to realize the scale of influence of Indian communities in the United Kingdom and the United States due to their vocal criticisms of the Emergency in the media and their successful political lobbying within and outside government (Desai, 2006). Suddenly, therefore, there was a 'compulsive re-look at the policy towards the diaspora'. According to Desai, who had a hand in the

organization of both the UK and US Festivals, for the first time the Indian administration understood that Indians abroad were a powerful tool, if wielded properly, to advance India's foreign policy interests, secure new markets for exports and investment, and fight proxy election battles abroad (Desai, 2006). Accordingly, from the late 1970s both the Congress and the Jan Sangh governments tasked Indian missions with developing close relations with overseas Indians, liaising with local ethnic media, and spurring the growth of non-resident Indian (NRI) organizations.

In keeping with this policy shift, the Indian embassy hosted an informal meeting of a few prominent Indians living in the New York area to mobilize support from the diaspora. Thereafter, a non-tax-exempt trust entitled 'Friends of the Festival of India' was established to raise funds, organize members, and develop a pyramidal network headed by the Indian ambassador for widespread involvement. Several sub-committees were formed, computerized mailing lists of possible members compiled, and a financial target of raising \$3 million for the festival was set (Folder Friends of the Festival of India, n.d.).<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, volunteers were recruited to collate data, compile press kits, assist in special events, launch and conduct school programmes and educational activities, and provide assistance to museums (Folder Friends of the Festival of India, n.d.). As 'a vital educational process for ... second and third generation' Indians, the 'Friends of the Festival of India' initiative thus not only served to 'reaffirm [Indians'] cultural identity' but also created 'significant opportunities for the local communities to forge new and closer cultural links between themselves and the local[s]' (Desai, 1985). By serving as expert interlocutors – who, through their 'insider's' knowledge, unlocked India's secrets for 'the West' – local Indians volunteering in classrooms and museums across the country found an institutionalized outlet to share 'their' culture even as they jumbled orientalist divisions of labour (where 'natives' occupied the position of object rather than subject of knowledge). Consequently, the festival facilitated several historic processes: the convergence of economic and political interests between the diaspora and the Indian administration, the quest for identity by NRIs rehearsing nostalgia for the home country, and the inversion of orientalist modes of knowledge production through the collapsing distinction between 'native' informant and translator.

Significantly, when US Subcommittee officers suggested that arrangements could be made with the Asian Cultural Council to receive diasporic donations which could provide tax-deductible status, many Indians argued that they

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<sup>9</sup> The raised funds would be utilized for overall Festival activities such as the Festival office, publicity, performing arts, and other unforeseen contingencies.

preferred a new trust. All members believed, according to the ‘Friends of the Festival of India report’, that the new diaspora-led trust could play a major role in the continuing presentation of Indian culture even after the festival’s termination (Fund-raising target, n.d.). The Friends of the Festival committee thus constituted the first mass mobilization of the US Indian community, setting a highly influential precedent for subsequent cultural events; a public politics of ethnic, religious, and racial representation (Knott, 2009); and the development of ‘diasporic nationalism’ – the construction of associative patriotic identities linked to the romanticization of home, the reification of Indianness, and the projection of the motherland as a repository of morals, authenticity, and ethno-cultural identification (Shukla, 1997).

### 3.4 Tourism and Publicity

However, the Indian diaspora was not the only resource that the Indians tapped into. An unclassified USIA memo details that the Government of India hired a New York-based public relations firm, Joan Sands Associates, to launch a one-year-long publicity campaign in the United States for India (Unclassified USIA Incoming Telegram, n.d.). Sands had extensive experience in the Ford Foundation, State Department, and the New York Mayor’s office before launching her independent public relations firm that worked with clients as wide-ranging as the Government of Brazil and Disneyland (Joan M. Sands Biography, n.d.). She was therefore able to rapidly mobilize an expansive network of local television shows, radio, and print media to achieve maximum print and broadcast coverage for all of the festival’s exhibits and programmes; stimulate travel, trade, and investment; and encourage corporate and individual participation (Festival of India 1985, n.d.).

The firm’s comprehensive two-year strategy to accomplish these objectives began with a research and planning phase from June 1984. A press tour within India was organized in September 1984 for highly influential US editors and journalists as, according to Sands’ strategy, early excitement was vital to stimulate additional fund-raising efforts; encourage active participation; and promote high visibility and favourable exposure for corporations, cultural institutions, and India at large (Festival of India 1985, n.d.). A few months later, American representatives from PBS, CNN, and ABC and writers from several major publications were led on a carefully organized itinerary through the now ‘classic’ tourist circuit of Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur. Thereafter, magazine stories and special television and radio programmes were negotiated; a schedule of spot press breaks were ‘carefully orchestrated . . . to prevent early over-saturation’; and media and events calendars coordinated to avoid duplication and potential conflicts (Festival of India 1985, n.d.).

The tour, however, was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Festival records comprehensively detail the complex yet meticulous top-down ‘orchestration’ of a sweeping, tightly controlled, hitherto unseen national publicity blitz. Five-minute pictorial videos on India were created and disseminated to 330 network and local TV shows; lists of possible guests for syndicated interview programmes and radio were drawn up with their available times and ‘booked’; and it was ‘suggested’ that seventy-three magazines, twenty-three newspapers, Reuters, UPI, and the Associated Press write up feature articles on carefully curated, predetermined themes (*Advance Contact Status*, n.d.). In addition to thirteen half-hour radio documentaries and short modular extracts broadcast by the national public radio, educational packages of self-contained lessons for direct classroom use were prepared through stereo cassettes, compact disks, and a 120-page teacher-and-student guide. Created for high schools and junior colleges, these lessons introduced thousands of American students to subjects as wide ranging as ‘Sita, Draupadi & Shakuntala: Women in Indian Society and Culture’, ‘Rajiv’s India: India in the Year 2001’, ‘Calcutta: A Sound Portrait’, and ‘The World’s Largest Democracy: How Does It Work?’ (*Folder Festival of India Radio Projects*, n.d.). Thus, by May 1986, contacts through the media reached the staggering, hitherto unseen total for any cultural event of 1 billion (*Tanen*, 1986a). In the words of Subcommittee officer Ted Tanen, ‘money could not buy the type of publicity that India has received over the past few months’ (*Tanen*, 1986a) (see *Figure 3*).



**Figure 3** Mela, an Indian Fair (85–81059), Photo by Heiderer, The Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.



Concurrently, Indian authorities, dismayed by the precipitous drop in tourists from the United States after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, actively sought to translate the festival into actual bookings on tours of India. In order ‘to attract a wider range of tourists’ (Unger, 1985), government officials attempted to change India’s image in the United States, from a land ostensibly teeming with slums and pot-bellied children to a country ‘as modern as many cities in the US’ with low-cost, \$8-per-day hotels with clean beds, toilet facilities, and safe water (Unger, 1985). To do so, Indian Ministry of Tourism officials distributed special promotional films to the United States Tour Operators Association members, relaxed charter flight rules, organized ‘India wonderfares’,<sup>10</sup> and developed a series of specialized art-oriented tours for Americans with Indian museums and universities (Folder Festival of India Travel Programmes, n.d.).

More importantly, these officials consciously deployed a vision of India as vibrant, rich, and worthy of travel by juxtaposing Kathakali dancers, white-bearded artisans, and bucolic village children with hip Goan beaches, golf courses, and luxurious railway cabins in their promotional materials. According to a festival brochure, ‘herein lay the charm of this wondrous country – perennially ancient and stridently modern. Where the old is not outdated and the new is not a passing fashion’ (Discover India brochure, n.d.). By advertising India as modern ‘craftshop of the world’ both ancient and contemporary, the festival, more than any other cultural form, was pivotal in inaugurating a special epoch of cultural tourism that would culminate in the ‘Incredible India’ campaigns of the 2000s (India Craftshop of the World, n.d.).<sup>11</sup> By rendering banal elements of Indian life – mehndi, lassi or ‘a frothy yoghurt drink’ (Discover India brochure, n.d.), and a busy train ride in Bombay into sources of fascination, the festival promotion materials and, as we will eventually see – the festival itself manifested a *precession of simulacra*, in which the representation of a country or culture precedes or becomes more real than the original culture that is referenced.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that people usually travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places. For a place, she says, to become a ‘sight to be seen’, that is, a museum or exhibit of itself, culture is a resource (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 132). Culture as ‘heritage’ allows lifestyles, places, and rituals in danger of disappearing to survive by adding to them the value of pastness, difference, and indigeneity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 150). Objects thus become ethnographic, ways of life become patrimony, and

<sup>10</sup> These were promotional airfares for tourists and Indians who resided abroad.

<sup>11</sup> See (O’Shea, 2016).

exhibitionary virtualities show what can otherwise not be seen. The process also raises, as she crucially argues, several questions: ‘How does a way of life become ‘heritage’? How does heritage become an industry? And what happens to the life world in the process?’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 144).

## 4 Actors

### 4.1 What Is an Actor?

One person had the answer: Jayakar. Her gargantuan job – cultural curation – was far more challenging than the sequential, goal-oriented administrative tasks, encompassing the tangled worlds of finance, the media, tourism, and domestic politics, imposed on her less-visionary colleagues. To win American hearts and minds and create diplomatic settings conducive for problem-solving while giving easily comprehensible form to abstract, dialogical, often conflicting political discourse within the dramaturgical frame of the festival was her Herculean mission. This required an act of translation of extreme complexity, involving a variety of incongruous interests and heterogeneous systems of values and meanings according to diverse institutional and disciplinary parameters.

Richard Kurin, who assisted Jayakar and Sethi in the organization of a key exhibition analysed below entitled *Mela!*, describes the work of Jayakar and the other festival directors as one of ‘strategic cultural brokerage’ (Kurin, 1997). In order to ‘make a broad spectrum of Americans aware of . . . another country’s culture, and [. . . develop] programs that will ensure continued binational dialogue long after the festival is done’, brokers, Kurin argues, function as symbolic manipulators of the audience. They interpret political discourse through a repertoire of genres (gimmicks, disciplinary knowledge, techniques for persuasion, and amusement) in order to facilitate among audiences communication, participatory cultural transformation, and lasting change (Kurin, 1991: 19; Tanen, 1991). Kurin’s description of cultural brokerage as the transformation of values from one domain into another is not dissimilar from the phenomenology of the actor on stage who, as Freddie Rokem argues, bears the paradox of the relation between the real and discourse (Rokem, 2002: 12). Though differences may easily be identified between civic and theatrical actors, both types are tasked with transforming ‘reality into abstract images, which are rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to others’ (Kurin, 1997: 19). They therefore share the role of materializing abstract ideas into embodied form through carefully calibrated cultural representations within the here and now of the liminal performance event.

Political theorist Hanna Pitkin explains in the context of democracy that the concept of representation implies a paradox of being present and yet not present, or in other words, that someone or something not literally present is nevertheless present in some nonliteral sense (Pitkin, 2004: 336). Yet her assertion that ‘the way Macbeth is “made present” on the stage differs from the way an ambassador represents a state’ invites nuance (Pitkin, 2004: 336). Echoing Pitkin, William Worthen in his *The Idea of the Actor*, one of a handful of book-length treatments on the phenomenology of the actor, argues that an actor is someone who is there and not there, strutting his stagey stuff’ but ... also absent, negated by the dramatic illusion he creates’ (Worthen, 2014: 3). There are two performances here: one that conceals him as an actor and another that conceals him within his dramatic role (Worthen, 2014: 3). As beings operating betwixt and between state and civil society, home and abroad, Jayakar and her *protégés*, who were both remarkably astute as well as singularly short-sighted, engaged in a special doubleness. On the one hand, they were cogs in a geopolitical wheel that was already turning — effects of their time who played predetermined parts within a performance that exceeded individual intentions or aspirations. Concurrently, they were historically powerful individuals who consciously calibrated their performances of non-doing during the doing. Their strong air of political aloofness was often belied by their distributive, definitional, and interlocutory power, that is, their ability to allocate resources; to support specific artists, cultural phenomena, and scholarly topics; and to interpret crude political discourse into charming, monumental, seemingly apolitical spectacle.

## 4.2 The Classical/Folk Performing Arts Programme

An illustrative example of this shared phenomenology between actors on theatrical and political stages is cultural advisor Beate Sirota Gordon. Gordon’s name appears in the festival’s performing arts committee that comprised other luminaries such as Martin Segal, Paul Newman, Isaac Stern, and Elia Kazan (Segal, 1985). Yet she – a relatively unknown figure in global theatre history – wielded far more influence than her more celebrated peers. The daughter of Russian Jewish *émigrés* who, according to the *New York Times*, nearly single-handedly inscribed women’s rights into the Japanese constitution at the age of twenty-two, Gordon had already spent several decades building her reputation as a powerful cultural impresario – ‘one of the first people to bring traditional Asian performing arts to audiences throughout North America’ (Fox, 2013). In her capacity as director of the Japan Society and subsequently director of the performing arts programme of the Asia Society, she travelled to Asia’s ‘most remote, inaccessible reaches’ in order to scout for outstanding talent (Fox, 2013).

Like other cultural officers at the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations operating at the height of the Cold War, Gordon constituted a powerful arbitrator of 'cultural worth', determining the individuals, institutions, and artistic forms deserving of sponsorship, international recognition, and scholarly approval. An Asia Society memorandum dating to 1977 details the procedure that she followed to recruit Indian artists for programmes in the United States (Gordon, 1977). Once a year Gordon organized an American advisory committee of experts in the field of Asian arts. Based on their suggestions as well as those of her own extensive list of Indian contacts, she then reached out to Indian troupes and artists. She subsequently personally travelled to India, auditioning as many dancers and companies as possible and making decisions for possible tours on the basis of 'authenticity, availability and financial conditions' (Gordon, 1977). After deciding on a troupe, her staff prepared publicity materials for dissemination to approximately 10,000 individuals based at US universities. Upon signing contracts with universities, a schedule was worked out, flights and hotels booked, and costumes and stage properties transported. Finally, in addition to the preparation of press-releases, posters, and leaflets, experts in the field were invited to write monographs on the performances. Gordon was thus at the centre of an influential transnational epistemic community of artists, professors, and governmental representatives. Along with a handful of other US foundation officers, she facilitated not only the post-World War II interpenetration between Asian and American art, music, and design but also the global dissemination of a consensus on what constituted theatre through scholarly exchanges, fellowships, conferences, and workshops.

Gordon followed a similar procedure in 1983–4 while piecing together the 'classical' and 'folk' components of the performing arts programme for the festival. In October 1983, she requested Indian bureaucrats Misra and Narayana Menon to arrange music and dance programmes for her visit to India under the auspices of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (Singh, 1983; Tanen, 1984a). Concurrently, Dan Neuman, chair of the American Institute of Indian Studies Performance Committee, and Martha Ashton, coordinator of Tours for the University Program, put together an extensive Indian performing arts lecture tour for South Asian Studies and Theatre departments between 1985 and 1986 (Desai, 1984; Sundar, 1984). After finalizing the artists and mobilizing academic networks, 'classical' and 'folk' performances with explanations by 'top-class', unnamed artists of Krishnattam, Langas, Dhrupad,

Kuchipudi, and Meitei were held at approximately thirty universities across the country (Sundar, 1984).<sup>12</sup>

Within the scenographic frame of the lecture tours and shows, the context of the state-to-state diplomatic festival, and the Cold War area studies configuration of ‘South Asia’, Gordon, her peers, and the performers themselves translated ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ performance as ‘an emblem of national and diasporic identity and as ‘high art’ that transcends national and linguistic boundaries’ (O’Shea, 2003: 177). Sundered from the simple category ‘Indian’, the tours lined up several thought systems: ‘Eastern’ choreography; English-language scholarly epistemology through which the choreography was rendered intelligible (O’Shea, 2003: 177); and the late-Cold War political discourse of transnational dialogue, intercultural harmony, and universal, transcendental spiritualism. As musician Ravi Shankar said of his role, ‘I cannot carry a placard and walk around and do politicking. The only message I can send I can express through our music, emanating a special something – a lot of love and peace, a tranquillity which is also a part of our religion, our culture, our heritage. I so much wish for harmony between the people’ (Sweeney, 1985).

Wholes, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett argues in the context of festival culture, are constituted not given; exhibitions are fundamentally ‘of those who make them, no matter what their ostensible subject’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 21, 78). Though international exhibitions’ heterogeneous content often belies overt or clear international relations strategy, the festival frame – the superimposition of art, dance, music, science, exhibitions, film shows, and live shows with board room meetings, seminars, and diplomatic soirees – provided the highly codified matrix for the interpretation of geopolitical meaning. By parroting bureaucratic discourse in common parlance, actors onstage such as Ravi Shankar and the classical dancers tacitly shared a theatrical self-consciousness – a doing in the not doing – with those offstage. Through the double effort of the prescribed performance of geopolitics and the often-subconscious concealment of this performance in non-partisan language – that of love and peace, tranquillity and harmony – the Indian performing artists and the political actors hidden from history at the Ford Foundation, Indo-US Subcommittee, and Indian Ministry of Culture reflexively transferred the burden of cultural interpretation to ‘calculatedly ambiguous’

<sup>12</sup> These were Michigan State University, Wesleyan University, Brown University, Carleton College, University of California, Los Angeles, University of Washington, California State University, Syracuse University, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Dartmouth College, University of Virginia, Duke University, University of Illinois, University of Miami, University of Texas, Austin, Davidson College, East-West Center Honolulu, Florida State University, San Diego State University, University of North Dakota, Lewis and Clark College, Colgate University, Columbus College, Kansas State University, State University of New York at Oswego, University of Missouri, and University of Northern Iowa.

foreign policy ground. Indeed, artists, foundation officials, and government authorities often conflicted on the organizational minutiae of the ‘deal’ such as finances; the selection of artists, scholars, and objects; the number and size of events; invitation lists; the relative privileging of elite, urban spaces; and scenographic and site-specific details. However, what bound all of these state and non-state actors mobilized to perform across the United States was the often involuntary, consensual, and therefore potent understanding of the need to disseminate a specific discourse before the global public according to the terms of political engagement set in the late Cold War.

### 4.3 Making and Breaking Illusions

The Ford Foundation, which funded this comprehensive Indian performing arts university tour at a cost of \$250,000 in collaboration with the Indian government, also funded a series of academic seminars on India ([Folder Finance Committee, 1984](#); Sundar, 1984). Along with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the universities themselves, \$280,000 were allocated to fourteen symposia on topics such as ‘The Canvas of Culture: Rediscovery of the Past as Adaptation for the Future’; ‘Patronage in Indian Culture: Religion, Politics and Aesthetics’; ‘Conflicting Images: India and America in the 1980s’; and ‘Indian Literature’ ([Chronological Schedule of Events, n.d.](#); [Folder Finance Committee, 1984](#)).

According to Durrans, though the effectiveness of the Festival of India in accomplishing governmental objectives such as bilateral trade or political cooperation is impossibly difficult to assess, academic relations ‘in personal contacts, visits, joint research projects, conferences, publications and so on’ constitute the best possible measure of impact ([Durrans, 1982](#): 13). Not unlike the mediating influence of the performing arts avant garde of the 1980s (Ellen Stewart, Richard Schechner, and Ariane Mnouchkine), Gordon and her successors facilitated, through the overlapping lecture tours and seminars, an undeniable scholarly interest in US universities in the ‘traditional’ performing arts of the subcontinent. Overdetermined by categories such as ‘classical’, ‘folk’, ‘rural’, and ‘traditional’, Indian culture was conceived as a repository of myths and bodily techniques for the development of the theatre of roots,<sup>13</sup> intercultural theatre, and a globalist theory of ‘performance’. This consensus on Indian culture began in the 1970s with JDR 3rd Fund-sponsored conferences and workshops on Ritual and Theatre attended by Gordon herself, Victor Turner, Schechner, Phillip Zarrilli, Martha

<sup>13</sup> The Theatre of Roots was conceived as an attempt to ‘decolonize’ modern, proscenium-based Indian theatre by placing ‘authentic’ elements of ‘folk’ performance within modern structures of representation.

Coigney, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Farley Richmond, and other theatre scholars, anthropologists, foundation officers, and performers ([Folder World Conference on Ritual and Theater/Asia DF-7944 DF-7945](#), n.d.). Intended to facilitate richer and deeper mutual understanding of one another's cultures at their most vital level and the fusion of a culture's past with the present, the 'overriding theoretical concern' of the world conference in 1982 and preparatory planning workshops was: 'What is a unified field theory of performance?' ([Zarrilli, 1979](#)).

The classical festival programme pieced together by Gordon and her colleagues that occurred three years later in many ways constituted the next stage in the development of the overlapping fields of performance studies and modern Indian theatre. Facilitating exchanges that impacted works such as Girish Karnad's 'Theatre in India', Richmond, Darius Swann, and Zarrilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, and Schechner and Willa Appel's *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, the festival constituted a translational meeting point between those working on either side of the proscenium – each influencing the other through financial flows, elite networks, and scholarly output.<sup>14</sup> Despite their differential motivations, objectives, and distributive, definitional, and interlocutory power, all participants – in determining what constituted as representative of Indian culture within a larger geopolitical design they were powerless or indisposed to counteract – shared an implicit agreement on the discourse that the festival would manifest. By intuitively ventriloquizing performing artists', scholars', and audience's expectations; isolating specific elements of ideologically instrumental value; and shaping symbolic constructs to facilitate 'trickle-down diplomacy', brokers such as Gordon, Jayakar, and Sethi assumed influential gatekeeping roles. They thus literally and metaphorically set the stage for the twentieth century's most significant spectacles, inadvertently identifying the artists, cultural forms, and scholarly themes which would shine in the global limelight or fade away into obscurity.

Crucially, this powerful performance enacted by this network of authoritative actors within the broad gambit of 'soft power' broke once in a while. For example, Narayana Menon, the Indian face of the festival's performing arts recruitment drive, faced the wrath of three dancers at a public performance in honour of the Indian dancer Balasaraswathi at the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Sonal Mansingh, one of the dancers, declared that as she had not been selected for the US Festival, she had no talent and therefore did 'not wish to desecrate the memory of the great Bala by performing' ([Bumiller, 1985](#)). Similarly, Jayakar was shouted down as a 'liar' at a packed public meeting in New Delhi ([Bumiller, 1985](#)).

<sup>14</sup> See ([Wenner-Gren, 1982](#)).

More affectingly, Sethi – tasked with organizing several festival events – was seen before the opening sweeping clean a makeshift Hindu shrine previously sacralized by a Washington priest by ‘holding the broom in such a clumsy and unaccustomed way that he could scarcely control it’ (Cantwell, 1993: 147). Could it be, Robert S. Cantwell witnessing the ‘supercilious’ Brahman asked, ‘that he had never held a broom before’ (Cantwell, 1993: 147)?

These conflicts, denunciations, and occasional moments of epiphanic spectatorial revelation suggest the hidden, brutal yet delicately fragile performances that these upper-caste, seemingly cosmopolitan bureaucrats, mostly born into wealth, engaged in in influencing not only what was represented but also how what was represented came to be understood. In deciding who performed where, which art form deserved representation and patronage, and, in consequence, what was to be understood as Indian performance, Jayakar, Gordon, Sethi, and Menon bred ‘jealousy, distrust and aggressive competitiveness among the participants’ (Menon, 1987: 39). Admired and despised, fascinating and fearsome, together they thus belligerently yet not entirely consciously gave form to geo-political strategy according to seemingly all-encompassing but, in actuality, exceptionally distinctive aesthetic conventions.

What, however, was the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the festival, which encompassed far more than the classical and folk performing arts programme? What was the overriding message on *India!* that these actors wished to convey to the global public? How did they translate into soft, visually impactful artistic events, the hard Indian transition in the late Cold War from the clunky planned socialism of the Premier Padmini to the speedy liberalism of the Maruti 800? How did these cultural officials spearhead the momentous shift from Indological-orientalist curatorial approaches to the now ubiquitous neoliberal paradigm, made fashionable by the World Bank, of ‘cultural industry’?

## 5 Cultural Development

Jayakar, ‘the indefatigable moving spirit behind the Festival’ who was both a devout follower of the spiritual leader Jiddu Krishnamurthy as well as ‘a Gujarati [having] money in [her] blood’ and who had extensive experience generating foreign markets for Indian cultural products, sums up how this complex endeavour was to be achieved in one phrase: ‘creating a total spectrum’ (Dasgupta, 1985; Jayakar, 1986; Sethi, 1981; Trehan, 1985a). From ‘silent sculptures thousands of years old . . . [and] a brightly turbaned flesh-and-blood balladeer from Rajasthan’ to exhibitions on technological innovation and scientific progress, the Festival of India in the United States, building on the curatorial theme of the Festival in the United Kingdom, showcased both the



modern and ancient, that is, ‘the total face of India’ (Dasgupta, 1985). Revered and loathed in New Delhi’s incestuous power circles, India’s ‘cultural tsarina’ understood the mandate assigned to her by the Gandhis regarding the emphatic *India!*, which they wished to project (Burns, 1997).

Against the backdrop of quickening globalization; the related growing disillusionment with narrowly economic, Western-centric, linear development; and the universal terror of humankind’s extermination through nuclear conflict, Gandhi, according to Jayakar, had one major concern: ‘whether India could survive with its wisdom intact; for without this wisdom what was India’ (Jayakar, 1992: ix)? While Gandhi posited the question, her biographer and close friend had the answer: Indian culture – not merely her arts but her very way of life – would show the world at the dawn of the twenty-first century how to thread modernity and spirituality, the soulless industrial-technological and the bucolic agrarian-rural, the satellite and the bullock cart. As Jayakar described to the press at the opening of the festival:

We want to show that the technological revolution does not mean the end of the whole past, of universals like literature, art, music and peace. The next few years will be traumatic for us as we make the transition into the modern world. I know of no country that has as deep spiritual and cultural roots, but the question is whether or not we can make the transition without losing our values. (Winship, 1985)

### 5.1 A Brief History of Cultural Development

This dramaturgical scheme of preserving the past to safeguard societal values while moving into a frightening, potentially devastating future did not emerge in a vacuum. As I have described elsewhere, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations honed the concept over several decades in India under what Rustom Bharucha declaims as ‘that most philistine of categories – “cultural development”’ (Bharucha, 1996: 199).<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the Indian government’s commitment to cultural preservation, the representative of the Ford Foundation for India, Douglas Ensminger, argued as early as 1963 that development was not about ‘socio-economic considerations alone’ (Mayer, 1959; Sommer, 1973, 1). On his commission, a German-Jewish scholar, Artur Isenberg, proposed the ‘encouragement of Cultural Development’ as the ‘cultural dimension’ of life was as essential as the ‘irreducible necessities . . . [of] food production, clothing, shelter’ (Isenberg, 1963: 1). With the guidance of an administrative board comprising Indira Gandhi, Ford began to follow a ‘gut hunch’ that Americans

<sup>15</sup> To win the Cold War, these foundations had formulated a ‘cultural-development’ model for soft-power activities in emerging countries. See (Nicholson, 2020).

should protect indigenous values, thereby promoting ‘foreign development concepts insofar as possible within the developing society’s cultural framework in order to minimize crises of identity and inferiority, charges of cultural imperialism, and westernization and dull standardization’ (Isenberg, 1970: 26; Sommer, 1973: 1). Through arts preservation courses, travel and study awards for talented artists, and large infrastructural projects such as the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Bombay, Ford’s 1970s cultural programme, in Ensminger’s words, would ‘effectively, if indirectly, facilitate developmental work in seemingly unrelated areas’ (Possible support, 1968: 1).

In the 1980s, cognizant of new criticisms of the aims of development – no longer a ‘narrow common course towards a uniform modern industrial society . . . [where] Osaka equals Chicago equals Bombay’ – the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations’ cultural development programme considerably expanded (McCarthy, 1987: 107). A 1982 cultural strategy paper highlighted the ‘dehumanizing effects of certain forms of modernization due to social dislocation, change[d] family/community structure, [and] modern technology’ (Delhi Office Culture Program, 1982: 1b). In order to inhibit the erosion of a ‘just and humane society’, diverse peoples needed creative expressions that would help them understand their new circumstances and ‘engage in a continuing reconstruction of social and human values’ (Delhi Office Culture Program, 1982: 2b). This process of cultural development, according to the report, had to be based upon each country’s cultural heritage: the myths and memories that elicit mass response and that could make comprehensible historic patterns of change. Indian traditions, in particular, offered ‘invaluable sources for the evolution of a modern but distinctively Asian cultural framework capable of absorbing new technologies and behaviour patterns’ (Delhi Office Culture Program, 1982: 3b). According to this new vision, India could lead the way in reconnecting all human beings to a universal humanity almost irredeemably eroded by modernization and nationalistic jingoism.

## 5.2 The Soft Power of Sulfa Drugs and the Sacred Cow

The soft power potential of the paradigm of cultural development was well-known to Jayakar, a previous fellow of the JDR 3rd Fund who liaised for decades between US foundation officers, representatives of transnational organizations such as the International Theatre Institute, government officials, artists, scholars, and the Gandhis themselves. Accordingly, three years before the pathbreaking declaration by UNESCO of the World Decade for Cultural Development that proclaimed the failure of the Washington Consensus due to its inability to recognize the importance of culture in the development process, the Festival of India projected, in Jayakar’s words, ‘an ancient country with very

deep roots . . . entering into a new century, a new ethos . . . tak[ing] in the new technological culture without destroying the sense of heritage' (Dasgupta, 1985: 14; UNESCO, 1987).

This transcendentalist dramaturgical scheme was succinctly verbalized during the proceedings of *India 2000*, the first in a series of university seminars scheduled across the United States as part of the festival. In response to the economist Raj Krishna's bleak projection of India's probable increase in poverty and population, the philosopher-novelist Raja Rao 'like a voice from another century' let out an 'anguished cry [that] reverberated in the minds of the audience': How can happiness be quantified; what is the true measure of need; does quality of life rest solely on possessions or does it include the state of the spirit (Das Gupta, 1985: 39; Krishna, 1986)? The seminar, a microcosm of the entire festival, thus expressed, according to co-participant Chidananda Das Gupta, the 'confrontation of two mighty perhaps irreconcilable forces', highlighting tensions characteristic of Indo-US relations and global peace building and development discourse at the liminal historical juncture of the end of the Cold War and the beginning of unprecedented globalization: 'tensions between the modern and traditional, progress and preservation, industrialization and the hand-made, art and commerce, design and craft, colonial and post-colonial, socialist and democratic, East and West' (Das Gupta, 1985: 39; Hodson, 2016).

The festival's 'non-threatening "visual scheme"' that promoted India as the panacea to the modern world's evils accordingly emphasized cultural divergences and convergences: 'iconic images of essential cultural and historical symbols, interwoven with new images depicting universally identifiable symbols of techno-modernity' (Kaur, 2012 cited in Sawkar, 2019: 408). By combining India's unique heritage with global scientific progress, the scheme served to attract potential investors, tourists, and consumers; reaffirm diasporic Indian cultural identity; facilitate diplomatic power-play; and legitimize artistic practices facing unfathomable economic crisis. The potter does not simply pot, the dancers do not simply dance. Instead, as Durrans explains in the context of the festival, their souls – fragments of India's own – flow through their bodies and hands to reflect a deep, universal, religio-philosophical tradition that would guide the rest of the world away from the banal evils of westernisation and uniform development (Durrans 1982: 15). Obscuring stereotypes of the country as 'a land of teeming populations, backward, poor' (Jayakar, n.d.: 3), and glossing over separatist agitations in Punjab and Assam, the festival narrativized *India!* – the land of sulphur drugs and the sacred cow – as the chief exponent of both a no-longer Western-prescribed modernity and a muscular vision of the arts as drivers of meaningful socio-economic development. As bureaucrat Narayana Menon proclaimed in *India 2000* – two decades after the

Ford Foundation birthed the idea of ‘cultural development’ in the Indian subcontinent and two decades before the World Bank made culture an integral component of its sustainable development initiatives – ‘the arts do have a role to play in the development process, and total development is possible only when literature, art, philosophy, and the sciences interact’ (Menon, 1986: 35).

### 5.3 The Pitfalls of Cultural Development

In the long view of history this global instrumentalization of culture in the service of foreign policy and socio-economic change was, as critics of ‘cultural industries’ and ‘creative economies’ have long decried, a ticking time bomb. Yet the localized effects of this paradigm in one of its primary breeding grounds – the Indian nation state – were especially noxious. The Rajiv Gandhi administration’s pathbreaking fusion of Western and indigenous commodities – computers with kurta-pyjamas – as the symbols of a shining new India signified, as Arvind Rajagopal describes, a dual emphasis on both market forces and national culture, on economic liberalisation and ‘Hinduisation’ (Rajagopal, 1994). The growing focus on an original wellspring of Indian culture through the Festival of India and corollary activities such as the 1982 Asian Games, Apna Utsav (Our Festival),<sup>16</sup> and the Doordarshan serialized *Ramayana* commissioned by Rajiv Gandhi (Brosius, 2005: 34), implicitly promoted Hindu myths, rituals, and artistic forms as indigenous tradition applicable to all, thereby abetting the production of a popular ‘soft saffron’ Indian identity linked to the diffusion of a consumerist ethos. Donning the Brahmin thread over his clothes during his mother’s last rites – a performance of the amalgamation of hyper-masculine upper-caste Hinduism and modernity, which was broadcast nation-wide – Rajiv thus inaugurated a new era of symbolic politics (Brosius, 2005: 34). To be Hindu had shifted in the mid 1980s from signifying sluggishness, obsolescence, and being stuck in a hoary, anachronistic past to a triumphalist pronouncement of power and the pursuit of socio-economic hegemony. No longer encumbered by the handicaps of superstition and antiquated beliefs, ‘Hinduism’ – now the metonym of the cultural nation – was an integral component of the suppressed force of India to be emancipated through the removal of socialist controls and state interference and the reinvigoration of dormant mass drive (Rajagopal, 1994).

Consequently, like Reagan and Thatcher, who introduced new free market policies along with celebrations of national culture comprising sentimental

<sup>16</sup> The Apna Utsav cultural festival which displayed the rich and diverse cultures of India was, according to Rajiv Gandhi, a festival of India for India. According to Sethi, director-general of the festival, its objective was to bring Indian culture to India’s streets and have her people meet their roots.

imperialism and xenophobia, Rajiv's new vigorous India witnessed, along with increasing liberalisation, the beginnings of the promulgation of 'a cohesive Hindu upper-caste dominated cultural identity for the nation' (Rajagopal, 1994: 1661). With the exultant discourse of sweeping socio-economic revolution that Gandhi carried with him to office and the concomitant re-invention of 'an indigenised "India"' in the United States, new spaces were created into which communalism, casteism, and regionalism embedded themselves. The indigenious idioms and vernacular traditions formulated through the festival that smoothed the way for debt-induced economic growth heralded the widespread appeal of populist spectacles such as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which gained traction in 1986 when Rajiv Gandhi authorized the opening of the Babri mosque for Hindu worship (Rajagopal, 1994). The Festival of India's celebratory rhetoric of liberalization/development cum cultural indigenization accordingly planted both the seeds of economic revolution as well as, what Amartya Sen called, the 'illusion of a singular identity' – a compulsive identification with religion that is today so deeply embedded in the popular consciousness of a 'Hindu' India as to have become invisibilized (Sen, 2007: 8). Unwholesome and hugely promising, the festival thus marked the beginnings of the steep descent from postcolonial secular India – a meeting place of numerous enumerated communities (Kaviraj, 2010) – to a majoritarian Hindu nation state.

## 6 Zoological Performance

### 6.1 *Aditi and Mela!*

It was, therefore, in the words of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Robert McCormick Adams, 'especially fitting', that the Sanskrit word *Aditi* from the 3000-year-old Rig Veda denoting the ancient Hindu mother goddess or 'original creative power' had been chosen to signify the event that best articulated the 'mutually reinforcing relationships between artistic performance, economic trade and religious belief' (Adams, 1985a; Adams, 1985b: 9; Kurin, 1985a). Nine years in the making with support from the Ford Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities and involving the participation of nearly twenty Smithsonian bureaus, *Aditi – A Celebration of Life* was initially conceived as part of a 1981 'India!' exhibition in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently postponed due to lack of funds to 1982 and then 1985, the exhibition featured live performances by

<sup>17</sup> This was to be a yearlong exhibition comprising A 'Manifestations of Siva' exhibit, seminars, a film festival, children's and contemporary Indian theatre, a kathakali dance troupe, and the music programme Jazz Yatra.

forty folk artists and two thousand objects (some as large as a life-sized toy elephant) loaned by the queen's collection in London and more than fifty Indian institutions in an immense recreated Indian village at the National Museum of Natural History (Holmes, 1988; Kurin, 1991: 317–18).

In an effort to favour 'cultural holism over atomistic particularism' (Kurin, 1991: 318), *Aditi* was inspired by and approximated the Hindu philosophies of *samsara* and *moksha* in its celebration of the life cycle of India from the point of view of a child (Kurin, 1991: 318, 340). The exhibition was, accordingly, divided into eighteen sections though it looked and appeared spontaneous: commencing with the coming of age, advancing into courtship, matrimony, childbirth, and infancy, to the phase when the young adult leaves the home and village for the *Mela!* (fair) to recommence the cycle (Kurin, 1991: 317–19; Sethi, 1985a: 21). To mark *Aditi's* inauguration, a *puja* (Hindu ritual of worship) was performed through a makeshift shrine made of the Smithsonian's collection of meteorites (Kurin, 1991: 329). Performance, as Rokem describes, is structured through entrances and exits (Rokem, 1994: 143–44). Openings and closures regulate the presence and absence of peoples on stage and thus influence dramatic action and the structure of the presentation. In performing the *puja* at the museum's entryway, an all-encompassing Hindu world view was assumed as the underlying *mise-en-scène* of the exposition, though lip service was paid to India's secular credentials through the presentation of objects of diverse ethnic, caste, regional, and religious origin (Kurin, 1991: 318). *Aditi* thus marked a concerted, high-level attempt abroad to deploy upper-caste Hindu religious symbolism as the general organizing principle of the Indian state's body of self-representation.

Following this logic, masterpieces of Indian art and newly made handicrafts of varied origin linked to specific stages of the life cycle were juxtaposed, within an incense-infused setting vaguely suggestive of Hindu-Indian traditional life, against 'living, moving, ever-changing human spectacle': Bauls singing of cosmic fertility; Warli wall painters depicting tribal courtship on russet village walls; Muslim Langa musicians singing songs to welcome the new-born; Rajasthani women applying mehndi to the hands of visitors in preparation for marriage; and magicians, puppeteers, jugglers, and storytellers initiating children into India's history, myth, and wisdom (Kurin, 1991: 318; Russell, 1985a: 1).

Orchestras strike up. Dancers dance. Child acrobats turn themselves inside out. Puppets act out their stories. Magicians magick. Potters pot. Jewellers, carvers, weavers, toy makers go about their business. Almost life-sized mock horses canter to and fro, and a licensed saboteur or resident clown is encouraged to bring chaos wherever there is order. (Russell, 1985a: 1)



**Figure 4** Mela, an Indian Fair (85–80755), Photo by Tracy Eller, The Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.

Spilling up the museum's escalators and out of its doors, the 'living exhibition' continued with a hundred more artists onto *Mela! An Indian Fair* on the Mall, which functioned as an enlarged form of the final section of *Aditi* devoted to festivals (Kurin 1985b; Kurin, 1991: 319; Shapiro, 1985: 20; Russell, 1985a: 1). Replete with handicraft stalls, performances, and food carts from all corners of the Indian subcontinent, this recreated Indian outdoor carnival was organized according to the senses of sound, touch, sight, taste, and smell (Kurin, 1991: 319). Interweaving ritual practice, sensorial pleasure, and not least commerce, *Mela!* comprised scores of stalls selling handwoven cloth, toys, incense, and flower garlands. To the enigmatic tunes of Punjabi *giddha*, Gujarati *garba*, and Bengali devotional songs, visitors purchased exotic knick-knacks while devouring succulent kebabs and tooth-aching *jalebis* (Kurin, 1991: 319) (see Figure 4).

Despite or perhaps because of its overriding Hindu spiritual undertones – a few steps away from Narendra Modi's Hindutva-lite spectacles such as Yoga Day, Howdy Modi!, and the Ganga-Aarti laser light show – the consumption of India through *Aditi* and *Mela!* was extraordinarily successful from an economic and diplomatic standpoint. *Mela!* had 1.2 million visitors and *Aditi* had 130,000 (the limit of the museum's capacity) and there were two-hour-long queues to enter the site on weekends. Gandhi, who made the journey from Capitol Hill – the 'heart of America' – to this 'heart of India' with Nancy Reagan, hailed the artists as India's

cultural ambassadors as both events acted as major catalysts for promoting exports (*Mela!* alone earned \$100,000 in ten days) (A.D., 1985: 15–16; M.O., 1985: 30; Kurin, 1991: 320–23, 336). Moreover, the events were declared ‘a vital educational process for . . . second and third generation’ Indians, creating ‘significant opportunities for the local communities to forge new and closer cultural links between themselves and the local[s]’ (Desai, 1985). Consequently, American news outlets, critics, and scholars showered nothing but adulatory praise on this ‘free trip to India on a flying carpet’ (Aditi: *A Resounding Success*, 1982: 142; Kurin 1991). ‘Past the clichés of crippled beggars’, it was, according to its chief patroness, Jayakar, and leading dance critic Shanta Serbjeet Singh, ‘one of the greatest shows of the 1980s’, ‘a glittering, glowing event which . . . [would] change the face of Indian culture in the western hemisphere’ (Aditi: *A Resounding Success*, 1982: 142).

## 6.2 ‘India’s Answer to Diaghieff’

Revealing to millions of Americans in their own milieu how ‘art is a part of everyday life in India’, these exhibitions, which made ‘a terrifically strong case for India’s claim to the best and most versatile craftspeople and performers in the world’, were designed and directed by Jayakar’s young star-apprentice Sethi (Adams, 1985a; Holmes, 1988; Trehan, 1985a). Described at the time by *New York Times* art critic John Russell as ‘India’s answer to Diaghieff’, Sethi is today arguably one of the most influential exponents of India’s ‘creative industries’, having worked over the course of his long career with professionals and organizations as diverse as the Planning Commission of the Government of India, Pierre Cardin, the World Bank, Joan Littlewood, Ariane Mnouchkine, and the boards of the Central Cottage Industries and Tourism Ministry to position culture as a core component of poverty reduction and development (Cantwell, 1993: 147; Russell, 1985a; Sethi Biography, n.d.).

The scenographic vision undergirding such monumental contemporary projects as the highly acclaimed refurbishment of Mumbai’s now privatized T2 terminal – India’s largest public artwork project to date consisting of original treasures and commissioned pieces by master-craftspeople and designers exploring contemporary media – stems from Sethi’s formative experience at the festival under Jayakar’s imposing charge. Sitting between the 2019 airport – a spectacular, selfie-conducive doorway to the nation where ‘the old and new coexist . . . side by side . . . erupting into fantastic hybrids, at once global and local’ – and nineteenth-century ethnographic displays at world fairs that represented the truths of the ‘exotic’ orient, *Aditi* and *Mela!* captured the ghostly simultaneity of past and present (Ganguly, 2016). In its use of Indian heritage to



market a unique Indian modernity, these exhibitions suggested Indian futurity through the backward glance. In this regard, they constituted forerunners of sites as specific as Louis Vuitton's Indian handicraft window installations and the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre's debut fashion exhibit which directly cited Diana Vreeland's famous Festival of India aphorism: 'Pink is the navy blue of India!' (Brown, 2020; Thacker, 2010). So too did they foreshadow phenomena as broad as the brand-building exercise 'Made in India' that promoted Indian goods and industries on an international platform. The exhibitions thus constituted the first concerted transnational attempt to give traditional India a 'creative edge' in the competitive global marketplace through essentialist, ahistorical Hindu cultural frames (Bharucha 1997; Sethi, 2005).

Explicitly aware that the festival needed 'a couple of gimmicks to have it explode upon the world as a huge promotional gala', the long esteemed inscrutability of the exotic as an end in itself, and the easy legibility of the national self through the internalization of the imagined other, Jayakar and Sethi drew on orientalist taxonomies of human display (Sethi, 1981). In Sethi's original 1979 plan for *Aditi* proposed to the American panel of the Indo-US Subcommission, the sixty craftsmen and performers played their parts alongside a photo-essay – intended to accompany each segment of the exhibition – 'with pictures of real families to counterpoint the idealization' (Annual Meeting, 1979: 2). Subsequently, Smithsonian staff preferred, in their selection of artistic forms and artisans, authenticity, community-oriented performance, and 'root forms of a tradition to derived or evolved forms' (Kurin, 1997: 153). For example, Kathputli puppeteers were encouraged to sing Mewari over Bollywood or family planning songs more popular in India (Kurin, 1997: 154). By thus blurring the boundaries between the daily and extra-daily, didacticism and ghoulish curiosity, scientific demonstration and living menagerie, the show mimicked an experience of travel more real than the original. Locating authenticity in simulation, the lifeworld of rural India became a museum of itself even as the 'original' as point of reference mattered less and less. In delineating conceptual pathways for virtual travel across the Smithsonian's foyers, *Aditi and Mela!* – part of a burgeoning global tourism–heritage–museum industry complex – thus produced a new cultural geography of *India!* as distinctive, organic, and 'true' even as they bridged the gap between colonial and neocolonial developmental visualist paradigms.<sup>18</sup>

Here a sculpture, there a dancer; somewhere an acrobat up on a rope, elsewhere a deity at peace on his pedestal; today a festival, tomorrow a wedding. Sometimes the craft, other times the creator *and* his creation. People and objects.

<sup>18</sup> See (Mathur, 2017).

Performers and happenings. . . . 'I want it to be a noisy exhibition, not a hushed whisper affair,' proclaims 36-year-old Rajeev Sethi. . . . 'Life . . . doesn't come to you in an ambience of solitude . . . It is almost impossible for us to present our music, dance, theatre and crafts as if they were not a part of our life. We don't see culture as something that lives in glass cases'. (A.D., 1985: 15)

As culture, according to Sethi's design, could not be understood with catalogue and cassette player in hand, eighteenth-century paintings rated equal time with Kama Dhenu, the fulfiller of human wishes, in a seemingly natural yet in reality tightly stage-managed, highly concerted display (Russell, 1985a). Circumscribing imaginary routes that induced wonder not critical analysis, *Aditi* and *Mela!*, as zoological displays void of theoretical hierarchy and historical point, suggested 'social pornography'. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett intimates, they generated voyeuristic excitement and the thrill of the hyperreal through symbolic biopsy (when culture is defined, segmented, detached, and carried away or metonymy) and staged authenticity (when human subjects are compelled to act as themselves or mimesis) (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 2012: 434). Against the exhibitionary backdrop of delicate miniature paintings, pearl-encrusted carpets, and glazed ceramics, the 'folk' performers – mortal bearers of the soul of the nation – became signs of themselves equipoised between the animate and inanimate.

Evocative of mystery, timelessness, and eternal wisdom, performances such as the roll of the *dhholak* (drum), the laughter of scattering children, the craftsman's magic, the monkey-man's frivolity, and the imitation bride's shy songs of an era long-gone signified a bucolic indigeneity, which catered to the global public's insatiable appetite for a make-believe, essentialized nation that would enchant and bewitch (Jairazbhoy, 1985). Excised from their original, unsanitized contexts, the arts, according to the festival's ethnographic scheme summarized by the familiar-yet-foreign exclamation point, thus conflated with culture as a way of life, providing visitors with a peep-show, panoramic view of the essence of Indian civilization (Doniger O'Flaherty, 1985; Holmes, 1988; Russell, 1985a). The entire subcontinent, in Sethi's hands, had become a utopian yet hyper-real theme park of itself, a visual scheme that would influence phenomena as wide-ranging as India's first luxury tourist train, the Palace on Wheels; television shows such as 'Rick Stein's India'; and young Israelis discovering themselves in Dharamshala after military service.

### 6.3 'Abracadabra' or the Politics of Postcolonial Cultural Display

In their aftermath, *Aditi* and *Mela!* elicited several answers to the question: Where is the line between on the one hand the ethical representation of Indian heritage and on the other the pillaging of culture to be sold first to the global

marketplace and then back to India as essentialist, othered kitsch? At one end of the spectrum, Indian scholars Bharucha and Sadanand Menon delineate the violence intrinsic to culture's reduction to an artefact and its separation from the totality of life. According to Menon, *melas* traditionally perform larger functions of socialization as they are linked to cycles of economic production and distribution. Unshackled from bourgeois morality, they function in their original contexts as meeting places of marginalized peoples: mendicants, soothsayers, quacks and conmen; snake charmers and acrobats; prostitutes and performers, whose existence is an embarrassment for the elite (Menon, 1987: 38). In contrast, the 1980s government-manufactured *melas* 'represent[ed] a rigid, controlled and embarrassed confrontation with otherness' (Menon, 1987: 39). Motivated by middle-class prudery, the anarchic, playful side of these festivals were sanitized. This, he says,

reduces culture to a commodity, a plaything of market forces and consumer caprice, delinked from life as lived and experienced and organised in the multiplicity of social exchange. It inevitably generates the syndrome of cultural warehousing – a stockpiling of cultural resources and products (divorced from their processes) on the shelves of privileged and exclusive godowns, to be bought at leisure, as from a department store, by men of means. (Menon, 1987: 37)

Similarly, Bharucha describes the script – never shared but assumed – that obedient performers are forced to enact in these cultural festivals. Passive, nervous, and above all dehumanized, these artists severed from their social context neither understand the deleterious dynamics of cultural tourism nor comprehend the instrumentalization of their bodies in its promotion. Instead, in order to please the *sahibs*, earn approval from the higher-ups, and thus earn a few pennies, they transmogrify on stage into 'mobile dummies' or 'mechanised automatons' performing 'human variation[s] of a monkey dance' seemingly triggered by remote-control command (Bharucha, 1997: 1462). Through the Festivals of India and its successors such as Apna Utsav, specialized knowledge gives way 'to an anachronistic adherence to the "living traditions" of "ancient India" ... fossilised beyond recognition' with no consideration given to what would transpire to the artists on returning home (Bharucha, 2000a: 14). No theatre, according to Bharucha, is more violent than this – 'actors ... being reduced to skills, to the fodder of 'human resource development' (Bharucha, 1997: 1462).

At the other end, Kurin asserts that there was no ethnographic script created in India or the American academy for the *Aditi* and *Mela!* players' enactment. While recognizing the potential for symbolic biopsy and 'reductions of self and

meaning' for performers, he argues that the Indian participants conveyed their own cultural repertoire with strong understandings of why and how they performed, and for whom (Kurin, 1997: 165). Neither were the performers treated as objects nor were they mistaken as such: they took coffee breaks, had lunch, went to the lavatory, improvised, and muddled the boundaries that defined the exhibitions as such (Kurin, 1997: 165). And if at all they did become signs of themselves and other, larger entities – a region, a tribe, a culture, a nation – there was, as he awkwardly admits, 'certainly an advantage in doing so' (Kurin, 1997: 166). In being recognized for their cultural achievements by the national museum of the United States and presented as such back to the Indian community, the 'low-caste' puppeteers, musicians, acrobats, jugglers, and street performers were considered more respectable and were ostensibly able to advocate for their rights through, for example, the revocation of beggary laws (Kurin, 1997: 145, 147). As a result, the artists deemed their bodily representations of 'tradition' a duty and honour that could be turned to personal advantage and profit. Similarly, Rebecca Brown argues that while objectification does remain in play in exhibitions – of the nineteenth century and the 1980s – the artists in the Festival of India were 'not static objects set out for observation by a dispassionate, distant audience' (Brown, 2017: 14). Instead, they refashioned relationships with spectators in numerous ways.

Between the Indian and US scholars, Durrans – organizer of the British festival – cautions that though the ways in which 'other' traditions are represented may be creatively reworked, the display-space of an exhibition remains the province of the audience/consumer. 'Like a museum or gallery, it is 'their' territory' (Durrans, 1992: 26). Unusual venues or performers who improvise and break local rules in order to test the limits of the exhibition-museum form – such as two 'monkey-men' (*langurbahrupias*) who stole fruit, travelled on the metro, and injured four tourists – confirm both the imaginative rendition of a display as well as the visualist limits of the modernist 'scopic regime' with a detached subject and an observable object or performer (Durrans, 1992: 25–26).

Common, though, between all of these viewpoints is the undeniable double fact of the exhibition as 'fundamentally theatrical' and 'political' – a space where knowledge-creation is performed and a 'diffuse marketplace within which all manner of trade [and diplomacy] can be organised' (Durrans, 1992: 26; Kurin 1997: 131). Because of its powerful, historically determined, pseudo-orientalist capacity to generate 'interest'; its relationship to the global market; and its universalization of the language of commodity advertising, the abandonment of the exhibitionist form, as Durrans suggests, is inconceivable so long as consumerist and capitalist rationale dictates cultural diplomacy.

## 6.4 All about the Money

Sethi, an eminently practical man despite ‘his effervescent, shawl-sweeping manner’ (Trehan, 1985c), was an expert at transforming not only artisans but also practitioners of the performing arts into revenue generating enterprises linked to market forces. Following US foundations’ and Jayakar’s lead, he recognized that while the Indian government focused on craftsmen – producers of material culture – as the protagonists of manufacturing and export, it had more or less ignored the critical realm of intangible heritage as supportive cultural systems capable of articulating the commercial viability of handicraft. Literature, music, the culinary and healing arts, publishing, cinema, and especially folk, classical, and modern performance forms – the prime movers of the ‘cultural industries’ – could, in his view, help build ‘the base for a muscular infrastructure of commercial enterprise’ and a new brand with a creative edge for Indian indigenous products (Sethi, 2005). In this regard, Sethi’s work in 1985 constituted the *Ursprung* of phenomena as diverse as Dior’s collaboration with the Indian cooperative Chanakya to lend an exotic touch to its catwalks; photographs of octogenarian Irani café owners to market coffee table books on ‘authentic’ Bombay cuisine such as *Dishoom: From Bombay with Love*; and the use of performance art to sell overpriced ‘aeromul’ in the posh Kala Ghoda precinct of South Bombay. Whether near-starving artisans, performers, and restaurant owners – the translators of India’s spirit – were dehumanized or became signs of themselves in a simulacra mattered little. Otherness, essentialism, and historicity – problematic as they may be – added symbolic and economic value to threatened, financially unviable artefacts, art forms, and traditions. As ‘commerce [was] oxygen for the lungs’ this, according to Jayakar’s and Sethi’s matter-of-fact world view, was the only way to ‘catapult . . . Indian crafts into the twenty-first century’ (Sethi, 2005; Trehan, 1985c). The postcolonial exhibitionary form thus became a haven for not only economically unproductive, near obsolete cultural phenomena marked as ‘heritage’ but also primitivist scenographic frames and anthropological narratives, now insulated from critique.

Crucially, Sethi implicitly understood that by situating different ‘cultural protagonists – *Dastkars* (craftsmen), *Lok Kalakars* (folk performers), *Sangeetkars* (musicians) and *Bunkars* (weavers)’ next to material goods for sale (Sethi, 2005), the artists did not merely become disassembled and abstracted symbols of an authentic culture and country. While the artists transformed into, as Bharucha and Kurin posit, ‘signs of themselves’ in a performance of *India!* more ‘real’ than the original, the objects that they handled or contextualized were fetishized, that is, invested with a powerful

force that fed desires for appropriation and consumption through export and tourism. Ordinary Indian objects – lapis-lazuli mosaic, canary-yellow and emerald-green bracelets, ferocious-coloured spices – became invested with energy and desire through their juxtaposition against performers within museum and festival settings. Bringing distinctions between the exotic and the familiar closer to American and subsequently Japanese, Swedish, Russian, and South Bombay and Delhi homes, these objects allowed audiences to experience fixed and unchanged halcyon Indian life without spatial and time travel (Russell, 1985b). This, to paraphrase Sethi, who ‘always attracted sniping controversy more for his methods of operation than his undisputably successfully exhibitions’ (Trehan, 1985c), was ‘the largest paradigm shift’ in the Indian state’s ‘*mehekma*-bound [managerial] thinking’ (Sethi, 2005). By linking the global marketplace to evolving ‘Indian’ identity through a holistic concern for *all* tangible and intangible heritage by way of performing bodies as signs and arcadian settings, the festival would create a leaner, synergetic mechanism for the metamorphosis of the ‘unorganized’ craft sector (Sethi, 2005).

So too did this dramaturgical scheme, which fused the hyper-real and idyllic and which emphasised a shared, lost humanity relevant to all time, materialize on the global stage the pivotal cultural development paradigm articulated by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. Like US foundations who emphasized the linkages between culture and economic development in India a decade before the festival, Sethi’s *Aditi* project, which received vital support from the Ford Foundation for its conceptualization, attempted to interpret and promote a better understanding of the cultural dimension ‘of socioeconomic and technological change in India, in order to help ground the development process in human values’ (Geithner, 1982: 1).

Accordingly, as Laura Shapiro posited, *Aditi* demonstrated how in India ‘daily life and spiritual life are the same; even now in the nuclear age, there are temples where devotees brush God’s teeth in the morning, set him to playing with his girlfriend all day and once in a while drench him lovingly in a mixture of milk, yogurt, river water and other treats’ (Shapiro, 1985: 20). The exhibition evoked, within the setting of diplomacy and development, a cluster of esoteric, ‘fundamentally Indian’ metaphors made more pretentious by quotes such as Pupul Jayakar’s ‘*Aditi* is a riddle. Like the Sun, she is also fire as energy. Awakened, she is the first dancer’ (Jayakar, 1985: 25). In so doing the festival’s ‘older-than-thinking rituals’ illustrated, according to Jayakar, contemporary humankind’s attempts to understand a mysterious environment in light of the deterioration of tradition, the disparities of economic pursuits and achievements, the penetrating, deleterious influence of mass media, and whispers of

doom due to a ravaged environment and peak nuclear threat (Jayakar, 1992: XI; Sethi, 1985a: 16). In rendering ordinary life events into objects of anthropological fascination and transforming ‘supportive cultural systems’ – folk/classical/modern performance forms – into critical drivers articulating economic and social development (Sethi, 2005), the festival positioned India as an incubator and promoter of a cutting-edge, persuasive developmental model that sustained both body and spirit. This was the ‘appropriate anodyne’ for the problems of the developing and developed world. The performance of the potter at his wheel, symbolic of the cosmic forces of creation, would change ‘the prevailing pursuit of culture as a leisure-time activity’ (Sethi, 1985a) and widen spiritually wayward Westerners’ ‘perception[s] of the creative life’, by showing them how to temper material pursuits with a renewed consciousness of the forgotten ‘timeless truths’ of ordinary human existence (Ripley, 1985: 13; Shapiro, 1985: 20) (see Figures 5 and 6).

### 6.5 The Golden Eye

This special poetics of objectification and intimacy, commerce, consumption, heritage-tourism, and cultural development was thrown into special focus in Sethi’s final exhibition *The Golden Eye*, which took place as an adjunct of *Aditi* at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Museum of Design, New York. For many years,



**Figure 5** Nancy Reagan, Rajeev Sethi, and unknown performers at the Aditi exhibition. Ronald Reagan Library. Roll no. C29739(01) Photo 7, 13 June 1985.



**Figure 6** (Clockwise) Rajiv Gandhi, Rajeev Sethi, Nancy Reagan, Pupu Jayakar, and the potter at his wheel. Ronald Reagan Library. Roll no. C29746 (01) Photo 15, 13 June 1985.

the craft world in India, in Sethi's words, was 'in a state of indecision' (Sethi, 1985b: 16). Over the previous three decades after India's independence, ethnic trends sustained the country's material arts. However, as the fashion for 'ethnic and exotic bric-a-brac' eventually fell out of favour, artisans attempted to produce work that catered to Western audiences without a genuine understanding of the expertise and technology necessary to enter foreign markets (Trehan, 1985c). Indian indigenous knowledge thus remained an untapped treasure trove of skills that could meet the needs of cutting-edge global design. A systematic and consistent movement was necessary to take Indian craft from curios such as 'brass wine *surahis* and Seventh Avenue sequin baubles' to beautifully designed consumer goods (Trehan, 1985c).

The Festival of India provided 'the first opportunity to begin work in this direction' by bringing eleven of the world's leading designers together with 265 traditional Indian craftsmen 'to create unique prototypes for a global marketplace' (McGill, 1985; Sethi, 1985b: 18). Foregrounded in window-display-like settings by *zardozi* embroidered, hand-block printed gowns (designed by Mary Macfadden); towering wood cabinets lined with peacock feathers (designed by Hugh Casson); black-on-white marble and brass inlaid tables (designed by Ettore Sottsass and Bernard Rudofsky); and carved sandstone benches



(designed by Mario Bellini), numerous Indian artisans, using few rudimentary tools, worked metal, moulded shoes, and tailored semiprecious stones with bow and stone wheel (Giovannini, 1986; McGill, 1985). ‘Elegant and hallucinatory’, the exhibition that echoed the ‘precession of simulacra’ quality of *Aditi and Mela!* was closely studied by delegations from Bergdorf Goodman and Bloomingdale’s for commissions (McGill, 1985). Economically and commercially, therefore, it was ‘possibly the most important exhibit for India, to come out of the Festival of India’ (Trehan, 1985c).

We needed a corporate logo that spells out that ‘Made in India’ does not mean ‘cheap and shoddy,’ Mr. Sethi said. ‘This is not a wave. I will not endorse India as a fad of the season, with turbans and sequins one year, and to hell with the little craftsmen the next year. We’re talking of serious design, at an international level’. (McGill, 1985)

By pulling off a show that, according to journalist Madhu Trehan, put artisans on the pedestal of cutting-edge international design, *The Golden Eye* brought together craftsmen unexposed to market realities with experts tasked with protecting and selling ‘tradition’ globally (DeNicola & DeNicola, 2012). Simultaneously, the exhibition explored sustainable heritage as a complement to big industry and advertised India’s new central focus to absorb modern designs and technology (Trehan, 1985c).

This dramaturgical scheme was thrown into focus at the opening night of the exhibition when, in a brief ritual conceived for the occasion, Sethi brought out three brass pots filled with mud – one from the Hudson River, the second of lime plaster, and the third of earth from behind the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. All the designers who had a hand in the exhibition then dipped their palms in the pots before placing their handprints on a makeshift shrine at the exhibition’s entryway. Echoing the implicitly Hindu *mise-en-scène* of *Aditi* but now with an added international twist, Sethi announced, ‘It’s a shrine of the 20th century . . .’ This shrine, as a *New York Times* journalist argued, was key to understanding Sethi’s hyphenated national-global vision that linked ‘the living traditional crafts of Indian society and the West’ (McGill, 1985). Personified by Rajiv, who sartorially fused the modern (Ray Bans) and ancient (Nehru jacket) and who thus appeared both as ‘a national [and] an international leader’, *The Golden Eye* proved that traditional ‘Indian craftsmen [who were] fully capable of fruitful collaboration with 20th-century designers and manufacturers’ represented an India that was both national and global (McGill, 1985).

‘Five years from now, this [western] part of the world will have very little industry other than micro-processors and the building industry of interiors will be on its last legs. When that takes a turn, India can meet the designers’ needs

before China, Korea, Japan or Italy’, Sethi bleated (Trehan, 1985c). Consequently, the exhibition visually (though, as described earlier, not unproblematically) illustrated the Indian economy’s readiness to support cutting-edge, competitive transnational industry and trade in the pivotal years pre-economic liberalisation (India’s Rajiv, 1991; McGill, 1985; Sethi, 2005). India, according to Sethi’s composite scenography symbolized by the obelisk-like exclamation point, was not simply a service provider with backroom support for regional trade and manufacture, but a powerful knowledge society in the making with creative resources and skills to rival most advanced countries. Poor but powerful, this ‘old country but young nation’ impatient to be ‘in the front rank of the nations of the world’ would, as illustrated by these exhibitions, remove control and cramped bureaucratic bottlenecks, improve productivity, ‘sustain artifacts of technology without a diminishing of its ancient [Hindu] heritage’, and show the West, which had ‘lost touch of something inside us’, how to become whole again (Jayakar, n.d.; Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, 1985).

## 7 Theatrical Performance

Had this totalizing, essentialist view of India stopped at the exhibition form, charges of self-orientalism would have been relatively facile. The enthralling, all-encompassing world of the festival was, however, remarkably eclectic. On the other side of the country, under the forty five-foot-high ceiling of Sound Stage #12 at Hollywood’s Raleigh Studios, more than seventy six tonnes of clay, straw, sand, and vermiculite (to create the hand-kneaded, baked, cracked holy earthen flooring); 1500 gallons of water (for a small water-body to denote the Ganges); and intricate scaffolding and brown fiberglass construction scrim were brought in to transport American audiences to the softly bronzed, red-earth setting of Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata* (Connor, 1987; M.K., n.d.; O’Steen, 1987; L.A. Weekly, 1987). Hailed by critics as ‘the culmination of his career’, ‘his masterpiece’, ‘one of the three or four great experiences of [one’s] theatrical life’, and ‘the production of the century’, this nine and a half hour long *magnum opus* was not only the most praised and denigrated performance event of the twentieth century but also one of the festival’s ‘major attractions’ (Description of project, n.d.; Festival of India in the United States, n.d.; Festival of India USA, n.d.: 5; Peter Brook directs, 1985: C17). ‘Part showman, part shaman: a priestly guru with an incandescent imagination’, Brook had spent a decade, together with French writer Jean-Claude Carrière, distilling the 100,000-stanza-long *Mahabharata* – the longest epic of world literature about seven times the combined length of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and a wellspring of Indian culture – into a theatrical experience ‘part religious pageant, part sermon, part

military panoply and part celebration of the reverberant power of language' (Billington, 1987; Henry III, 1987).

Chanting in the dusky gloom before a battle, a robed figure stoops and ignites a circle of blue flame in the red clay soil around him. With one quick twist, a woman fluffs her white veil into swaddling and so conjures up a baby in arms. Horns blare as a crowd of celebrants, resplendent in red holds aloft a richly caparisoned tent for the wedding of a blind king. A master of military arts orders a disciple to cut off his right thumb and thereby lose his strength and skill. 'It is not cruelty,' the teacher explains. 'It is foresight.' (Henry III, 1987)

A 'huge literary chalice of spiritual philosophy' of Shakespearean universality, *The Mahabharata* was ostensibly 'a complete vision of life ... a living, breathing monument ... [the] collective wisdom of a whole civilization' (Billington, 1987; O'Connor, 1987). Maha, in Sanskrit, signifies 'great' and Bharata 'Hindu' or 'man'; the work thus constitutes 'The Great History of Mankind', Brook pontificated. 'In India, 'The Mahabharata' is a part of everyone's daily life, a source of wisdom and consolation. ... It's been an important part of living for hundreds of millions of people for thousands of years' (Jacobs, 1987). The theatrical extravaganza – a blend of 'the Bible, the heroes of Homer's legends, the sweep of Kurosawa films, and the heaving passions of 'Dynasty' – had played to capacity audiences at the Festival of India in France before its staging in Los Angeles and, subsequently, New York (Mahabharata: Longest Poem, 1987). More than French cultural politics, however, Indo-US diplomatic and developmental ambitions had allowed the legendary British director to tame this 'huge white whale, this Moby Dick, this bright vision' and thus consolidate his legacy as 'the most influential director alive' (Carrière, 1989: 7; Dickson, 2016).

### 7.1 A Brief History of the International Centre for Theatre Research

'The world's theatre has rarely been in so grave a crisis' (*The International Centre of Theatre Research*, 1969: 1).

Thus began Brook's first grant proposal to the Ford Foundation for his yet-to-be-established International Centre for Theatre Research (ICTR). The theatre world, he argued in 1969, was divided into two categories: those groups that continued to adhere to traditions in which they had lost confidence and those that desired to create a new and revolutionary theatre but had not the skill. And yet theatre, in the deepest sense of the word, he implored, had 'never been needed so urgently' (*The International Centre of Theatre Research*, 1969: 1). Why? Because of its inseparability from community. A healthy society, he argued using developmental rhetoric, could be built from ground up through

a healthy theatre. In keeping with the United Nation's and UNESCO's post-war emphasis on education and the dangers of illiteracy and ignorance, the ICTR was accordingly first conceived as a project with 'the freest of all spectators' in mind: children.

Playing for children is becoming vitally important today. The classic division between grownup theatre (playing occasional children's matinees) and a special children's theatre is no longer valid . . . . For the problem today is not one of restricting the theatre to any single group of spectators. On the contrary, it is a matter of making theatregoing a necessary experience and consequently a social activity that is essential to a community as a whole urgently. (*The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1969: 4–5*)

Based in Paris on a site provided by the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs, comprising sixteen actors, and supported with three Ford grants totalling \$674,950, the ICTR was thus originally conceptualized as a community-building project that would bridge the false and sterile separation between adult and children's drama, popular entertainment and the avant-garde' (*The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1969: 4–5; Thompson, 1970*). Working sessions with children constituted, in Brook's and his enterprising administrator Micheline Rozan's words, 'an essential exercise for the group . . . [serving as] a constant reminder of the need to present theatre in a fresh and everchanging way' (*The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1969: 3–4*). The intention to work in and with people from other parts of the world and to develop cross-cultural understanding was, at this stage, simply a corollary of the ambitious undertaking (*The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1969: 6*).

Nevertheless, the experience of building a tightly knit community of actors sharing special techniques from different cultures gradually began to furnish a specific blueprint from which all of the centre's future work would be developed (*The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1970: 1–2*). The ICTR's extensive work with children during the first months of 1971 slowly began to give way to other experiments in 'immediate communication' with language dating back to the origins of the spoken letter. The outcome, *Orghast*, was performed in 1971 at the Festival of Arts of Shiraz – a trial-run for the controversial celebrations in Persepolis to promote the Persian royal family, described by one exiled critic as the 'Shahspielhaus' (*Wardle, 1971: 11*).<sup>19</sup> Designed to both communicate intensely through heightened speech as well

<sup>19</sup> Some of the leading figures of the Euro-American avant-garde participated in the controversial Shiraz Festival, and were thus part and parcel of Iranian cultural politics. Concurrently, however, the event brought voices from Asia and Africa onto a global cultural platform by 'juxtaposing them alongside western neo-avant-garde expressions in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation' (*Mahlouji, n.d.*).

as boost the image of the Persian monarchy, the production set the stage for a shift in emphasis to ancient breathing techniques and invented words based on root consonants, vowels, and vibrations ([The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1971](#): 1–2).

Concurrently, a consistent stream of American visitors and participants graced the centre even as more money began to come in from numerous, primarily US-based, organizations: the Robert Anderson Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, JDR 3rd Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, Rockefeller Brothers' Fund, Rockefeller Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, William C. Whitney Foundation, and David Merrick Arts Foundation ([Report on Activities, n.d.](#)). Much of this interest stemmed from the ICTR's watershed work in Africa in 1973. Setting out from Algiers in Land Rovers with electrical equipment, food supplies, and a movie crew with ninety thousand feet of film, team Brook travelled through five African countries, 'playing in villages where in most cases never in history had a theatrical performance been seen' ([The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1973](#): 1). By testing their previous experiments in nonverbal communication on an audience unconditioned by Western forms, it was possible, according to Brook, to examine universal laws of dramatic communication and find theatre forms that 'communicate[d] to anyone' ([Gibson, 1973](#)).<sup>20</sup>

I wrote in *The Empty Space* about the experience of playing King Lear in Eastern Europe and in America, and how, in Eastern Europe, the people who understood the language the least received more than the people of Philadelphia who theoretically understood the language most but were not tuned towards the play in the same emotional manner. So what came through was more when there was a greater barrier, and less when there was a lesser barrier. Now out of those sorts of observations and paradoxical experiences . . . we set out to explore what the conditions are through which the theatre can speak directly. In what conditions is it possible for what happens in a theatre experience to originate from a group of actors and be received and shared by a group of people that you call the spectators without the help and hindrance of the shared cultural signs and tokens? ([Gibson, 1973](#): 2)

From the point of view of US foundations, the thrill and potency of this universal theatrical vocabulary, which bypassed formalized language and socio-cultural mores, lay in the possibility of person-to-person diplomacy. In the words of Brook:

<sup>20</sup> That is, to discover, according to Brook, 'where an action becomes a story, and in what way a story, or thematic action is or is not a development . . . No process I know that can be done in rooms with theory or practice can bring the root questions into the open the way that going in these conditions is, or isn't being made' ([Gibson, 1973](#): 15, 23).

Something very active could happen, quite different from what happens on the level of official culture. Because official culture is something absolutely ridiculous. All sorts of countries have sent ballet companies, opera companies – England has sent Shakespeare companies, but where to? To the big cities. So the performances unfold to an audience of government officials and largely the European diplomatic corps. So why they go there is highly suspect. In any event no relation is made . . . We were exploring, opening up a trail, and finding that it's a very valid one. (Gibson, 1973, 19)

In Africa, the ICTR thus not only honed the intercultural objectives of the search for a universal theatre, the replacement of literal statement with poetic suggestion, and the transformation of spectacle into 'collaborative ritual' but also rehearsed the soft power idiom of American foundations (Berresford, 1986: 6). Shaped by the terms of engagement with non-Western countries set by the Cold War, the ICTR increasingly emphasized through its repertoire a commonly shared humanity and the building of bridges between East and West (Feingold, 1987). As Brook, commissioned by UNESCO, expounded, 'we need to speak about culture, and the first thing that is put in front of us is the desperate and terrifying situation of the world today. A bridge has to be made because nobody can deny this; nobody wishes to deny it' (UNESCO, 1976). By articulating transparent, quintessential truths applicable across geographic and cultural divides and recapitulating international leaders' familiar Cold War pieties on the need for 'bridges of understanding and friendship', the ICTR increasingly functioned as a potent 'soft' tool in the cultural Cold War, glossing over the more uncomfortable 'hard' realities of Western bloc military invasions and economic sanctions in 'third world' countries.<sup>21</sup>

The centre's protracted American tour in 1973 was a critical turning point in this mission, comprising an eight-week stay with El Teatro Campesino at their headquarters in San Juan Bautista, California, followed by a five-week residency at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The visit served, in the words of Brook and Rozan, to fulfil the centre's original commitment to the Ford Foundation in 1970 of forging 'new relationships that [would] become the basis for later, more extended inter-relation with American theatres and theatre people' (The International Centre of Theatre Research, 1970: 1–2, 5; Report on Activities, n.d.). As, for the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the establishment of knowledge networks among intellectuals, artists, and bureaucrats was their 'principal long-term achievement', Brook's residency was eminently successful (Parmar, 2015: 681). By 1976, coverage of the ICTR's early intercultural work featured in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Los*

<sup>21</sup> Indira Gandhi for example often cited the need for a 'new atmosphere that would create bridges of understanding and friendship amongst ordinary citizens' (Isar, 2017: 711).

*Angeles Times*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Journal*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *East Bay Review*, and *The Houston Post*. This media coverage coincided with seminars, workshops, and performances of *The Ik* – based on the ICTR’s work in Africa and comprising nonverbal sounds that hinted at the primitivization of ‘natives’ – at several universities: the University of Houston; University of California, Los Angeles; University of California, Berkeley; University of Chicago; and George Washington University.<sup>22</sup>

Through inaugural funding to the centre and the subsequent dissemination of an epistemic consensus by way of residencies in US universities and fellowships for key Asian ICTR artists (such as Tapa Sudana and Katsuhiko Oida), US foundations created the fertile ground to seed interculturalism, corroborating Charlotte Canning’s proposition that the linkages between theatre and US governmental foreign policy were definitional (Canning, 2011: 151). In keeping with the pattern, followed by Gordon and her peers, of laying conceptual paths for performance studies, the Indian theatre of roots, and the intercultural through strategic support to specific artists, troupes, and cultural forms, foundation officers positioned Brook as a key artistic, scholarly, and geopolitical bridge-builder during a watershed moment in the Cold War. In turn, the ICTR laid the groundwork for the ‘kind of diplomacy’ – totalizing in its purview – that the United States during the 1970s sought to achieve (Brook, 1974; Tanen, 1986b).

## 7.2 Brook in India

In 1978, Brook and Rozan presented their first proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation for the French-language *Mahabharata*, soliciting funding for a protracted stay in India at a total cost of \$312,500 (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1978: 13, 15, 17). Described as ‘the fulfilment of all his past work’, the aim of the undertaking was, at this early stage, to bring to the West the pseudo-erotic ‘possibility of penetrating deeply into an Eastern culture’ (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1978: 2). In the same year the JDR 3rd Fund began to put the ICTR in touch with highly influential Indian cultural figures, thereby setting in motion *The Mahabharata*’s inextricable relationship with the Festival of India (Lanier, 1978). In 1982, shortly after their first joint reading of the epic, Brook and his associates visited India to participate in the inauguration of the Bharat Bhavan arts complex in Madhya Pradesh, meeting Ford Foundation officers and all the chief Indian architects of the US Festival:

<sup>22</sup> Over the course of twelve years, the ICTR fulfilled its mission of ‘making performers transcend national barriers without losing their individual cultural identities’ through works such as *Timon of Athens*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Kaspar*, *The Conference of the Birds*, *L’Os*, *Ubu Roi* and *Ubu Enchaine*, and *The Tragedy of Carmen*. (Berresford, 1986: 3).

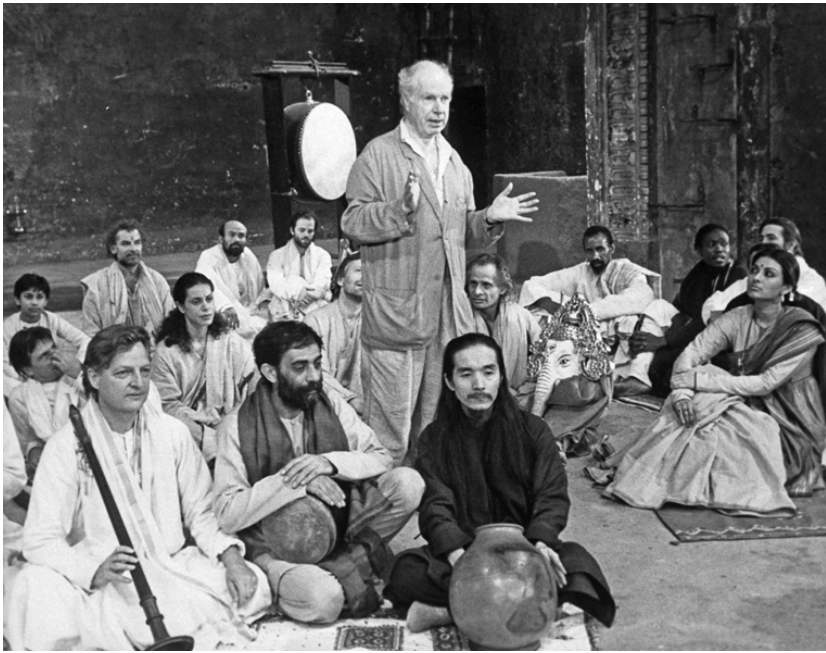
Indira Gandhi, Jayakar, Sethi, and other ‘key Indian cultural leaders’ (Nadkarni, 1982: SM4). During subsequent periods of research and preparation in India in 1983 and 1984, ‘a close relationship’ was established with all the critical Indian policymakers who met at the ACC’s Rose Room: Jayakar, Menon, and Sethi. This ‘wide range of collaborators’ functioned, in Brook’s muted words, as a ‘panel of advisers’ for the production (Chandran, 1984).

Thus in 1983, when Ford deputy representative Peter Geithner wryly noted that ‘Brook ha[d] surfaced again’, officer Marcia Thompson’s cable pointed out that ‘Mrs Gandhi’s principal collaborator for cultural affairs Mrs Pupal Jayakar ha[d] confirmed wish for her government for Mahabharata to have central place in Festival of India’ (Hardy, 1983; Thompson, n.d.). Likewise, the Ford Foundation mentioned in 1985, when deliberating funding for the English language adaptation, that *The Mahabharata*’s performances would conclude ‘in New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Benares under the auspices of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations and Ms. Pupal Jayakar’ (Berresford, 1986: 8). Jayakar, they noted, described the production in Avignon as ‘a single bush moving in the wind, and a sliver of running water, a flowing river, suggesting distance, journey, passage of time’ (Berresford, 1986: 5). Consequently, though Brook and Rozan had approached Ford several times prior for funding for *The Mahabharata* and though Ford’s representative in India, Eugene (Rocky) Staples, was ‘general unenthusiastic’ about the project (Thompson, 1982: 2),<sup>23</sup> Jayakar’s endorsement of this Western rediscovery of an Indian epic ignited a sense of urgency amongst foundation officers (see Figure 7).

More than the charges of misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, and neo-colonialism, therefore, Bharucha’s brief appraisal, ‘wherever Brook works, one can be sure that he receives the support of the political establishment’ here deserves reconsideration (Bharucha, 1988: 1646). ‘Pink as an Easter morning rabbit and as soft-spoken as a vicar giving gentle benediction in a chapel’, the mild-mannered Brook understood the symbolic world of soft international power play and, relatedly, the potency of the magic words ‘Mrs. Gandhi’ and ‘Jayakar’, ‘President Perdigao’ and the ‘Shah of Iran’ (Kerr, 1973). An expert broker like Jayakar, Gordon, and Sethi, he understood how to transform values from one domain to another and how to meet the diffuse, often equivocal

<sup>23</sup> Rozan and Brook first approached Ford via Francis Sutton in November–December 1980 for this funding. Subsequently, meetings were held between Brook and officers Richard Sheldon, Francis Sutton, Carolyn Elliott, Lincoln Chen, and Pushpa Sundar. Simultaneously, Martha Coigney of the International Theatre Institute provided Ford with a proposal and materials on *The Mahabharata* project. Subsequently, Eugene Staples mentioned that he doubted Brook understood India very deeply (Thompson, 1982).





**Figure 7** Director Peter Brook (C) with the cast on the set of *The Mahabharata*, Photo by Martha Swope, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library, NYPL catalog ID (B-number): [b19790133](#).

interests of each party involved. As Ford's deputy vice president Francis X. Sutton described,

It was credible to me that he [Brook] was well received in India. He says that the exposure that the Indians have had in recent years has been rather limited and biased. They have had Brecht and the Bourgeois Gentleman in a Delhi folk theater. The East Germans have pushed Brecht and brought a Leipzig director there. From Britain they have had only 'fourth-rate Shakespeare Companies.' ... He said he had very positive reactions to the enterprise from Mrs. Gandhi down to student groups and had found in no place any serious resistance. ... During the time I was working on the Arts Review I read and thought and talked a great deal about the arts in international communication and understanding. Some statements from Peter Brook were about the best things I found. (Sutton, 1982: 2)

Interweaving the threat of East German theatre; the blessings of the Indian prime minister and the country's radical, grassroots student groups; and the mutual understanding rhetoric much loved by hardened Cold warriors, Brook condensed not so much everything he had 'learned in forty years of directing' as the highly evolved, imaginary universe of US foundations and the Indian

government (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1980: 1). Both the ‘finest living director of the English-speaking stage’ as well as a consummate translator between visual spectacle, Cold War politics, and ‘foundationese’, Brook succeeded as an actor due to his dexterous ability to recapitulate what all of the right people in the right places wished to hear (Sheldon, 1981). Consequently, though Ford’s headquarters almost never funded work produced and staged outside the United States, *The Mahabharata* – in light of stamps of approval from the Indian higher-ups, the soft power cultural threat of Brecht and fourth rate Shakespeare Companies, and the need for powerful ‘international communication and understanding’ during the Cold War – justified a very costly special appropriation of \$150,000 (Sutton, 1982: 2).

The Rockefeller Foundation too expressed considerable enthusiasm for the project due to its intonation of programme guidelines and peace-building-speak. Though an anonymous officer sarcastically pencilled in ‘just a trifle overstated?’ next to the sentence ‘This project will bring one of the greatest stories in human history to a public completely unaware of its existence’, most other comments were generous in their praise (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1984). ‘A very exciting project’, an anonymous officer wrote, ‘The fact that . . . the play will come to the USA in 1986 as part of the Festival of India makes it all the more appropriate for guideline three.’ ‘Let’s do it. A nice guideline three project’, another officer said, ‘I’m glad to see us participate in the Festival of India’ (Inter-Office Correspondence, 1984). The repeated reference to the Festival of India and guideline three – ‘Enhancing the American Public’s Understanding of International Affairs through the Arts and Humanities’ – suggest the reasons for the magnitude of *The Mahabharata*, which had a production budget at least seven times higher than any of Brook’s previous work (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1984). As ‘the celebration of the discovery of links where apparently there are only divisions’, this theatrical highlight of the festival was, in the performative language of the Rockefeller Foundation, ‘the most necessary act of our times’ (The Rockefeller Foundation, 1986: 60).

### 7.3 Scenography

It is, as Bharucha says, also ‘worth pondering [how and why] . . . the Indian government and its cultural satellites spent more money on this enterprise of the *Mahabharata* than it ha[d] supported any other cultural group in India itself’ (Bharucha, 1996: 199). Jayakar, ‘the guiding force and inspiration’ of the festival, put together a list of two hundred ‘suitable’ actors for *The Mahabharata*’s auditions, brought in \$53,000 for the production, and liaised with the media while turning a deaf ear to accusations at home of ‘cultural exploitation’ and

reducing state institutions to ‘cultural colonies of affluent regions’ (Bumiller, 1985; Our Special correspondent, 1984: 5; Sarabhai, 2021). More importantly, Sethi, Brook’s ‘artistic advisor’, lent to *The Mahabharata* the scenographic vision that undergirded his *Aditi*, *Mela!*, and *The Golden Eye* of the juxtaposition of exquisite linens, carpets, thalis, durries, incense, and oil lamps – excised from their original contexts – with ‘living’ expositions of idyllic-rural life. By sharing his embryonic T2 airport vision of ‘a swirl of colour-saris, gowns, and garments of saffron, crimson and gold, umbrellas of rippling blue silk, red banners and snow-white robes’ (Bharucha, 1988: 1646), Sethi showed Brook how to depict an overriding aura of ‘Indianness’, avoid historicity, and theatricalize heritage while simulating an *India!* more authentic than the original. ‘In between a presentation, in which there is too much mediation, and a “cultural zoo,” in which there isn’t enough’ (Cantwell, 1993: 131), *The Mahabharata*’s ‘altar like’ arrangements of low burning flames and marigold garlands – ‘explicit icons of Indian culture . . . popularised through [her] cottage industries’; the percussion, string, and wind instruments for improvised music which provided ‘juste un couleur indienne’; the lighting expressing the ‘enigmatic, primitive beauty of the elements’; and the actors’ avoidance of performance through the search for ahistorical, root movements common to all cultures, neatly subscribed to *Aditi*’s and *Mela!*’s Indic-zoological scenographic theme (Henken, 1987; O’Steen, 1987; Tsuchitori, 1985). As a core component of the festival’s self-orientalist visual scheme, which delimited the horizon of possible interpretations by consumers, *The Mahabharata* thus cleverly deployed cultural commodities already embedded in a field of meaning prefigured by conceptions of ‘otherness’.

Not dissimilarly, clothing – the second largest budget item after actors’ salaries – was the core focus of *The Mahabharata*’s seemingly vanguard market-mediated aesthetic. The ‘coupes authentiques’ of costume designer Chloe Obolensky’s beige Indian cotton robes, which would become symbols of conspicuous consumption from Saint Germain de Près to Soho, neatly articulated not only ‘certaines formes essentielles’ [certain universal forms] but also (and relatedly) *The Golden Eye*’s phenomenological constellation of national-global display, anthropomorphic visual pleasure, and consumer appetite (Obolensky, 1985). An entire trip devoted solely to visiting one cloth-seller after another undertaken by Brook, Carrière, and Obolensky in the foothills of the Himalayas with Sethi’s constant counsel allowed Carrière, inspired by the warp and weft of handloom cloth, ‘to write more truly – or more concisely’ (Carrière, 1989: 8; Drake, 1987).<sup>24</sup> Concurrently, this process strengthened the

<sup>24</sup> As Carrière described, ‘Strange as this may seem, the warp and weft, the very texture of a piece of cloth, can help an author to write more truly – or more concisely’ (Carrière, 1989: 8).

production's convergence of sensibility between ethnographic exhibitionary display; the twentieth-century avant-garde theatre's eschewal of 'obvious theatricality' and valorization of root, non-European rituals; and twenty-first-century luxury storefronts. Brook's/Obolensky's/Sethi's mandate of 'l'evocation et non l'illustration' was inextricable from the exhibitions' poetics of detachment – the art of the excerpt where the object stands in contiguous relation to an absent whole (Obolensky, 1985). *The Mahabharata* therefore functioned, despite its elegance, vanguard aesthetic, and second-order mimesis, as a kind of trade show, evincing the reciprocity of the zoological and theatrical through a simple turn of the head. In so doing, theatre, which had long experienced a legitimization crisis after the advent of film and television, acquired new economic purport, giving the aesthetic and craft of the Global South aspirational status in a global market through representations of 'an array of myths and human archetypes and an animal world aquiver with magic' (Henry III, 1987).

#### 7.4 *The Mahabharata* and the late Cold War Discourse of Cultural Development

Crucially, in the becoming of exhibition into theatre and theatre into exhibition, much emphasis was laid on the production's simultaneous universality and topicality. Through 'elemental rather than stylistic' suggestions – the warmth of the atmosphere, the colour, the earth, the presence of water and fire as though 'one were sitting in a cloud of red dust – that feeling of red earth and light' – *The Mahabharata* represented both an India living 'in several centuries simultaneously' as well as an anywhere, anytime place (M.K., n.d.; Sen, 2013). The natural cream-coloured costumes based on 'universal shapes that you find in Hellenistic Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia'; the primitive, aboriginal music from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East 'more universal than specifically Indian' (Henken, 1987; M.K., n.d.); and the 'ahistorical' performance aesthetic of the West African, European, American, East and South Asian actors represented both a particular civilization as well as something of 'clear universal meaning', touching 'a chord in a totally unprepared Western public in a direct and lasting manner' (Carrière, 1989; Drake, 1987).

'Was it the unmistakable sense of impending doom hanging over the world? Was it the unwavering search for the true meaning of doing what was right (Carrière, 1989: 4)'? 'What does it mean to commit yourself to conflict? . . . Is it part of the inevitable pattern of human existence? Is it better to try to renounce violence or accept it' (Peter Brook directs a Sanskrit Epic, 1985)?

‘All the questions we are living through today are dramatized by this work. The fact that it was conceived at least three thousand years ago doesn’t make it remote’, Brook catechized (Peter Brook directs a Sanskrit Epic, 1985). Through a protracted, dynastic war of Shakespearean complexity between two opposing sets of cousins that leads to universal destruction, the tale, ‘of great antiquity and at the same time more contemporary than a play about the [hydrogen] bomb’, functioned within Brook’s scheme as both a metaphor for the Cold War as well as ‘a prism looking from every direction at this mystery of human existence called conflict’ (Kurcfeld, 1987; Peter Brook directs a Sanskrit Epic, 1985).<sup>25</sup>

The story is close to us today because none of the factors involved have changed in any way since ‘The Mahabharata’ was conceived, Brook said. The weapons used, he added, ‘are curiously like our own. They fly through the air. They pump out fire and destruction. (In the end) they destroy the whole planet. (Jacobs, 1987)

By dint of a criss-crossing shower of white arrows; horizontal ladders whirling fiercely on the vast dirt-carpeted stage; a mud-caked warrior who sucks the bloody guts out of an eternal enemy; and a god who generates a solar eclipse with a bare gesture of the hand, audiences imagined that they were witnessing what one character designated as the last night of the world. Through the explosion of a blinding magnesium flare in which the ultimate divine weapon, the *pasupata*, which Shiva bestows as a gift to Arjuna, is unleashed (an element so vital to the story that the Los Angeles County Fire Marshall was flown to see the French production to convince him of the necessity of pyrotechnics), the production depicted an inferno that destroys eighteen million people and threatens to desiccate the earth itself. Allusions to the problems of the world’s bipolar order – tropes much valued by Foundation officers and the Indian government – were thus, in Brook’s masterful hands, strenuously pushed (M.K., n.d.).

Though described by one cranky reviewer as ‘the architectural equivalent of the intentionally worn look of a Ralph Lauren jacket’, the *mise-en-scène* of *The Mahabharata* echoed Sethi’s triptych, proving how contemporary India – a huge culture bowl where the Stone Age and Nuclear Epoch merged – had ‘much to teach the West’ (Kimmelman, 1987; Kurcfeld, 1987).<sup>26</sup> Through the incipient

<sup>25</sup> Specifically, the work recounts the struggle between two groups of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The first play, *The Game of Dice*, introduces the characters and concludes with a dice game, during which the course of the kingdom is decided. The second play, *Exile in the Forest*, shows hostility developing between the two family factions. The third play, *The War*, begins with the Bhagavad-Gita, the god Krishna’s advice to one of the protagonists. It is followed by the final battle, in which virtually the entire world is destroyed.

<sup>26</sup> As Ford Foundation officer Pushpa Sundar described when justifying financial support to the production, ‘Its central theme of battle, actual and symbolic, and the search for peace are relevant to the international situation’ (Sundar and Elliott, 1982: 2).

soft-saffron combination of Hindu mythology and symbols of techno-modernity such as the nuclear bomb, *The Mahabharata*'s 'visual poetry' neatly adhered to the festival's representational universe that projected science and ancient civilisation, 'hard' and 'soft' power to position India and its leadership as the guiding figureheads for a spiritually wayward, perennially endangered world. Jayakar and Brook, almost citing each other verbatim, accordingly proclaimed:

The next few years will be traumatic for us as we make the transition into the modern world. I know of no country that has as deep spiritual and cultural roots, but the question is whether or not we can make the transition without losing our values (Winship, 1985).

A feeling for the sacred is always present. This feeling, which we have almost lost, is perhaps why the pull of the East is felt everywhere today – as if these distant lands, swept by famine and largely incomprehensible to the rest of the world, have a meaning which reaches, beyond our established religions, with something very particular to say to us today. (International Centre of Theatre Research, 1980: 4)

The underlying script of *The Mahabharata* that emphasized the sacred, the exotic, spiritual roots, and universal philosophy, was thus not so much Brook's and Carrière's neo-orientalist fantasies than the aesthetic exigencies implicit in selling a highly codified discourse on India to the American public in the mid 1980s. What is presented at festivals, as Durrans argues, 'is rarely random' (Durrans, 1982: 15). Like the potter at his wheel who reflects India's soul and transcendentalist religio-philosophical truths, *The Mahabharata* illustrated how the world, in this 'most difficult, dangerous and terrible period of history', needed to look to India for spiritual renewal, self-survival, and the preservation of cultural diversity amid modernity's 'ceaseless drive for autonomous, self-motivated, endless, spectacular movement' (Kurcfeld, 1987; Lepecki, 2006: 13).

Accordingly, Brook insightfully noted in 1984, 'If [*The Mahabharata*] had not existed now, the festival would have had to invent it' (Chandran, 1984). Riding on the crest of the festival's publicity tidal wave, the production – acclaimed by critics such as Margaret Croydon who concurrently kept US foundation officers informed of its progress – enunciated Indian and American bureaucrats' desires to promote India as the world's new model for human-centred development (Klein, 1985). Recapitulating and expanding on the cultural development discourse articulated in *Aditi, Mela!*, and *The Golden Eye*, the production 'transform[ed] Hindu myth into universalized art, accessible to any culture' (Croydon, 1985); refracted a panoptical dramaturgical vision of 'all the images of India, from the maharajah's palaces to the shanty towns' (Carrière 1989; M.K. n.d.); and told the entire

story of humankind. In this regard, the production was a mere blip in the wide swath of festival performances representing *India!* to the global public – political adjudication in boardrooms, deals settled over *hors d'oeuvres*, Rajiv Gandhi in Ray Bans, and hyperreal monkey-men playing with vexed visitors. ‘Relevant to all time, relevant in any place’, *The Mahabharata* – one of hundreds of festival events – thus translated into theatrical idiom the economic and political objectives of affirming India’s status as an independent world power; patching up strained political relations; and telling the story, only beginning to reach the ears of the average American, of a new favourable liberalizing climate for foreign investment and tourist discovery (Jayakar, 1985; Taylor, 1987).

## 8 Conclusion

Canning’s suggestion that the productions canonized as the most ground-breaking and impactful in US theatre played little part in what government funded to represent it here invites inflection (Canning, 2011: 152).<sup>27</sup> While the US state almost never directly supported those landmark performances which historians have traditionally focused on in their written and pedagogical work, American philanthropic organizations, in tandem with foreign governments, filled in the gap, facilitating the growth of those significant artists, companies, forms, and scholarly paradigms that suited their purposes. Staged within the Indic scheme of the festival that in scope, scale, and impact ‘vastly exceeded any previous international cultural activity’ (Festival of India, 1983), the highly choreographed, tightly stage-managed though seemingly universal *Mahabharata* and its conceptual siblings *Aditi*, *Mela!*, and *The Golden Eye* were not so much the result of American neo-orientalist fantasies and Indian self-identification with orientalist *topoi* than the economic and political exigencies implicit in selling *India!* to the global public of the 1980s.

The festival subsequently accomplished a *grand tour* across Sweden (1987), Switzerland (1987), Mauritius (1987–8), the USSR (1987–8),<sup>28</sup> and

<sup>27</sup> Foreign audiences, she argues, ‘did not see state-sanctioned productions of the most influential artists and companies, because the government rarely sent abroad the productions or performances upon which historians have focused in the classroom, but instead chose productions that would build cultural capital for the United States without engendering controversy’ (Canning, 2011: 152).

<sup>28</sup> The Festival of India in the USSR transpired in 130 cities and towns and followed the same scenography of the US festival: the juxtaposition of the clichés of the ‘India of maharajas, poverty and bullock-carts, Raj Kapoor and Amitabh Bachchan’ with a modern nation. The objective of the Soviet festival was, however, about maintaining rather than strengthening friendship, about continuity rather than change. During this time, Rajiv Gandhi, who looked westward for military and computer technology, was a ‘captive of the system’ who could not turn a blind eye to India’s existing investments in Soviet arms (Gohar, 1987: 96).

Japan (1988) in the liminal decade of the 1980s before being exported in a more diminutive form to Germany (1991), China (1994), Thailand (1995–7), and many other places. So too did numerous other countries, in the festival's immediate aftermath, propose festivals of their own cultures in the United States – a measure, according to John Hubbard writing to USIA director Wick, of the 'unusual attention that the Festival attracted' (Hubbard, 1986). In this regard, the festival could happen neither today nor in the previous decade. In addition to 'the funding, the political will, the obsession with big spectacle, the popular culture interest in colonialism and in India, the planet-wide rivalries for economic primacy and political might' (Brown, 2017: 19), two related historical developments drove the festival's thick, multi-year-long series of events: (1) a nation laying the groundwork to become, in a new liberalizing environment, an economic powerhouse and (2) the expansion of the model of cultural development that centred the arts in development. Conspicuous, demanding attention, intrinsically more visual than the words that they came after, exclamation points inextricably linked to the festival signalled, over and above exultation, wonder, and a hyper-realism more true than the original, India's arrival on the global stage as exponent of an ideology subsequently adopted by governments as far apart as Norway, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Brazil. From reducing poverty and advancing skills and employment to fostering environmental sustainability, resolving conflict, and promoting mutual understanding, culture, as articulated by the Festival of India, was no longer a policy domain strategized in isolation but a panacea to solve all the seemingly unresolvable problems in people-centred development.

Changes in traditional American perceptions and attitudes towards India; a fresh start to Indo-US relations, frozen since the early 1970s; and the global prominence of the country's manufacturing, trade, and tourism potential constituted the significant upshot of this curatorial emphasis. As Rajiv Gandhi argued, the nuts and bolts of aid and trade and even policy issues are of no relevance 'without basic understanding' (Geyelin, 1985). Through the synthesis of East and West through cultural bonds, a metaphor for syntheses in economic and political affairs, the latter was achieved, much more than could be said for previous meetings between Indian prime ministers and US presidents. In the festival's immediate aftermath, numerous new Indo-US foundations – the Golden Eye Foundation, the India Fund, and the Indo-American Council – 'presaged a possible new generation of understanding between [the . . .] two countries' (Ripley, 1986). Simultaneously, senior Indian officials largely eliminated anti-US rhetoric when speaking of issues such as the SDI, over which Washington and New Delhi continued to



differ; the Indian government ceased to blame Indian domestic unrest on the United States; US and Indian companies negotiated a dramatically larger number of joint ventures and contracts that showed up as gains in US exports; and memorandums were signed to facilitate the purchase of sophisticated US commercial and military technology (*Indian Response to US Initiatives*, 1986: 7–8). As Sadanand Menon powerfully argues, ‘The military parade and the political pageant . . . disguised as a cultural event are obverse sides of the same coin’. No one, he says, ‘has yet told us the full story of the massive arms deals carried out under the benign cover of the Festival of India in Britain, the United States and France . . . . The artists have returned, but the soldiers stay on’ (*Menon*, 1987).

All the while, the fact that Rajiv Gandhi visited high-tech facilities in the United States and France but declined an invitation to tour Soviet installations in Siberia was not lost to Moscow, who viewed the act as a signpost of Rajiv Gandhi’s new India.<sup>29</sup> By thus shifting to a position more independent of the USSR, India began to transform into a more credible middle power (Directorate of Intelligence, 1986: 6). ‘Youthful, energetic, intelligent, realistic, and independent’, India, personified by its leader, was no longer ‘tied to the apron strings’ nor played second fiddle to any superpower (Rajiv Gandhi’s visit proves ‘a turning point’, 1985). Taking control of the representation of cultural difference, the festival, poised between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century modes of visual consumption, let numerous actors in the monumental production ‘[get] what they wanted’: the transfer of high technology, greater opportunities for US companies in the Indian market, a more solid footing in Indo-US ties, the legitimization of endangered arts and crafts, and a new ‘vision of India as a self-sufficient, technologically advanced nation, not as a dependent aid recipient’ (Directorate of Intelligence, 1986).

However, the festival was ‘a Trojan Horse of sorts’ that smuggled political and economic messages – Reagan’s proclamation ‘we hit it off!’, supercomputer sales, and nuclear discussions in hard and soft (*Mahabharata*) speak – not only for audiences abroad but also for those at home (*Jain*, 1986). While consolidating his position as prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi continued in his mother’s footsteps by deploying vast networks of local and interregional

<sup>29</sup> According to CIA reports, Rajiv Gandhi preferred to emphasize continuity rather than change with Moscow. In order to reassure Moscow that closer ties with the West would not come at the USSR’s expense, ‘Gandhi engaged in the kind of symbolic acts that have long characterized Indo-Soviet relations’: signing economic and scientific cooperation agreements, accepting the Lenin Peace Prize on behalf of his mother, and dedicating a Moscow square to his grandfather (*Directorate of Intelligence*, 1985: 2).

cultural displays to unify a deeply fractured nation. First exported to capitals abroad where *India!* was displayed and consumed, the arbitrary decontextualization and re-assemblage of performers was swiftly indigenized into a mammoth internal jamboree entitled ‘Apna Utsav’ in 1986 – the year of the US Festival’s closure.<sup>30</sup> In Sethi’s dexterous hands *India!* as a project of international peace-building and sustainable development metamorphosed into a lesson on ‘unity in diversity’ for the ‘lumpens’, many of whom killed without compunction during India’s darkest days of the anti-Sikh riots. Advertised as ‘the wonder glue to stick together our national consciousness . . .’, ‘national integration or bust was the theme song’ of what Rajiv Gandhi denoted as the Festival of India for India (Jain, 1986; Menon, 1987). Accordingly, the Red Fort and the bylanes of Chirag Dilli witnessed a magician from Punjab performing magic tricks with the national flag and a Bengali conjuror jesting with Sikhs in broken Punjabi. By diverting India’s ignorant multitudes from ‘cinema to folk arts, from the kind of consumerism which can lead to dowry deaths to culture with a small c, from soul-less vagrancy to soul in some form’, Sethi perfected a specialized cultural complex energized by technologies of information, movement, and leisure (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 2015; Jain, 1986). Supporting zonal cultural festivals, the revitalization of museums and craft exhibition-cum-sales (such as in the National Crafts Museum in New Delhi), cultural displays in beauty contests, televised adaptations of the *Ramayana*, and the building of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, the idea of a ‘lost and found department’ of essentialized folk cultures that returned India’s masses to their roots, inadvertently propagated a now all-too-familiar libidinal communalism linked to commodity fetishism (Jain, 1986).

But in the brief hallucinatory dream of primitivized Mizoram folk dancers thundering with their spears, comically caricatured Sikhs breaking into Bhangra, and shivering Rajasthani children twirling top-like in worn *ghagras* (skirts), this accidental propagation of godly selves and satanic others was inconsequential. What mattered was the next election win, the United Nations General Assembly’s proclamation of the central role of cultural and human values in technological and economic development, the sharp uptick in Indian tourism (Festival of India, 1983), the CIA’s report of a strain in Indo-USSR relations (Directorate of Intelligence, 1986b), the loosening of restrictions imposed on multinationals by the Indian Foreign Exchange Regulations Act, and the deregulation of the Indian markets under Narsimha Rao – a move that laid the foundations for contemporary India’s transformation into the world’s

<sup>30</sup> See (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 2015).

fifth-largest economy by nominal GDP and third-largest by purchasing power parity. For these phenomenal historical shifts, but not for the unnamed and forever unknown ‘man who strings beads with his tongue while balancing a knife on his head’, Sethi’s, Jayakar’s, Reagan’s, and the Gandhis’ ‘theatrical magic had worked’ (Croydon, 1985; Shapiro, 1985).

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*For Noshir uncle – ghost-writer of many a school essay*

## Theatre, Performance and the Political

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