

18

Mela in the UK: A 'travelled and habituated' festival

Rakesh Kaushal and Chris Newbold

Introduction

Mela in the United Kingdom has become, in its short thirty year history, one of the most popular forms of festival entertainment. The word 'mela' itself, is based on the Sanskrit, meaning a community gathering or meeting, and in its many forms mela in the UK has remained true to this broad sense of people, families and communities congregating together in an atmosphere of festivity. At its roots, mela in the UK has evolved out of South Asian religious rites and rituals, and can also be seen to be built on South Asian folk and rural culture and traditions. However, at the core of the definition of mela is the notion of a gathering. This is most appropriate here in that it does not necessarily refer to any mono-cultural or religious focus, and is important when we observe how mela has 'travelled' and become 'habituated' in the UK. Carnegie and Smith (2006) identify *Edinburgh Mela* as having travelled but in this chapter, whilst recognising the travelled nature of mela that they refer to, we indicate that it is the habituated nature of mela that more clearly identifies its nature and existence in the UK.

Therefore, this chapter will document that, after 25 to 30 years, mela in the UK can be seen to be adopting its own traditions and connotations. Moreover, by the very nature of the modern diverse British population, mela is now largely urbanised and many continue to reflect South Asian religious festivals, be they *Boishakhi Melas* (Brick Lane London), *Holi Hai Melas* (Oxford) or *Eid Melas* (Birmingham), but others have lost touch with these roots as the demands of festival and cultural event management and venue availability have led to other requirements taking priority. The focus of the research presented here is concerned with the manifestation of mela in the UK and, in particular, how it has adapted to the various town and city locations in which it is now a fundamental part of the cultural events calendar. The importance of mela in terms of economic impact and tourism may be one reason why mela is popular with local authorities. However, as this research will docu-

ment, other explanations revolve around debates and policy decisions on community cohesion, multi-culturalism and diversity.

The overall approach in this research is that melas do not take place in a vacuum, but are in fact woven into the wider cultural, social and artistic fabric. Thus social, economic, political and cultural contexts are vital to an understanding of mela in the UK. This research advances the argument that mela in the UK is a barometer of the extent to which the South Asian population see themselves and are seen by the wider population as a legitimate part of cities and towns in the United Kingdom. Mela festivals can be seen as the overt displays of the rightful existence of communities and cultures rather than their being viewed as separate, alien or 'other'. The research methodology for this chapter consisted of a case study approach combined with sixteen in-depth qualitative interviews, carried out over the telephone with managers, organisers and representative of sixteen different mela organisations, from Bristol and Swindon in the South West of England, to Middlesbrough in the North East and Dunfermline in Scotland. This research examines the overall state of mela in the UK through the three years of research, 2010 to 2013 (see Newbold and Kaushal 2014)¹.

At the heart of the research questions were a number of key areas to be explored within the sample:

- ◆ First, the history and development of the particular mela, together with its changing role.
- ◆ Second, the organisation, management and key stakeholders of the mela, in particular looking at the relationship between these stakeholders, funding and local authorities which emphasises the economic impact of this relationship.
- ◆ Third, the analysis of community involvement and support is central, since they have a dual stakeholder role as object and subject of the mela.
- ◆ Fourth, the programming policy is at the heart of the delivery of the melas aims and objectives, and there is often a conflict between traditional South Asian art and culture and the influence of global Bollywood and the hybridisation of modern Indian music. This also leads to questions relating to provisions for first, second and third generation community members.
- ◆ Last, our questioning explored the role mela played in community cohesion, perceptions of multi-culturalism and diversity and the importance of visuality, legitimacy and references drawn from a bawdy style of theatre from the Indian sub-continent, known historically as Tamasha.

Research into melas calls forth a number of debates and discussions both within the South Asian population, and between that community and the wider population. As an example of one of the most successful forms of festival in the UK at present, the study of mela allows for an opportunity to deepen knowledge of the management and impact of festivals and cultural events in the twenty-first century.

Mela in the UK: origins and development

The oldest established melas in the UK, *Bradford Mela* and *Nottingham Mela*, have their roots in a desire to bring the various South Asian communities together, with their common interests and heritage, rather than on religious grounds. Many melas have become wholly secular, hybridised and eclectic in their content and organisation, as they have become successful local and regional events in their own right, and have thus sought through organisational and economic necessity to attract wider audiences. The story of the movement of mela around the globe is the story of the movement of the South Asian population out of the subcontinent, either by forced or voluntary emigration. South Asian immigration into the UK had started to increase noticeably in the 1950s when citizens of British colonies and the Commonwealth had the automatic right to settle in the UK. It grew through the first years of the 1960s for two main reasons. First, a demand for labour which had seen large scale immigration from the Caribbean and, second, a fear that the UK might impose restrictions on immigration in the face of growing popular, political and press opposition to it. This resulted in the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act* of 1962, introducing an employment voucher system. Subsequent amendments to this system in 1965 did not stop the flow of dependents and by the end of the 1960s the balance of immigration into the UK had shifted from the Caribbean to the Indian subcontinent. This was then boosted in the 1970s by Asian immigration from East Africa, following policies of 'Africanisation' in the newly independent states.

Mela beginnings in the UK can be seen to emerge as a combination of personal action by community leaders and activists and by interventions of entrepreneurs and individuals who recognised a gap in the market for South Asian based arts and entertainment. What was key here was the desire of the communities to have something that represented their cultural interests and heritage. Melas in the UK usually have some common threads that motivate their founding and development. First, to bring South Asian arts and culture to the local community. Second, to provide a free family and community orientated festival. Third, to reflect the diversity of South Asian Arts and to bring South Asian artists and stars to UK audiences. Fourth, to provide a