

## The Southall ever after festival – what COVID-19 taught us about community, research and funding

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# The Southall ever after festival – what COVID-19 taught us about community, research and funding

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of COVID-19 on a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) research project.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the research, in its original iteration, was cultural heritage and identity within Indian diasporic communities across India and within the UK. In March 2020, four weeks into the project, work was suspended as the UK went into lockdown, with India following shortly after. When the project restarted in May 2021 in the UK, although not in India, projected outcomes had changed radically from the original proposal as the vacuum created by COVID-19 encouraged participants to take control of the process. Guided by participants the project expanded beyond the South Asian diaspora to encompass the diversity of Southall. This revealed far more nuanced attitudes towards cultural heritage and challenged the notions of dual identities in the original proposal, resulting in a more complex account of identifications across communities. This article contends that these findings would not have occurred if participants with an investment in the process had not led the research and calls for a shift from output-driven research to research with an emphasis on process in future participatory arts and humanities-funded projects.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Cultural heritage; migration; diaspora; community; participatory arts

## Background to the network

In the spring of 2019, a call was announced online for joint applications from UK and Indian partners for ‘AHRC and ICHR Research Networking Awards; Cultural Heritage, Migration and Indian Diasporas.’ The guidance notes which accompanied the call laid out its aims as:

[t]o explore the role that cultural heritage can play in inclusive and sustainable economic growth as well as social cohesion. Through researching cultural connections and engaging diasporic communities with their cultural heritage, it examines how this contributes to improving quality of life and economic growth that is inclusive and sustainable. (2019)

The guidance notes go on to make the point that ‘the Indian diaspora is the world’s largest with over 15.6 million people from India living overseas.’ Applicants were

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encouraged to explore partnerships with non-academic organisations and asked to consider the cultural, social and economic implications of this massive dispersal of peoples under one or two of the following themes: Indian diasporas and cultural markets; Digital technology as a bridge; Cultural Heritage Transformations; Identities and Migration, Cultural Heritage Institutions as gateways to diasporic cultures.

Professor B. Anandhakrishnan, Head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication, University of Hyderabad and myself have a history of performance research collaborations and projects including a UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI) Thematic Partnership (2013–2015).<sup>2</sup> Building on these collaborations we jointly constructed a response to the call with the aim of establishing a transnational network of scholars, community activists, citizens, artists, writers, and filmmakers to address two of the themes highlighted ‘Cultural Heritage Transformations’ and ‘Identities and Migration’. Under the umbrella of these themes we were interested in investigating how cultural traditions and religious beliefs changed over time, are manifested in and through creative arts practice, and how Cultural Heritage Institutions reflect these changes. Whose histories are being told? Who or what is being represented? Who or what has been excluded? How do first and second-generation Indian diasporic communities in the UK negotiate their dual identities as British and Asian? How is this performed? In India, diasporic communities exist within the subcontinent when peoples migrate from rural communities to major cities like Hyderabad and Delhi to find work in the construction industry or as security guards for example. How do these communities adapt to their new identities whilst still maintaining the traditions and values of their cultural roots? Arjun Appadurai understands the term *cultural*, to be ‘a realm of differences, contrasts, and comparisons’ (Appadurai 1996, 12), with heritage understood as coming from the past and associated with place, but not anchored to it, and still having value in the present. Applying this concept of cultural, in conjunction with untethering heritage from place, we proposed to connect participants, artists, academics and community activists in the UK and India through a series of workshops, performances, pop-up exhibitions, symposia, and exchange visits.

In our response to the call, we translated the questions above into a language that we hoped would be acceptable to the peer review panel and the funders. For example:

- How are different constituencies imagining, embodying and practicing their heritage? What are the slippages between the ways these groups negotiate heritage; what are the commonalities?
- What forms of assimilation and cultural hybridity are these encounters giving rise to?
- What is the efficacy of practice-led performance research as a mode of knowledge production in relation to cultural heritage and the Indian diaspora? Does it offer this area a new critical and analytical lens, potentially opening up new modes of enquiry for diasporic studies more widely?

When we were notified that we had been granted the award in November 2019, we swiftly consolidated our plans to begin a series of weekly workshops in the UK in February 2020, with workshops scheduled to begin in India in July of the same year. We then started booking flights and confirming speakers for the symposia.

The translation of key questions into language that was acceptable to the funders signalled from the outset there was a potential mismatch of interests between those who were being asked to participate in the research and the requirements of the institutions that supported it. Who was this research for? Who would benefit from its outcomes? The proposal posited arts-based activities as a method for eliciting material, that is, as knowledge-producing activities, but given the small window between the call being announced and the deadline for applications, partners and participants had very little say in the project's design in its initial stages. The main beneficiaries listed in the application would be academic institutions, local, national and international stakeholders, policy makers and of course funders in the UK and India, who could claim the kudos for its impact. The participants were not listed. Adam J.P Gaudrey elaborates on this type of methodology.

Research is often an extractive process. In the contemporary academic environment, research and publishing expectations drive researchers to take deeply meaningful information, often from a marginal or “underresearched” community, and present it to a third party. This third party is usually a highly educated academic audience or government bureaucracy, both of whom have little staked on the preservation of the integrity of that extracted knowledge. Rarely are the people who participate in the research process as participants or “informants” considered to be the primary audience when it comes time to disseminate the research. (Gaudrey 2011, 113)

Time constraints are another factor that contribute to these extractive processes. In this instance, AHRC/ICHR limited the research to run for a maximum of nine months, making it highly unlikely that meaningful relationships could be built with partners and participants, especially on a project with an international dimension.

The onset of COVID-19 severely compromised the partnership with Hyderabad as their funding was delayed and then eventually completely withdrawn by the ICHR. In the UK funding was frozen for fourteen months during which time the project continued unofficially online. This hiatus in funding combined with the extended time frame enabled participants and our project partners in the UK to expand the project and steer the research towards activities which they saw as having value for themselves and their wider community. I will argue this expansion contributed insights to the research that would not have become apparent in its original design. One of these insights was a shift from the notion of ‘dual identities’ envisaged in the original proposal to an understanding of a plurality of identifications ranging across communities and the realisation that cultural heritage cannot be studied in isolation. I contend this shift happened because the direction of the research was devolved to the participants who, with their local knowledge expanded its focus to be more inclusive and embrace activities that reflected the diversity of Southall. As a result of the disruption caused by COVID-19, as principal investigator, I was able to divert funds to support them. Enabling participants to have more agency in the design and application of research in their own communities has implications for the funding and organisation of this kind of project in the future. In order to explicate how the shift came about in this research, I will first give a brief account of the early workshops, the subsequent developments online during the pandemic and the consolidation of the project into a post lockdown celebratory community festival in July 2021.

## The Workshops February – March 2020 Southall Community Alliance

Our partners in the UK, the Southall Community Alliance,<sup>3</sup> based in West London serve a vibrant and diverse community with a high proportion of British Asians of Indian descent. With their offices in the Old Town Hall in the centre of Southall their mission statement seeks ‘to address the social, cultural, environmental, religious and local needs of the area’.<sup>4</sup> As principal investigator I had no previous links with Southall and I was introduced to Janpal Singh Basran, Network and Community Development manager of the Alliance by Mahenderpal Sorya, researcher on the project, a filmmaker, and lecturer in fine art at Central St Martins, University of the Arts London. As will become clear, Sorya, a Southallian himself of South Asian heritage and his family, long-term residents, were indispensable to the project in terms of their local knowledge and creative input. Our plan was to initiate a series of arts-based workshops, conducted over a six-month period, to capture and document the stories and experiences of older members of the Indian community in Southall before they were lost. This diasporic group, many of whom were activists in the 1970s, were pioneers in the way they negotiated their identities as British Indians in an often hostile environment. In 1976 the racist murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in Southall sparked a wave of protests. In April 1979 this culminated in the Southall Riots when the National Front held a meeting in the centre of Southall. The brutal response of the police to anti-racist protesters led to the death of Blair Peach.<sup>5</sup>

The weekly workshops were designed to encourage senior citizens to talk, draw and record their memories of India and their early experiences in the UK. Focusing on both the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage, prompted by Kim D Butler’s assertion that ‘Much of diasporic experience is unwritten; it is inscribed in the creative arts, material culture and oral traditions’ (Butler 2001, 212) the plan was that experts in the fields of dance, storytelling, music, and film would be employed to conduct specialist workshops at regular intervals. Family and younger members of the community were also invited to join in the activities. The material gathered would be curated as a pop-up exhibition and possibly shaped into a short audio performance to be presented as part of the symposium in July 2020. We had a line-up of eminent speakers for the symposium and our colleagues from India were scheduled to fly over to attend the event with the UK team due to travel to Hyderabad in the Autumn.

As soon as we began the practical application of the project, Sorya voiced his concerns about the mismatch between the language used in the funding proposal and what would be needed to attract the community we wanted to engage. The research questions, as articulated for the academic sector, were couched in a language that would not be understood by local residents, and as stated above, there was also a tension between the research outcomes as laid out in the proposal and the needs of participants. If we were to avoid extractive research practices, we needed to ensure that the workshops were enjoyable and of value to them as research subjects.

In the weeks before we were scheduled to start, Sorya began a media campaign that invited members of the first-generation Indian community of all faiths to share their memories of India and stories of arrival in the UK in the 1960s and 70s. He designed a poster made up of a carefully constructed collage of images of Southall past and present following Appadurai’s notion of ‘heritage still having value in the present’ (Appadurai 1996, 12) (Figure 1).

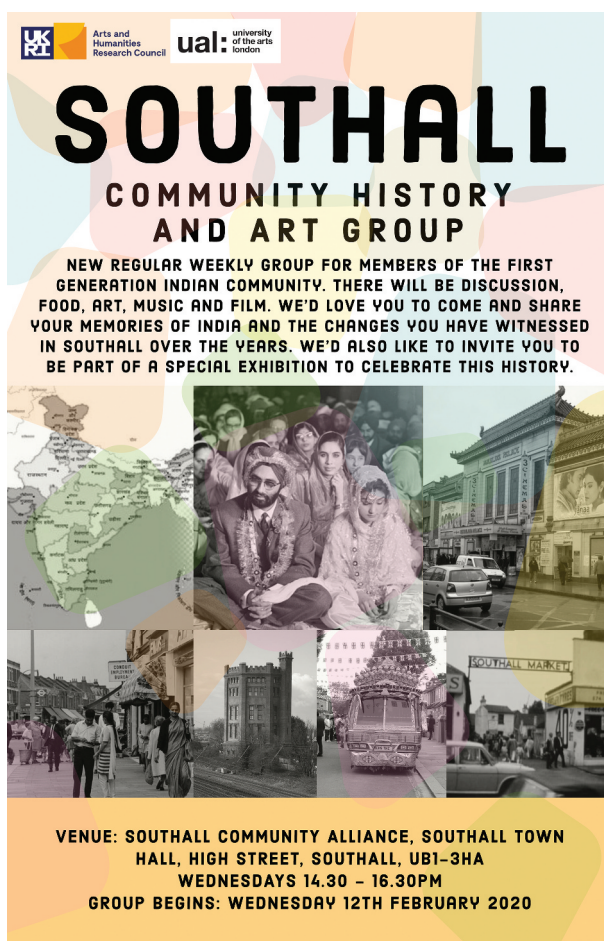


Figure 1. Invitation to workshops in February 2020 Photo Mahenderpal Sorya

Take-up for the workshops was good. For the first workshop, we had eighteen participants, who were elderly residents and their families. This settled into a core group of around ten elders who, every Wednesday from early February, sometimes with their families and sometimes not, came together in the town hall. Refreshments, usually tea and samosas, were generously provided by the hosts. For the introductory workshop, Sorya rephrased the key research questions articulated in the proposal to make them more accessible and relevant to the constituency we were working with. Emphasising that these would be some of the questions we would be returning to over the course of the next few months mediated through a series of arts based activities.

**Identity:** What special things did you bring with you when you came to the UK? How did they help you negotiate your new identity?

**India:** What are your memories of India? How has your relationship with India changed over time? What is your relationship with India now?

**Cultural Heritage:** What do you appreciate most about Southall? What stories would you like to share? How important do you feel your Indian heritage is for future generations?

In the second week, we drew and mapped journeys of arrival, creating an abstracted map of the world that reflected the participants' personal experiences. In weeks three and four, Sheila Ghelani,<sup>6</sup> an artist whose work spans performance, installation, social art and moving images, conducted workshops using objects and colour as memory triggers. In week five, documentary film maker, David Jack Fenton showed his film HOME is NOT JUST A PLACE,<sup>7</sup> a sensitive and revealing portrait of the issues facing a group of South Asian women in North London and their resilience in dealing with them, including creating short performances as a means of sharing common problems. We were excited about the potential of connecting these north and west London communities and sharing experiences.

## Lockdown

Then COVID-19 struck and in mid-March the UK went into lockdown. As principal investigator my responsibility shifted to negotiating the suspension of the UK activities with the funders. But Sorya and I also felt we had a responsibility to the participants who generously gave their time not to abandon the project so early in its development. However, we were working predominantly with elderly people who were highly vulnerable and although it was tremendously disappointing, I saw little prospect of continuing activities in the near future.

Sorya was more optimistic. One of the things the early workshops had revealed was the extent to which many of the elderly participants used social media to communicate; the circulation of messages on WhatsApp, for instance, as a way of keeping in daily contact with loved ones. This messaging often incorporated symbolic and religious icons marking important festivals – lamps and candles for Diwali, and snowscapes for Christmas, often from the same person – attesting to the way members of the group had integrated these different faith celebrations into their lives. As the weeks went on and we waited for a response from the AHRC, Sorya independently created an online community arts group to keep the project alive during the early days of lockdown. Gradually, coverage grew as the online community opened up beyond Southall and began encompassing a range of activities not envisaged in the original proposal. Poems and letters were posted on a wiki page documenting people's experiences and emotions during their enforced isolation; playlists and film lists were shared amongst the group. It soon became clear, from the eclectic mix of music chosen ranging from 'Dukh Bhare Din Beete Re' (The Days of Sorrow Have Passed) from the 1957 film *Mother India* to 'Blowin in the Wind' (1962) by Bob Dylan, that people were quite at ease moving across these different genres.<sup>8</sup>

While this kept the project alive in the UK it was impossible to sustain a working relationship with our colleagues in India. They were not scheduled to begin their activities until the summer so from their perspective the project had not even started. There was no communication with the funders in India and Hyderabad University was closed. Ananthakrishnan suggested we should hold off making any future plans until the situation in India became clearer. With everyone working from home in the UK we heard

nothing from the AHRC for months. With no clear directive from the funders and our university research office staff also operating from home, the grant was effectively frozen.

Throughout the spring, summer and autumn of 2020 the unofficial network expanded. One of the original workshop participants, Andre Rungen, was a volunteer at a local community nature reserve, Wolf Fields.<sup>9</sup> As restrictions eased and limited outdoor activities were permitted, he invited Sorya to join some of the community projects there, which included digging a pond and helping to build a small sculpture garden. Volunteers at Wolf Fields are representative of the diversity of Southall, coming from a range of ethnicities including long term residents and relative newcomers. Sorya sometimes worked alongside others as a participant but on other occasions initiated new projects himself, always taking care to record what was happening and maintain the network's presence online. In this way people's lives and experiences became visible to one another.<sup>10</sup> On one level the research project appeared to be spiralling out of control with a serendipitous mix of arts-based and community activities occurring under the umbrella of the network, none of which had been envisaged in the original research bid. On another level, as a result of the vacuum created by COVID and the inevitable and understandable slow response from the funders to get the research back on track, the participants could be said to have taken control of the network themselves.

Sorya's online activities began from the sense of an ethical responsibility towards the participants we had invited into the project who had given us their time and trusted us with their personal stories. Being from the community himself he was sensitive to the isolation they were likely to experience as the country went into lockdown. Over twenty years ago Frances Rifkin's *The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in a Higher Education Context* was a response 'to a perceived absence of consensus on an ethical approach to teaching, learning and professional practice of Participatory or Applied Theatre' (Rifkin, 2010).<sup>11</sup> More recent articles attest to a raised awareness of the need for an ethics of care especially when research involves vulnerable participants. Practitioner-researchers in the Netherlands, for example (de Kock et al. 2023), explore this in their work with elderly residents during COVID-19, and in Canada, with young members of the LGBTQ+ community and their families (Owis et al. 2023). All funded research projects must adhere to institutional codes of ethics of course but in the years since Rifkin's review, no consensus has been reached. As Kouritzin and Nakagawa point out, ethics is not adequately defined especially in current funding models concerned with cross-cultural research; rather, it is often reduced to 'cold formal texts' tick box forms, which seem to be more about protecting the institution than participants. They go on to argue that a 'non extractive ethics of research ...' requires that 'the *process* of research must be as validating, endorsing, and important as the product of research. It must benefit the participants' (2018, 684). As a result of its suspension during COVID-19 the process and products (outcomes) of this research project became inextricably entwined and the findings shifted from outcomes shared across academia or the institution to be primarily shared amongst the participants themselves. Over the months of lockdown, the thread of connectivity with our early workshop participants was maintained online and then expanded beyond the framework of the original proposal, resulting in a shift away from an 'extractive' process towards a more generative one of working *with* people. Our partners and the participants we had established a working relationship with throughout the lockdown period brought immense local knowledge to the table

including existing community groups and activities they wanted to be included in the project. Listening to their ideas involved relinquishing control and placing them in the driving seat as the experts in the field but it also built up trust.

Further examples of community-based initiatives leading the network occurred in the early spring of 2021 when Jennal Amin, Communities and Programme Officer at Gunnersbury Park Museum,<sup>12</sup> approached Sorya about running a series of online photography workshops with local participants. Gunnersbury is due east of Southall and has a diverse, multicultural population. The museum houses an extensive collection of works by the photographer Dennis Morris, famous for his images of life in Southall in the 1970s. Sorya put out a call for participants on social media inviting them to photograph their local environment using the Morris collection as inspiration, under the umbrella title *Being South Asian*. Participants were supported by weekly online workshops, discussions and group crits, led by Sorya and other network members.<sup>13</sup> The aim was to exhibit selected works at the museum. There was energy and gathering momentum to these activities, but with no restart date or authorisation from the funders, there was a fear on our part that we would not be able to fulfil expectations. In the end, I could apply for funding from the research budget at the University of the Arts to support the workshops and the materials needed to mount the exhibition, arguing that these activities would be in the interests of the network research and would eventually feed into its outcomes. In July 2021, the exhibition, *Being South Asian*, opened to the public with photographic works of the South Asian community dispersed amongst the museum's permanent collection. Jennal Amin, describes the impact of the exhibition:

The *Being South Asian* exhibition brought many South Asian people to the museum. Across the six weeks that it was exhibited, we had a 75% increase in South Asian visitors. Many felt it was an important exhibition - simple yet powerful and it was clear from the feedback we received that people were really happy to see their culture being represented in a public space such as a local history museum. (Interview with the author, March 2023)

When we finally got confirmation from the AHRC that we could access funds and officially restart our network activities in May 2021 the contacts made as a result of all the unofficial activities undertaken during lockdown became a crucial factor in the way we moved forward and had a seminal influence on the direction the network took over the remaining seven months of its duration. Devolving responsibility to our partners and participants to shape the content of the research, utilising their knowledge of existing cultural practices within their community was a key factor in the success of the next phase of the project and the resulting impact of the network.

### **The Southall Ever After Festival**

The title of the festival was inspired by *The Ever After Project*, a National Theatre Wales (NTW) initiative in partnership with Aberystwyth University and the Institute of Making, University College London in 2020. *The Ever After Project* was a speculative endeavour during lockdown that took up the challenge set out in an essay by Bruno Latour to use the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 as momentum for potential positive change.

‘Let’s take advantage of the enforced suspension of most activities’, wrote Latour, ‘to set out the inventory of those among them we would like to see not coming back, and those, on the other hand, that we would like to see develop’ (Quoted in Filmer et al. 2020, 383). Concerned with challenging established conventions and imagining more democratic and sustainable ways of working, *The Ever After Project* asks us to imagine different modes of theatre and performance production, ‘as we come to terms with creating performance in changed and changing circumstances within and emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when there is no consensus on how to proceed ...’ they offer ‘10 propositions as invitations and provocations’ (Filmer et al. 2020, 392). Although the study was primarily concerned with theatrical production, in their first proposition, the notion of ‘assemblage’ and ‘gathering’ seemed particularly appropriate to harness the diverse activities generated by our project.

Conceive every production as an assemblage- of people, things, technologies, texts, ideas, regulations - gathered and mixed in different relationships, and to varying extents in order to generate meaning and effect in a particular context. (Filmer et al. 2020,392)

After the initial workshops were suspended, we established a network of community activists, arts practitioners, academics and volunteers who were keen to continue their engagement with the project. We all agreed that continuing our workshops with elderly residents indoors was not a safe option even with restricted numbers and social distancing they would be vulnerable. This meant dropping some of our proposed research activities and substituting others, taking a pragmatic view of what was achievable and what wasn’t. Basran reiterated his desire that we should embrace the diversity of Southall in line with the mission statement of the Southall Alliance cited at the beginning of this article. In light of all the above, whilst still keeping in mind our research aims in relation to Indian cultural heritage, we started to think about ways of expanding the project to include wider representation of all the communities in Southall and to consider the kind of assemblage we might create that would, ‘generate meaning and effect in [our] particular context’ as proposed by Filmer et al. Inspired by the provocations of *The Ever After Project*, building on the participant networks Sorya had established during lockdown, the advice of Basran and other local activists, the project shifted focus.

We now had a budget and a short window to consolidate our plans. Given the anxiety around meeting indoors, we decided to move our activities outside, which led to discussions about planning activities for the summer months. We set up a small organising committee, which met weekly online to plan activities that could take place in the open air. Basran, Sorya and I were joined by Jennal Amin of Gunnersbury Park Museum, with other artists and participants who were part of the extended network, attending as and when they were available. The idea of a festival to support and celebrate the diverse communities of Southall coming out of lockdown emerged gradually. As our ambitions expanded, *Southall Ever After* was envisaged as an opportunity to engage local people in arts-based activities that encouraged them to consider their present relationship to Southall, to reflect on their personal and collective past, and to imagine the future.

The multidisciplinary *South Ever After Festival* was a gathering that featured an assemblage of outdoor theatre performances, a steel band, mural painting, a pop-up museum, street photography, craft workshops, and an interactive exhibition. Over four Saturdays between August and September, the public were invited to participate in these

activities in outdoor settings. The festival opened in the urban nature reserve Wolf Fields, building on the relationship Sorya had built with the community of volunteers there, and continued for three Saturdays in Southall Park, an extensive green space in the centre of the town. With bright blue marquees signalling our presence, we were lucky with the weather on most weekends. The Gunnersbury Park Museum curated a pop-up exhibition that included a display of photographs by Dennis Morris, including Morris's iconic images of Southall in the 1970s, exhibited alongside selected examples from the recent works by *Being South Asian*. The exhibition not only raised awareness of the existence of Morris's photographs across all age groups attending the festival but also prompted discussion about hitherto hidden aspects of local history. For elderly residents, the images represented tangible evidence of their early experiences in Southall, and in conversation with the exhibition curators many expressed astonishment and pride that their lives had been documented in this way. (Figures 2,3,4 and 5)

The local Punjabi Theatre Academy<sup>14</sup> staged two outdoor performances which attracted a large audience (Figure 6). Working outside was a new departure for the company and enabled them to see the possibilities this offered for expanding their outreach work. Sheila Ghelani, part of the original research team, ran a series of craft workshops for parents and children. Over two of the Saturdays, *Routes to Roots*, an interactive drawing project co-devised with the *Lost Stories Collective*,<sup>15</sup> engaged local residents in tracing their journeys or their parents' and grandparents' journeys to Southall, on a large world map, to form the diverse community that exists today (Figure 7). Participants were invited to write postcards to family or friends, or to a town or place they remembered or associated with their past. These were displayed on a nearby tree forming a fragile temporary installation (Figure 8). The London Transport Museum based in Acton<sup>16</sup> also mounted a pop-up exhibition; they were keen to collect



Figure 2. Clay Workshop Wolf Fields Nature Reserve Photo Mahenderpal Sorya



Figure 3. Festival marquee in Southall Park Photo Gabriele Grigorjevaite



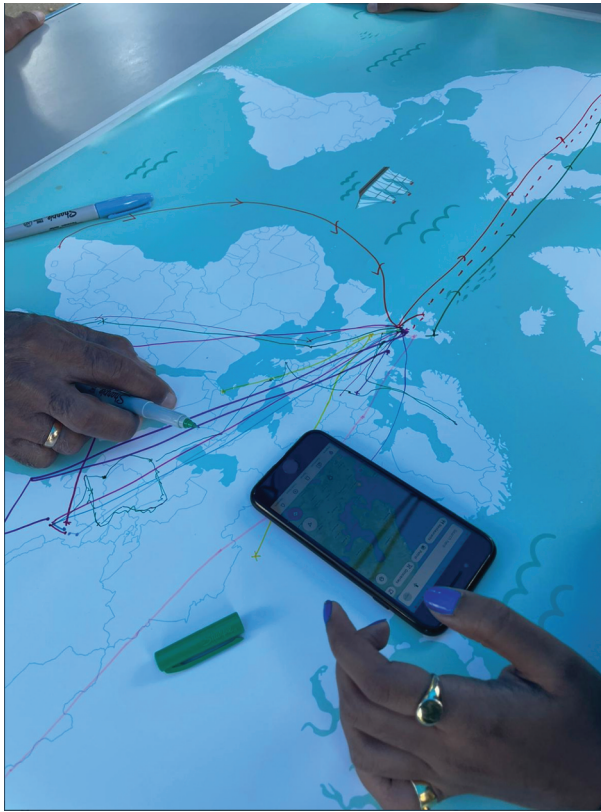
Figure 4. UFO Steel Band perform outside Southall Town Hall. Southall Ever After Festival 2021 Photo Mahenderpal Sorya



Figure 5. Pop Up Museum and Photo Exhibition Photo Gabriele Grigorjevaite



Figure 6. UK Punjabi Theatre Academy perform in Southall Park. Southall Ever After 2021 Photo Gabriele Grigorjevaite



**Figure 7.** Routes to Roots. Southall Ever After 2021 Photo Gabriele Grigorjevaite

stories of the early South Asian and Afro Caribbean workers on the London buses. The exhibition attracted much attention and stories began to unfold, even amongst festival organisers, of their early links with London transport. The festival also included another street photography workshop reflecting on the ways in which Southall's high street had been shaped, over many years, by migration.<sup>17</sup> On the third Saturday a local steel band performed outside the town hall. The success of the festival is summed up by Janpal Singh Basran, Southall Community Alliance, Network and Community Development Manager in his newsletter.

Our *Southall Ever After* festival ended on 18th September after four successive weekends of activity. This work has shown the value of providing engaging creative or artistic activity, especially as we recover from lockdowns ... After a well-deserved rest all of us will get together again to see how we can perhaps repeat some of our successes in the near future. (*Southall Community Newsletter*, October 2021)

### **Rethinking identities and debating Cultural Heritage**

On the cover of social and cultural anthropologist Gerd Bauman's comprehensive study of Southall in the mid-1990s, *Contesting Culture*, it says, '[t]he people of Southall affirm ethnic distinctiveness in some contexts, but they are also engaged in rethinking their



**Figure 8.** Routes to Roots Installation Southall Ever After 2021 Photo Mahenderpal Sory

identities and debating the meanings of their cultural heritage'. Bauman's argument in relation to Southall is that '*culture* and *community* could be equated in some contexts but were not the same in others. What the word identity might mean in any one context was a question of context' (Bauman 1996, 6). Bauman's study took place over 25 years ago and the findings of his research offered an alternative to the dominant discourse at that time that equated 'community, culture, and ethnic identity' often reducing people's behaviour 'to a symptom of this equation' (Bauman 1996, 6). Bauman highlighted the fact that '... the vast majority of all adult Southallians saw themselves as members of several *communities* each with its own *culture*. 'Making one's life meant ranging across them' (1996, 5). The community of Southall is even more diverse currently than it was at the time of Bauman's study, but his conclusions still resonate with the qualitative findings of the network. In the early stages of the project many of the elderly workshop participants told us they felt their heritage in Southall surrounded them with its mosques, Hindu temples, Gurdwara and a plethora of restaurants and food markets; they didn't feel estranged from their cultural roots and were to some extent surprised that anyone would want to talk in those terms. They were however eager to talk about the changes that had happened in Southall over the years including its changing demographic. The festival expanded the project beyond the South Asian Community to include Afghan, Afro-Caribbean, Somali, Tamil, as well as white British participants across generations, representative of the current cultural mix that is Southall. As is evident in the video and series of vox pops recorded at the festival by David Jack Fenton,<sup>18</sup> part of the original project team, the arts

based activities generated conversations across different ethnic groups and these conversations generated knowledge that was shared between participants. They prompted distinct as well as shared stories of arrival, encounters with racism in the past and the present, and alongside memories of Southall as it was, an often critical but committed, engagement with its future. The postcards from *Routes to Roots* for example displayed messages to India, Mauritius, Afghanistan, the Caribbean, Africa and Ukraine signifying a web of different diasporic identities. Everyone had people elsewhere and many expressed a longing to be reunited with grandparents, sons, daughters and friends. But there was no nostalgia for a lost singular cultural past, rather an affirmation of Southall as home with its diverse cultural present and a commitment to being a part of its future echoing Appadurai's description of 'heritage coming from the past and associated with place but not anchored to it' (1996, 12). In a multi-ethnic community like Southall where a multiplicity of different traditions and belief systems, Hindu, Christian, Muslim rub up against each other on a daily basis what becomes clear is that cultural heritage cannot be studied in isolation. This co-existence with 'the other' is mutually co-constitutive of identity – or identities. Residents negotiate these multiple identities through their encounters with the traditions and mores of their neighbours, whether it be food, fashion, music, religion, 'ranging across them' as part of their daily lives. Listening to our partners and representatives of the diverse communities of Southall and being guided by them, in the end revealed a much more nuanced relationship with cultural heritage across a range of communities and contexts. What had seemed at first as a loss of control because of COVID-19, ultimately enriched the findings of the project in ways we couldn't have envisaged when we began the research.

### Knowledge production and impact

There were other important findings in this research not envisaged in the original proposal. Under current funding paradigms in the UK, arts and humanities research projects are kept firmly in the hands of the institution with predetermined goals and time frames set at the outset making it extremely difficult for participants themselves to influence the direction of the research. The need for more collaborative, inclusive and redistributive approaches to research funding has long been acknowledged in relation to the global south and supported by a number of radical practices that seek to open up to scrutiny some of the underlying hegemonic assumptions and values that inform these funding models. For example, supporting existing and emergent cultural practices within communities underpinned *Pontos de Cultura* Célio Turino's pioneering arts programme in Brazil in the early 2000s (Turino, 2013).<sup>19</sup> This programme attempted to upend hierarchical arts funding structures by giving agency to communities themselves to set their own agendas. In the foreword to *The Point of Culture*, the English language edition of the book which documents the programme, Andrew Barnett<sup>20</sup> explains the philosophy which underpinned it: '[R]ather than set agendas, it supported and developed what existed already in communities based on appreciation of its abundance and richness' (Barnett 2013, 6). In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Linda Tuhiwai Smith details the myriad ways in which indigenous peoples are beginning 'to fight back against the invasion of their communities by academic, corporate and populist researchers [and] to think about, and carry out their

own research'. She demands that all projects at the outset ask the following questions: 'Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed the questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?' (Smith 1999/2012, 43, 10) This critique has had a significant influence on approaches to research in the arts and humanities operating in international contexts. For example, The Global Research Network on Parliaments and People funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Global Challenges Research Fund empowered communities to conduct their own research.<sup>21</sup> Still, it has yet to be uniformly applied to research being conducted within the UK.

One of the contributing factors to this situation is the way the UK's current funding structures sustain and even reinforce a hierarchy of what constitutes knowledge production. As the project moved further away from its original aims I must confess to having felt a certain nervousness as I was aware that a community arts festival would not have been funded had it been listed as an outcome in the original proposal. Whereas seminars, symposia, workshops led by academic researchers, and articles like this one are deemed by the funding bodies to produce new knowledge, a festival organised and run by the community itself is not. But as is evident in David Fenton's film, it did produce new knowledge, and this was shared across the community. The festival has also left a legacy and had an impact on local arts policy which I will elaborate later but it is interesting to note that all these follow-up activities are being funded by the local authorities and Arts Council England who clearly see them as enhancing knowledge and understanding, widening participation and adding value to people's lives. This is paradoxical given the AHRC's current emphasis on impact which the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2029 defines 'as a change, benefit, or effect on society, culture, the economy, health, the environment, public policy or services, or quality of life, beyond academia.' (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/> accessed 26/8/2024) What is not acknowledged is that, given the right circumstances and resources, communities could be empowered to effect these changes themselves.

## Going forward

As a result of the vacuum created by COVID-19, local partners and participants, as experts in the field, were empowered to guide the direction and content of this AHRC network research project. This resulted in new methods of enquiry that were inclusive and embedded in practice. As evidenced in Fenton's film, by participating in a range of self-selected performance and arts based activities, members of the multi-ethnic community of Southall, better understood their diverse cultural heritage, in the words of Appadurai, 'as a realm of differences, contrasts, and comparisons' (1996, 12). Most importantly the research was owned by these communities and served their interests. To reiterate Kouritzin and Nakagawa, non-extractive research requires that 'the *process* of research must be as validating, endorsing, and important as the product of research.'

Recent evidence suggests that the AHRC is attempting to move its funding model in this direction. The 'AHRC's theory of change' published in December 2022 is described on their website as 'an important new key component of AHRC's strategy. It is a roadmap

which takes us through the steps that we need to take in order to achieve our council's vision.' (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/ahrcs-theory-of-change/> Accessed 2/2/2023). The roadmap reads well, but major practical and philosophical shifts are required to transform an arts and humanities research model, based on the knowledge and expertise of the researchers, to one which acknowledges the expertise of participants to effect change in their own lives, on their own terms. As part of their strategy, the AHRC propose to offer 'a wider range of research formats and provide greater flexibility for research ideas.' Their network grants are being incorporated into what they term 'Curiosity Awards'. Curiosity is defined as 'an eager wish to know or learn about something.'<sup>22</sup> The term implies a certain humility on the part of the researchers, the opening up of dialogue and a willingness to listen. The challenge to the research council to achieve a more process-driven research model means relinquishing control of pre-determined research outcomes, it means researchers being led and taking the time to listen and learn. Crucially, it means shifting from an outcome-orientated model to more open structures that focus on process. Network grants were supposed to open up these possibilities, but their limited time frames necessitated short-termism with no space to build long-term relationships and trust. They were also too often reliant on the unpaid labour of volunteers. It is not enough to offer participants 'a free lunch'; the value of their labour in the research process needs to be recognised and negotiated from the start in terms of reciprocity (mutual benefits), but also the remuneration participants can expect for the giving of their time. While Curiosity Awards remain outcome and impact-orientated with the criteria for assessment similar to that of the network grants with limited attention paid to process beyond the requirement of 'a clearly written and defined methodology' (<https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/ahrc-responsive-mode-curiosity-award-round-three/> Accessed 27/8/2024) it is, as yet, difficult to see how the Theory of Change is actually being implemented in practice.

## Conclusion

In the UK, paradoxically, by diverging from the course set out in the original proposal, we moved closer in many ways to some of the key aims of the original call 'to explore the role that cultural heritage can play in inclusive and sustainable economic growth as well as social cohesion.' As I write, the network still operates on social media to exchange information and ideas (<https://msorya2.wixsite.com/website>). The festival's success has enabled the Southall Community Alliance to secure funding from Ealing Council and elsewhere for further arts-based activities. Sorya has been employed by the Southall Alliance to continue workshops with elderly residents, encouraging them to record their stories of departure and arrival in the UK. In November 2022, Gunnersbury Park Museum was awarded National Portfolio status by Arts Council England<sup>23</sup> and as a result will receive £129,500 per annum for the next three years. The involvement of the museum in the network activities and the *Southall Ever After Festival* was cited as evidence in a successful bid to fund an exhibition of the Dennis Morris archives<sup>24</sup> this includes an outreach program, taking the Dennis Morris collection to local community groups. Jennal Amin confirmed that the value of taking collections to the community, rather than expecting the community to come to the museum, especially a museum with an imposing neo-classical façade like Gunnersbury with its associations with white British

history and colonialism, was a direct result of the response to the collection during the festival.

People were amazed to see their history represented; the fact that someone had bothered to take photographs of their lives was very affirmative for them and added value to their experiences. A lot of people said thank you for sharing these photographs with us. (Interview with the author, March 2023)

According to Amin, the fact that it was a family event added value in how it stimulated inter-generational discussions. The museum's presence at the festival also brought recognition of its existence as a resource to a broader and more diverse constituency. As a result, the Museum has now built into its policy a commitment to widen its outreach activities to incorporate more diverse and underrepresented groups.

The success of this network research project in Southall and its environs has to be set against its failure to engage with Indian partners beyond the very minimum level. It failed comprehensively in India predominantly because of COVID-19 and the dire situation that gave rise to across the sub-continent. By December 2021, Hyderabad still had no word from the ICHR about their funding, the end of that month was the official end of the renegotiated timeline in the UK. As a way of tying the project up and bringing Hyderabad in some small way into the research process we organized an international practice exchange between students at Wimbledon and students from the Department of Theatre Arts, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication at the University of Hyderabad. This was a two-day online movement workshop, sharing training methods and making work together. The international makeup of the student cohort, with many students far from their homes, has created small diasporic communities in both institutions. Facilitated jointly by staff from Wimbledon and Hyderabad, students explored their personal journeys through movement, reflecting on notions of home, cultural heritage displacement and assimilation. It was a small gesture towards what might have been possible together in actual space, and the potential of this transnational research network, had COVID not struck. On the other hand if it wasn't for the rupture of the pandemic, the lessons learned about research and community engagement in the UK would not have been so profound and the positive effects and longevity of the network so assured.

## Notes

1. Cultural Heritage and Representation (Mis): readings between India and the Indian Diaspora. Research Networking AH/T005084/1
2. See Ananthakrishnan, B. and Collins J. 2019. 'Against a hierarchy of expressive means; arguments for new pedagogies in performer education in India and the UK.' *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 39 (2): PPP.
3. <http://www.southallcommunityalliance.org/>
4. From the 1950s Southall's local factories and proximity to Heathrow Airport attracted large numbers of Asian immigrants; the town eventually became home to the largest Punjabi community outside the Indian subcontinent and is today a major centre of South Asian culture, having gained the nickname *Little India*. This multi faith community is home to the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, one of the largest Sikh Temples outside India, and Southall also houses, two Hindu temples, over five mosques as well as a number of Christian churches of different denominations.

5. <https://britishonlinearchives.com> 45-years-the-southall-race-riots
6. Sheila Ghelani is an artist of Indian/English mixed heritage, whose solo and collaborative performances, social art works, installations, texts and videos seek to illuminate and make visible the connections between race, ecology, science, history and the present day. <https://www.sheilaghelani.co.uk/>
7. <https://davidjackfenton.com/>
8. For a full account of the workshops and some of the arts based activities that Sorya continued through lockdown online and subsequent activities instigated by the project see, <https://msorya2.wixsite.com/website>.
9. Wolf Fields Urban Nature Reserve is supported by A Rocha UK a charitable organisation registered in England and Wales committed to sustainability and education. Wolf Fields is a local community resource on the edge of Southall that sustains an orchard, a wild garden and vegetable beds. It has strong links with local schools and runs arts and craft-based activities for children and young adults as well as workshops on conservation. <https://www.arocha.org/en/>
10. Wolf Fields activities October 2020 <https://msorya2.wixsite.com/website>.
11. [palatinedevaward-rifkin-2010-ethics.pdf](#)
12. In the heart of Gunnersbury Park the museum committed to serving its diverse local community as well as engaging with collections of national and international significance. It is part of the Gunnersbury Estate, a non-for-profit community interest company with a remit to advance education through the operation and development of the Gunnersbury Park Museum and the preservation, conservation and interpretation of the Gunnersbury Park Museum collections, and the historical buildings and landscape within Gunnersbury Park. <https://www.visitgunnersbury.org/>.
13. Anand Chhabra of Black Country Visual Arts was invited to run one of the workshops and gave invaluable guidance to the participants: <https://www.bcva.info/>.
14. <https://punjabitheatreacademy.com/>.
15. The Lost Stories Collective set up by Tanushka Karad and Kriti Agarwal focuses on 'collecting curating and displaying' oral histories. [https://www.instagram.com/the\\_lost\\_stories\\_collective/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/the_lost_stories_collective/?hl=en). They were introduced to our project by Gunnersbury Park Museum.
16. The Depot in Acton has one of the most comprehensive and important records of urban transport anywhere in the world. The Depot's main purpose is to act as a working museum store. Curators and volunteers work to catalogue and conserve objects in order to preserve LT heritage for future generations. Artefacts, posters, photographs, newspaper articles and uniforms were on display as part of the festival demonstrating the links between London Transport and the community of Southall past and present. <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/visit/museum-depot>
17. This street photography project was run jointly by Mahenderpal Sorya and Satvinder Sehbey over two Saturdays in the festival. Sehbey was part of the original artistic team engaged to run music workshops with elderly residents. After the success of the Gunnersbury Museum project *Being South Asian* the team wanted to widen access to photography workshops to reflect the diverse demographic of Southall.
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPCOaBDNXZM&t=23s>.
19. Célio Turino, Secretary of Cultural Citizenship at the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, 2004–2010.
20. Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, UK Branch.
21. <https://grnpp.org/partners-research/>.
22. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/curiosity>. Accessed 13 April 2023.
23. National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) are chosen by Arts Council England based on their ability to deliver ACE's 'let's create' strategy and engage communities and individuals in arts, culture and heritage.
24. <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/england-london-south-delegated-decisions-june-2023>.

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