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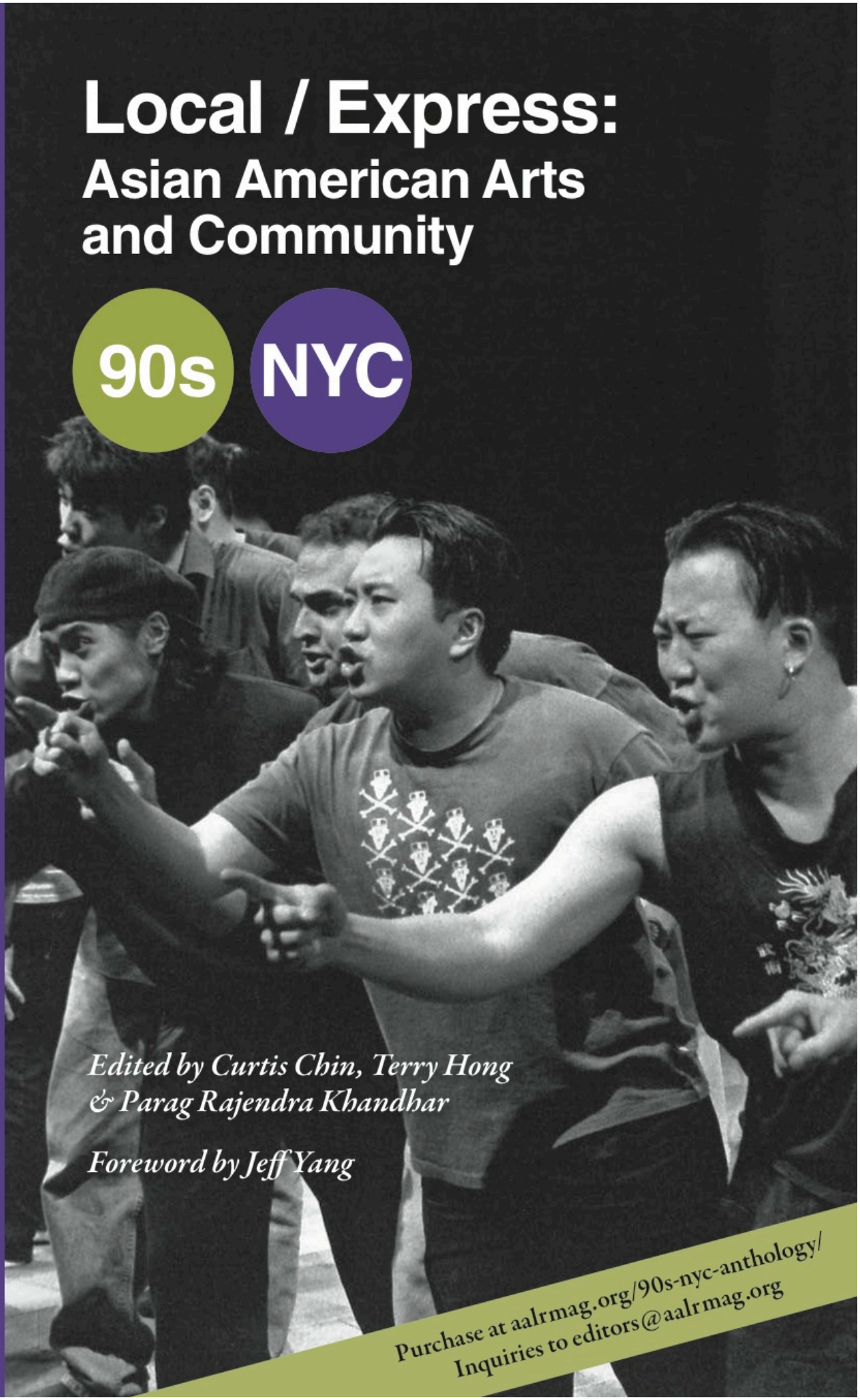

Edited by Curtis Chin, Terry Hong & Parag Rajendra Khandhar

Foreword by Jeff Yang

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The Asian American Literary Review 2013

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The City That Never Sleeps

Empire City

Crafting Community: South Asian American Arts and Activism in 1990s New York City

Anantha Sudhakar

This interview brings into conversation some of the key artists, activists, and academics who helped shape a new South Asian American cultural movement in New York City during the 1990s. Because several of us live in different cities, this interview was conducted virtually and asynchronously, using a shared Google Doc and a collaborative process of editing and revision. The participants—Jaishri Abichandani, Vivek Bald, Gayatri Gopinath, Madhulika Khandelwal, Rekha Malhotra, and Naeem Mohaiemen—responded to interview questions on their own time, and periodically revisited the document to expand upon their reflections or comment on others' answers. What emerged is an anecdotal history that captures both the intentional and unexpected ways in which community is formed, challenged and sustained.

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Anantha Sudhakar: What brought you to New York City in the 1990s? When and how did you first get involved with South Asian American community and/or arts organizations?

Madhulika Khandelwal: I arrived in New York in the 1980s and started working as a researcher at the Asian/American Center of Queens College. Around 1990, I was completing my doctoral dissertation on the Indian immigrant community, conducting oral history interviews with Indian immigrants, and doing fieldwork in the NYC area with a focus on Queens. I selected Queens as my primary focus, and the dissertation topic itself, because I was appalled at the lack of community research

on the Indian immigrants in the U.S. Stereotypes of an "all-successful," upwardly mobile immigrant were everywhere and, in my preliminary research, I found a total lack of attention to the socio-economic and political issues facing the community. In Queens, I saw an Indian population (the term "South Asian" was not in much use then, and was to emerge later, albeit rapidly, in the early 1990s) stratified by class and whose interests were not represented by nationalistic Indian immigrant leaders (predominantly men). At that time, I was a professor of history at University of Delhi in India, on leave to pursue advanced courses as an international student in the U.S., but the need for this research made me stay on in the U.S. to complete this work.

In these early years, progressive South Asian organizing had barely begun. As part of my community outreach, I located a handful of women's organizations, like the Association of Indian Women in America (AIWA) and Manavi, a newly-founded women's rights organization in New Jersey. I recall meeting Mallika Dutt at her presentation on the international trafficking of women, and was excited to know that she, along with some other friends, was thinking of starting a New York-based anti-domestic violence organization for South Asian Women, Sakhi.

Rekha Malhotra: My family moved to New York in 1976. First to Bushwick, then to Jersey City, then Flushing, then Westbury, Long Island. In the 1990s, I was a student at Queens College. My first involvement in organizing was an internship at Sakhi in 1992. My mother took a newsletter from them at a Desi community event in Long Island (not a frequent thing in those days). She noticed the internship call and thought I should apply. While I was at Sakhi, I think we supported the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) marching in the India Day Parade in 1992, but my memory is a little blurry.

The galvanizing moment for me in terms of organizing was going to the Kaushal Saran Civil Trial in Camden, New Jersey in 1993. Dr. Saran was part of the wave of violence that hit Jersey City starting in 1987. He was beaten and left for dead outside a fire station across from a street where many white youths hung out. Madhulika told me that folks from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) and Youth Against Racism (YAR) were trying to pack the court in support. I drove there with Madhulika and two others. At the Saran trial, I also met Rita Sethi and Ritu Sinha, who were about five years older than me. I remember being blown away that there were Desi women who looked different/

alternative and were civil rights lawyers. After the trial, I joined YAR (later renamed YAAR.)

Gayatri Gopinath: I moved back to New York after graduating from college in 1991. At the time a progressive South Asian community was only just beginning to come together in NYC. A number of us met through South Asian AIDS Action (SAAA), an organization focusing on HIV and AIDS in the South Asian community, spearheaded by Radhika Balakrishnan and Haresh Advani. (We held our meetings in Haresh's tiny East Village apartment; Vivek Bald was there too, I think.) The enormity of the epidemic in the subcontinent was just beginning to be grasped, and there was barely any conversation about how it was impacting South Asians in the U.S. It was through folks in SAAA that I first heard of the existence of a queer Desi organization in NYC, which was then named the South Asian Gay Association (SAGA). I'll never forget the day I screwed up the courage to walk into my first SAGA meeting at the LGBT Center on 13th Street: I was the only woman in a room full of mostly older, first-generation immigrant men. But they were hugely welcoming and resolved there and then to change their name to SALGA. SALGA really came together in the fight to march for the first time in the India Day Parade in 1992, and I, along with folks like David Kalal, Gita Reddy, and Anita Nayar, became really involved in that struggle.

Jaishri Abichandani: I moved to Corona, Queens, in 1984, to attend high school and then Queens College in Flushing at the same time as Rekha and Madhulika. During my time at Queens College, I was involved in the Indian club, feminist groups, and collaborated with art students and student activists on campus; however, there was little dialogue between those disparate entities when I graduated in 1991. It was in '93 at the India Day Parade that I came across women from Sakhi marching with other activists from YAAR. Like Rekha, I too met Rita Sethi and got involved with both organizations, volunteering at Sakhi and driving cross-country to do anti-racism workshops with YAAR.

The focus during the mid-nineties was much more on activism, with art marginally entering the dialogue. I can remember three instances where Sakhi held a women's film festival, performed a feminist Garba (dance) at the Diwali Festival at South Street Seaport and, finally, when Geeta Citygirl organized a benefit salon for Sakhi in the fall of '96. My own position through all this was as a photographer, documenting the amazing activity of inspiring feminists involved with Sakhi,

SALGA, and YAAR. After a visit to the diasporic arts festival Desh Pardesh in Toronto in 1996, I resolved to carve out a feminist space that would prioritize art, as the other organizations rightly pursued their social justice agendas, leaving art on the periphery. The visit to Toronto had allowed me to connect with a group of women who published *Diva: A Quarterly Journal on South Asian Women*, and I saw the possibilities of grassroots feminist organizing.

I called the first meeting of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC) on March 7th, 1997, after being in the community for four years, reaching women through word of mouth, at all the organizations mentioned above and by stopping them on the streets. The first meeting included Gayatri Gopinath, Tahira Naqvi, Sunita Viswanath, and ten other women across age, nationality, religion, sexuality, and class who unveiled the idea for the collective. Our second meeting was held at the Asian American Writers' Workshop (AAWW) on St. Mark's Place in the East Village—its basement was a nexus for community activity in the 1990s and provided us with free space to hold meetings. This meeting in April included a performance led by Tamina Davar that women participated in and enacted for the rest of the attendees. Within a few months, women got involved in an organizing capacity, and our first public event was "Wild Tongues," a festival for women of color at the Audre Lorde Workshop. It was at this event that artist Chitra Ganesh, DJ Ashu Rai, and many others were inspired to get involved with SAWCC. It's important to note that shortly thereafter, in 2000, Geeta Citygirl founded SALAAM! Theatre, which was active for many years, and Aroon Shivdasani founded The Indo-American Arts Council (IAAC), raising the amount of cultural production in our community. SAWCC, of course, has maintained itself as a democratic feminist collective, providing a unique space for women artists even amongst our peers.

Vivek Bald: I came to New York in 1989, when I was in my early 20s. I had spent the previous year as a researcher for an investigative documentary on police brutality in San Francisco, which gave me a sense of the power of documentary film and politically committed journalism. I arrived in New York to do a masters degree in international media, thinking that I might try to work as a journalist in India. But once I got to New York, I realized that I was much more connected to, and a product of, the diaspora. So I stayed in the city, started finding crew work on independent

films, and began working on my own first documentary, *Taxi-vala/Auto-biography* (1994), using whatever equipment I could get my hands on.

My political ideas and commitments, my sense of community, and my approach to media and technology had been influenced by being part of a punk/post-punk scene in Santa Cruz and the Bay Area in the 1980s. But there was always something missing in the California punk/post-punk circles that I was part of—my "South Asian-ness" if you want to call it that was always either on the side or was romanticized/exoticized. So coming to New York was transformative—it was the first time that I was part of a South Asian community that was so large and diverse in terms of class, generation, regional origins, etc. And it was the first time that I found a group of other people of South Asian descent—second generation, first generation, and "1.5"—who were roughly my age and shared a similar commitment to a politics that was based in an understanding of the legacies of British colonialism in South Asia, the workings of racism and xenophobia in the U.S., and the different forms of power and exclusion at work within South Asian communities themselves, especially along lines of gender, sexuality, class, and national/religious identity.

What was remarkable about the years between, say, 1992 and 1997, was the number of South Asian political and cultural organizations that were being founded and taking shape—and the way in which, despite various differences in commitments, ideas, and focus, they were actually quite interwoven. A lot of people were members of multiple organizations or moved in and out of different organizations over time, and people from different organizations went to each others' events.

The first group that I connected with was South Asian AIDS Action which, as Gayatri mentioned, included folks like David Kalal, Radhika Balakrishnan, Gita Reddy, and Anita Nayar. I also remember going to the first India Day Parade in which SALGA marched—Indu Krishnan and I were there with video cameras filming everything. While I was working on Taxi-vala, I got involved with the Lease Drivers Coalition (LDC), a project of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV) organized by Mini Liu, Debi Ray Chaudhury, and Anuradha Advani. I became friends with Saleem Osman, who was a driver and a former lawyer from Pakistan, and when he became LDC's lead organizer, I worked for a time as his assistant, often accompanying taxi drivers to court when they were fighting off "resisting arrest" charges stemming from incidents in which they had been harassed or beaten by the police. I think I first met Rekha at a YAAR meeting in the upstairs

seating area at Curry in a Hurry on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, and we first started talking when she turned up to provide a sound system for a meeting of taxi drivers at a Pakistani restaurant in Brooklyn. Then she took part in a video production workshop that I did at CAAAV. By the time we started Mutiny, the monthly club night we co-produced from 1997-2003, we knew so many people from all the different South Asian community-based organizations that they became our first core audience.

Naeem Mohaiemen: I entered New York's South Asian activist space through *SAMAR: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection*. Alam Khorshed ("Aleya's Odyssey," *Samar*, #1, 1992), Anu Muhammad ("Religion, Fundamentalism and Politics in Bangladesh," *Samar*, #2, 1993), Hasan Ferdous ("Mamun, the Portrait Man," *Samar*, #4, 1994), and others had already been writing about Bangladesh issues, and the magazine wanted a Bangladeshi to be a full-time member of the editorial collective, so I was actively recruited. There was an intense interview process by the entire collective, and at one point S. Shankar asked me what my views were on Cuba. I remember replying that I thought the initial vision was justice, but Castro had transformed into a "problematic figure" over time. Later, when I was going home, I remember thinking that Cuba might have been a crucial exam question, and I had wobbled. But it must have been all right, because a few days later I was invited to join and started working from Issue #7.

I was recently browsing the old *SAMAR* archives, which the South Asian American Digital Archive (www.saadigitalarchive.org/search/results/taxonomy%3A565) has partially restored, and looking at Issue #8 (1997) reminded me that one of my tasks for that issue had been to edit Brian Larkin's "Bollywood comes to Nigeria." Time goes by, Brian was a Ph.D. student at NYU at that time—now he's one of my professors in the Ph.D. program in Anthropology at Columbia. You look through the pages of *SAMAR*, and there are traces of so many names who were, at that time, just starting their journey through New York. Hasan Ferdous is a senior officer at the UN, Alam Khorshed returned to Bangladesh and runs a cultural organization (Bishaud Bangla) in Chittagong, Dina Siddiqi is a visiting professor at BRAC University in Dhaka, Kamal Quadir is now a mobile money company CEO in Bangladesh, David Bergman is an investigative reporter with the New Age in Dhaka, Chaumtoli Huq is a senior lawyer in New York—and that's only some of the Bangladesh-linked names. *SAMAR*'s table of contents runs through

many members of New York's desi intellectual space from the 1990s—Sujani Reddy, Manu Vimalassery, Saba Waheed, Tejaswini Ganti, Chaiti Sen, Sarah Hussain, Sheetal Majithia, Amit Rai, Ali and Raza Mir, Nauman Naqvi, Vijay Prashad, Biju Matthew, Arvind Rajagopal, Purvi Shah, Sudipto Chatterjee, Linta Varghese, and many others.

AS: From SAKHI, *SAMAR*, and Youth Solidarity Summer to Mutiny, Basement Bhangra, and the South Asian Women's Creative Collective, many of you founded or worked with arts and community organizations/events that had their start in the 1990s. Why do you think that decade (roughly, from 1990-2001) was such an incredible period of innovation for South Asian American arts and social justice?

RM: I think it was in part because many of us who had an interest in social justice and the arts were coming of age in the 1990s. For me, my engagement was also a response to the violence against South Asians in Jersey City. Having spent kindergarten to 4th grade in Flushing, I was subject to frequent racial abuse. But in the 1990s, I found a community of folks who also wanted to create something for like-minded folks. This cannot be understated for me. I feel like I very much fell into creating Basement Bhangra and then, with Vivek, Mutiny. There was no grand plan—just the desire to create these spaces.

There was also a desire to counter the representations of community that were portrayed in *India Abroad*. Spelling bee winners. Model minority poster children, which I was not. I was also young and had a lot of energy to do these kinds of things. And after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Gujarat in 1992, I was especially outraged at Hindu fundamentalism and North Indian hegemony in general.

GG: I remember the early to mid 1990s (around 1990-1995) as an incredibly vibrant moment for queer of color activism and artistic production generally. This was the time when queers of color were really coming together as a powerful, transformative force in NYC, culminating in the formation of the Audre Lorde Project in 1994. As SALGA members, we would be organizing and collaborating with folks from Gay Men of African Descent, Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, Kilawin Kolektibo, Gay Asian/Pacific Islander Men of NY, and other queer of color groups. So I don't think we can see the emergence of a vibrant South Asian arts/activist scene as separate from what was going on within the queer of color community more broadly.

JA: Well, I think there was finally a critical mass of South Asians in NYC who were young, ambitious, energetic, progressive-minded, and the activism of the Clinton era really helped us galvanize our energy into movements that have withstood changing landscapes and challenges. We had access to structures that older Asian American communities had built, including AALDEF, Asian Americans For Equality (AAFE), and AAWW.

VB: I think a lot had to do with historical circumstances. By the 1990s, as others have mentioned, the first big wave of children of post-1965 immigrants was coming of age—reaching a certain kind of cultural and political critical mass. At the same time, there were groups of more recently arrived working class immigrants—taxi drivers, domestic workers—who were reaching their own critical mass and beginning to engage in different forms of organizing. And there was a group of folks who had come to the U.S. in their 20s or 30s, often as graduate students—people like Madhulika, Anannya Bhattacharjee, Mallika Dutt, Biju Mathew, Vijay Prashad, Amitava Kumar, to name just a few—who brought a politics that was grounded in ongoing struggles on the subcontinent, but who were simultaneously developing a set of political commitments in the U.S. Members of all of those groups began to intersect, form friendships, and build together, both politically and culturally. And I think what Rekha says is absolutely right: a lot of us created organizations or cultural spaces because they just didn't exist and there was so clearly a need for them.

This also meant that we were often drawing on our experiences in other, non-South Asian-specific contexts. Whether we came to South Asian American community work via Asian American or broader of-color organizations or labor organizing or queer activism or through politicized music scenes like hip-hop or punk, we were bringing those experiences into the South Asian American spaces and organizations that we were creating. Politically, the tyranny of Giuliani's first term galvanized all kinds of different groups. One of the least remembered moments from that time was a protest on April 25, 1995 in which something like a dozen different organizations, from AIDS activists to CUNY students to homeless groups to anti-police brutality activists, organized in secret for weeks and staged an action in which they shut down almost every bridge and tunnel leading in and out of lower and midtown Manhattan. Two organizations worked together on each bridge or tunnel; CAAAV, where I was working at the time, teamed up with the Center for Puerto Rican Rights, an organization that was similarly focused on policing and

police violence, and staged a sit-down strike that blocked the Canal Street entry to the Manhattan Bridge; I was one of the legal observers and I remember Anannya Bhattacharjee was right in the middle of the first row of protesters sitting on the road and Amitava Kumar was there taking photographs. So this is all to say that there were a lot going on and a lot of different factors that came together in this period.

NM: When I joined *SAMAR*, the editorial collective was Anannya Bhattacharjee, Aniruddha Das, Satinder Jawanda, Chandana Mathur, Venantius Pinto, and S. Shankar. In those early days (1996-1997), our level of cohesion, and willingness to work together intensely on one magazine issue for days on end, is something that could not easily be replicated today. We have so many more distractions in our lives, and in some ways I think that level of intensity is now anathema to a more regularized, professionalized activist environment (or maybe I am being nostalgic, not sure).

When I think of the pressing issues, and the logistics of activism in the 1990s, it's a time tunnel. There was so much labor involved in simply getting a few hundred copies to the post office to mail to subscribers, or to take boxes to an event where we would end up selling five copies, at most. There was a lot of effort to do things that are automated today—so much of contemporary activist lives are now digital. We're more likely to change our Facebook profile picture for marriage equality than to march somewhere. Now I'm not being nostalgic about a certain analog-only way of doing activism. When we would set up tables at events, we might end up talking to ten people—five would buy the magazine, and two would give us their phone number and say they wanted to volunteer. In contrast to that, the ability to reach millions today, with one email or web page, is of course a huge advantage, especially for small activist organizations. But we should also accept that bonds between activists get transformed when so much work shifts from face to face to desktop/digital.

Technology was both a net positive and a partial negative for us. I remember a meeting where I proposed that we open a "mailing list" and an "HTML page" for *SAMAR*. Oh, the frowns I got! In the early days of HTML, you had to open a fresh page in Text Edit and actually type in the code, line by line. When I think about it now, everything was so archaic and slow. But in the end, it was that same internet that doomed the print edition of *SAMAR*. That transition happened after the 1990s editorial collective made way for the next generation of editors. At some point, they

decided to move to online-only, which probably made sense from a cost and labor point of view; but once *SAMAR* went online it became irrelevant somehow, because there was so much distraction in that space.

I was recently remembering a long meeting that we held at Chandana's apartment one evening in 1998. We were debating whether to have only the Urdu version of a poem on the cover of issue #9. It was our longest editorial debate on one subject. Our designer and artist Venantius Pinto considered it a red line—having multiple languages would break the cover design. Somebody else argued that we shouldn't stop with Hindi, English, Urdu, etc.—what about South Indian languages? Somebody else argued that if we featured Urdu this time, then every single issue would have to have deshi language translated into many languages. We talked about the issue of Urdu as a hegemonic force within the pre-1971 debates in East Bengal/Pakistan. In the end, the multi-language argument carried the day. Then the meeting continued for another three hours. That was a different level of intense engagement, in a slowed-down time. You debated these issues into the late hours until you would finally reach consensus.

AS: Your responses have touched on the ways that New York's South Asian American community in the 1990s was characterized by overlaps and collaborations between creative and political efforts. Could you discuss some of these intersections between culture and politics, and which ones impacted you the most, either as a participant or observer?

RM: For me, monthly events like Basement Bhangra and Mutiny were, in themselves, political acts. At Basement Bhangra, for a while, I also did a series called *Your Attention Please* where we partnered with community organizations and I curated a musical artist for the early part of the night. A large percentage of the proceeds of that part of the night went to the community organizations we partnered with, like Sakhi, South Asians Against Police Brutality, and others. At Mutiny, we did a fundraiser with Pandit-G for the Satpal Ram Campaign. Personally, I was very involved in SAWCC in the beginning. As a DJ, I also did fundraisers for many of these organizations and for Youth Solidarity Summer.

VB: Mutiny really got me to think a lot about what constituted the "political" aspects or effects of music spaces. As Rekha mentioned, there were the very direct ways in which we were using particular nights as fundraisers for particular issues

or campaigns. In addition, Mutiny was always a space in which members of different progressive South Asian organizations were flyering for different events and campaigns and, for that matter, meeting to hang out, which was something important in itself, especially in the days after September 11th. Rekha and I also worked to make sure the club remained queer friendly and a safe space for women.

The music we were playing was often infused with explicitly political lyrics (I still remember a packed room at 1 am bouncing in unison to the lyrics from "Naxalite" by Asian Dub Foundation—"we have taken the power/and the land is ours"—or dancing to the drum 'n bass remix of Saul Williams's version of "Not In Our Name—Pledge of Resistance"). On a broader level I'd like to think that the "politics" of Mutiny had to do with the kinds of communities and individual transformations it fostered for young people who came to the space over the course of months and years. This might be a grand idea, and it is impossible to quantify, but I've come to think that the power of culture and cultural spaces has to do with the ways in which they change us as individuals, as people in community with one another, and as political actors in the world.

GG: When I think of the intersection of culture and politics, I immediately think of the work of a group like SLAAAP! (Sexually Liberated Asian Artist Activist People), which was made up of arts activists like Javid Syed, Debi Ray Chaudhuri, and Chitra Ganesh. They made incredibly vibrant and imaginative interventions into the public sphere with humorous and brilliant poster campaigns that tackled everything from the racism of the mainstream white gay community to the homophobia we face within communities of color. But I also think of the parties and club spaces that SALGA would create in the early days, which is a tradition that Sholay carries on today with its dance parties: this is where culture and politics meet in pleasurable and meaningful ways. This is also what Javid Syed and I were trying to get at when we created our clip show "Desi Dykes and Divas: Queer Representation in Popular Indian Cinema" for NYC's New Festival on International Gay and Lesbian Film and Video in 1997. We wanted to think critically about how queer folks in both the subcontinent and the diaspora mine popular Indian cinema for their own purposes: another way in which culture and politics are inextricable in queer lives.

MK: When remembering the 1990s, particularly the early 1990s (which was clearly distinct from the second half of the 1990s), it is useful to think in terms of "locales" of South Asian advocacy and organizing. To me, with Sakhi, the emergence of

new South Asian and women's leadership was palpable. I recall a number of youth, especially students I would meet at various universities, wanting to come to NYC to volunteer at progressive organizations because they had heard that NYC was where the South Asian community was most active! There were a number of artists and writers among them; and, as others have mentioned, both U.S.-reared and progressives who had come to NYC from South Asia or other parts of the world as adults. While some attended meetings of the handful of South Asian organizations that existed, others started new organizations on their own. As someone situated in Queens, and observing these trends carefully, the emergence of a new progressive leadership was evident—taking up "new" issues and presenting "new" identities which, for most of the time, ran parallel to existing leaders in the community. So to me, the 1990s marked a decade of departure, forging a new South Asian leadership which focused on progressive issues and transcended boundaries of nations, religions, regionalism, etc.

JA: I'd like to mention here that it wasn't all roses. There were several points of tension and fragmentation among the organizations within the community—between SALGA and Sakhi, Sakhi and Worker's Awaaz—conflicts that were public and even made it into the Village Voice. However, one moment of unity comes to mind. South Asian activist groups had been denied the right to march in the India Day Parade for several years. So SALGA, Sakhi, and SAWCC, amongst other groups, came together each year as the South Asian Progressive Task Force to protest the parade. After a few years, I suggested we stop protesting and instead simply carve out a space in Madison Square Park where the parade ended to gather en masse, and make ourselves visible with banners and streamers to those who would join us. That year—I believe it was '99—we held "Desi Dhamaka" (named by Atif Toor, then with SALGA, now with Sholay Productions) in the park, meeting and recruiting several new members for all our organizations by having an inviting presence at the India Day festivities.

AS: There were also strong ties between South Asian progressive circles in New York and those on the subcontinent, as well as those in other diasporic centers like London and Toronto, which some of you have mentioned. How did your artistic and/or political practice connect to activism in South Asia and its wider diasporas?

RM: Desh Pardesh, the annual Toronto-based desi arts festival, was really important to me and my peers. I drove there a few years in a row, forging and strengthening friendships on the drive. It was also so amazing to see such a range of South Asian art and, that too, with a queer focus in mind. I DJ'ed at Desh a few times and spoke on a panel there.

London and the UK were also very important to me as sources for music. The impetus for the Mutiny club night was to raise money for a film Vivek was doing on the UK's Asian Underground scene, but also to share the music he was amassing from there. A lot of the featured content at Desh was from UK film makers, as well.

GG: I was incredibly influenced by the British Asian arts and activist scene: they just seemed way ahead of what was going on in NYC within the South Asian community in the late 1980s. I remember being amazed by Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1985: it still remains a touchstone text for me, as does Pratibha Parmar's 1991 documentary *Khush*. And I was blown away the first time I saw Gurinder Chadha's documentary about the British Bhangra music scene, *I'm British But...* at the Asian American International Film Festival in NYC in 1990.

I began graduate school a few years later; I knew I wanted to explore South Asian diasporic expressive culture, and Gurinder's film was always at the back of my mind. I wanted to write about diaspora, gender, and popular culture, which is how I first met Rekha in 1993. I ended up organizing a panel with her [as a speaker] at the 1994 Desh Pardesh conference in Toronto. Desh was an incredible space: a showcase for brilliant queer South Asian diasporic art and activist scholarship; a crew of us queer Desis from NYC would take a road trip to Toronto every year to participate in it. It was the first time I met artists and writers like Shani Mootoo, Ian Rashid, and Shyam Selvadurai, all of whom I ended up writing about in my own work.

JA: At that time I was a photographer heavily influenced by the Black and Asian movement in London and what was happening in Toronto vis a vis Desh Pardesh. It seemed imperative that we have a dedicated art space in New York where we had critical mass. Without knowing what to call it, I was engaged in social practice in the arts, defining and creating critical spaces for other voices to be heard, all the while finding photography to be limiting as a personal practice.

My practice changed in the decade to follow, departing from documenting a community to making work that spoke to my individual concerns—ironically, it happened in London, where I set up SAWCC's sister collective in 2004 while

studying for my masters degree. I am still involved with both collectives, organizing events and exhibitions in London and New York. We now have a stronger community in New York than in London, where many initiatives such as the African and Asian Visual Arts Archives (AAVA) were dissolved due to lack of funding. Desh Pardesh saw the same fate. SAWCC has survived as we rely little on outside funding, staying lean and sharing resources with other arts organizations and spaces as much as possible.

VB: This goes back to what we were discussing about the formation of South Asian American spaces and organizations in 1990s New York. Although we didn't have these organizations yet in New York and felt compelled to create them, I think pretty much everyone I knew was looking at, and inspired by, what was going on in Britain and Canada. At the time, each of those places had a larger and slightly older second generation that had already come to a critical mass, that was already politically organized and active and producing new forms of diasporic culture.

I remember I was at the same screening of Gurinder Chadha's *I'm British But...* that Gayatri attended in NYC and was similarly blown away by its weaving together of community history, anti-racist politics, and bhangra music. I had already started checking out some of the non-bhangra British Asian groups that were active in different kinds of music and activism at that time—Fun^Da^Mental, Kaliphz, Voodoo Queens, Hustlers HC, ADF—and seeing I'm British But... was what spurred me on to make the Mutiny documentary, focusing on those groups. I remember that my mother was visiting Britain around that time and I asked her to bring me Fun^Da^Mental's first two or three singles—I still have the image in my head of this sixty-something year old Punjabi woman in a sari or salwaar kameez walking in and out of record shops in Soho in London asking for the "Countryman/ Tribal Revolution" 12 inch. I also remember listening to those tracks in a car full of folks from South Asian AIDS Action on our way to Toronto for Desh Pardesh. Desh was an incredibly nurturing and inspiring space. For me personally, it allowed me to imagine myself as a filmmaker—it was the first festival to invite me to show my work, when *Taxi-vala* was still just a very rough rough-cut. To have an audience that understood the importance of the story I was trying to tell and was willing to engage with it and take it seriously was really important for me.

When I started working on the Mutiny documentary, I became immersed both in what was happening with British Asians at the time, in the mid- to late-1990s, and

what had happened there in the previous decades in the Thatcher years, when the second generation was dealing with the rise of the far right and rampant xenophobia and racial violence. I used to describe Mutiny—both the documentary and the club night—as a project of "diasporic cross-pollination." It may have been presumptuous of me at the time, but I wanted to show South Asian audiences in the U.S. something of the political and cultural experiences of our counterpart generation in Britain, in part to make issues of race and class more prominent in how we talked about and understood our South Asian-ness in the U.S.

AS: How do you define and understand community? How is art important to this understanding?

RM: This one is hard. It changes for me, as does my relationship to identity. Like identity, I feel like I inhabit several communities. The desi arts/social justice community of the 1990s was a very important one—SAWCC, in particular, because it brought together such a diverse (in terms of art practice) range of women artists. I met many of my close friends to this day through that space. So, to attempt to define "community": it's a group of people with shared politics, histories, and artistic leanings.

But I am not saying that as an encompassing sweeping statement. There were tensions aplenty in these community spaces. One major tension I felt was that, though there is a degree of shared history, our class background and access to privilege varied. So as much as community can be a unifying word, it is also subject to power struggles, sexism, racism, and other issues of intersectionality. "Community" can sometimes be substituted for "clique."

VB: It is true—the idea of "community" is complex and contradictory. I think in the 1990s a lot of us were reacting to the very narrow, exclusionary, and bigoted ways in which the concept of "community" was being mobilized by the more powerful actors within each South Asian population – for example, by the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA), which ran the India Day Parade. The adoption of the term "South Asian" was itself an act meant to counter these narrow definitions; as ubiquitous as the term is today, it had a very particular oppositional political inflection in the early to mid-nineties.

The various South Asian organizations and spaces that we created in those days may have constituted a kind of alternative community—or series of communities,

really—but they were never free from the same problems of inclusion and exclusion, friction, conflict, and difference in terms of issues like class, gender, sexuality that plagued mainstream definitions of community. What I'd like to think set the groups we formed apart was that, in their best moments, they were trying to work through those differences and tensions and that South Asian-ness was changing, evolving, and expanding as part of that process of day-to-day negotiation.

JA: I define my community as an active, powerfully changing amorphous group of writers, artists, activists, academics, intellectuals, makers, feminists—those who are committed to social change through thought and action. Art has brought me to people and institutions with whom I thought I had nothing in common for exchanges that have left everyone enriched.

SA: How do you see 1990s arts activism connecting to post-9/11 arts activism? Are there points of discontinuity?

RM: It was and is totally connected. Nine days after 9/11 we were slated to do Basement Bhangra. We had to decide whether to open or not. Along with the club owner, we decided it was necessary to open to continue to provide that community space. On the one-year anniversary of 9/11, the Your Attention Please night was focused on post-9/11 efforts. Mutiny was also supposed to happen on September 13, 2001, but the city was still shut down. I know in a note to my list for the 9/20 Basement Bhangra event, I encouraged people to give to AALDEF. I know there were more collaborative efforts, but the details escape me.

NM: Artist collectives were a way by which many of us entered this space. In the period between 2004 and 2006, there was a lot of interest and writing about the new generation of artist collectives. Taking up the example of *Group Material* in the 1980s, or General Idea from 1969 onward, and transmitting to newer projects: *Bernadette Corporation*, *Temporary Services*, *Red 76*. We (*Visible Collective*, a coalition of artists and activists working on hyphenated ways of being) were one of the groups within that configuration. This was a time when the arts was coming under tremendous criticism, already having had one Whitney Biennial where there was no acknowledgement of the imploding world crisis outside the museum. And then the Venice Biennial of 2005 came, and the only thing discussing contemporary events was Fernando Botero's show outside the biennale. So people were saying,

"Why isn't there anything at Venice main stage?" People asked, how can there be a biennale in—somebody said the words—"splendid isolation?" The interventions of the *Visible Collective* were responding to that specific context.

Within the collective, there were debates about what we should work on, and where to focus limited energies. These questions became channels for concerns about the impact of museum projects. What was the ripple effect? What were we accomplishing? A frictional concern about use-value came up repeatedly among collective members. As of 2013, many members of *Visible Collective* now work in spaces adjacent to the cultural context. AiMara Lin, Visible member and longtime organizer, is now in law school. Vivek Bald is a professor at MIT. Aziz Huq is a law professor at University of Chicago. Conversations in visual spaces were valued by Visible for the butterfly wing effect. The possibility of shifting public thought in more quiet ways. But we were also mindful that, in the decade after 2001, some of the positive changes in migrant lives came because of legal cases and legislative victories. I think all of us are still looking for balances between direct action and liminal interventions.

JA: In 2001, I revisited the idea of the "Desi Dhamaka" from 1999 by organizing an event to mark South Asian solidarity for the Queens Museum's exhibition "Crossing The Line," which featured artists' interventions in Queens communities. Titling the event "Fatal Love," after an essay by Suketu Mehta about the relationship between India and Pakistan, I invited over a dozen South Asian artists, activists, filmmakers—including Suketu Mehta, Bani Abidi, and Rashid Rana—and youth from South Asian Youth Action (SAYA) to screen films and perform at the Eagle Theater, the Bollywood movie theatre in Jackson Heights. I myself made a public intervention in the form of a wishing tree where passersby could tie a string and make a wish for peace in South Asia, drawing great participation from community members. Most significantly, Rashid Rana's contribution to the event was in the form of a large building-size mural painted by Pakistani movie billboard painters, which we suspended on the streets outside an army-navy store. The painting included an image of skyscrapers being blown apart by planes—one month exactly before September 11, 2001. Rashid immediately left the States upon realizing the link between his work and the attack, returning to Toronto and Pakistan.

In the years that followed, there seemed to be a greater urgency and need for our expression, and I turned "Fatal Love" into an annual event at the Queens Museum

for six years from 2001-2006, including the exhibition in 2005 called "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now." The exhibition provided opportunities for many artists, including the launch of the *Visible Collective*, until my own departure from the Queens Museum in 2006 caused me to retire the event. The annual "UNIFICATION" demonstration for peace in South Asia that is now hosted in NYC seems to carry on where "Fatal Love" left off, bringing a younger generation of South Asian American artists and community members into the dialogue.

AS: What is the legacy of the 1990s? What questions from that period continue to inform South Asian American arts and community today?

JA: I would say one the legacies of the nineties is a hangover from identity-based/political art, much to our disadvantage. The mainstream art world seems content to believe that issue-based work had its moment, without acknowledging that there will always be new immigrants and young artists of color for whom the questions from the 1990s remain relevant, that our contexts and references are constantly shifting and new avenues of interrogation are required for our ever-changing worlds.

Added to this dismissal of a crucial dialogue by the commercial art world are the lack of structures that bring together various art worlds that coexist simultaneously—the Black, Latino, and Asian art worlds have few opportunities to join hands, thereby limiting our capacity to shift power structures in the art world into more egalitarian positions. The question of sustainability also haunts us—Bose Pacia, A Gallery, Gallery at 678, and the Indo Center were spaces that opened during the 90s but did not last, just as long-running Exit Art closed its doors after thirty-five years in operation.

Internally speaking from the perspective of SAWCC, I would say the legacy of the nineties has been to demand a rigorous engagement in politics and aesthetics from our members, and vice-versa. In an art world climate that really prioritizes the market, SAWCC has managed to keep artists in circulation within non-profit and commercial gallery spaces by providing an alternative means of visibility and a critically engaged community and context for the work we produce.

NM: I was recently reviewing Vivek Bald's new book *Bengali Harlem* (2013), and in the process thinking back to the 1990s when I first met Vivek, and the intense change in New York's demographics since then. Bolstered by a new wave of immigration, South Asian migrants gained the scale to encourage organizations to

look more narrowly along national South Asian lines (say, "Indian" or "Pakistani"). Bangladeshis were the fastest growing migrant group in New York for the ten years after 2001 and these numbers have allowed that community to become a more self-contained one. At the same time, an increasing Indo-centrism, twinned with the triumphalist "India Shining" language, crowds out recognition of South Asians who are not Indian—like Sri Lankan, Nepalese, Burmese, and other migrant groups. Without cross-racial solidarity, Asian migrants may cut themselves off from the possibility of generative, progressive alliances with other racial justice movements.

You can also sense a palpable desire to highlight white-collar South Asian success, sidelining the working class population that was the bulk of post-'80s migration. Vijay Prashad warned about exactly these tendencies when he responded to DuBois's question "How does it feel to be a problem?" by asking South Asian Americans: "How does it feel to be a solution?" Prashad argued, in *The Karma of Brown Folk*, that by embracing the model minority myth in their own self-presentation, Asian Americans allowed themselves to be pitted against African Americans. In this narrative, Asians could be the exceptional minority, the one that purportedly disproved racism simply by "working hard." Of course, the position of South Asians in America has gone through realignments and reversals as a hyper-profiled population; but triumphalist celebrations of "South Asian" identity can still unmoor us from a longer span of shared histories. I wonder if the greater mainstream visibility of today could end up diluting a progressive, pan-race political moment. As we have seen in the past, the equations of mainstream "acceptance" always subtly demand that we leave something, or someone, behind.