

PRESS RELEASE

Monday 8 March 2010

For immediate release



Melas in the UK: Helping define British Asian Culture

“Melas have been held in the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years but they are a relatively recent phenomenon in Britain... However, Bradford and Nottingham Melas are unique; they were as much about the Asian community taking ownership as they were about creating an opportunity for dialogue with other communities.”

- Irna Qureshi, Writer

Both Bradford and Nottingham Melas have been important in defining British Asian identity, from their formative years in 1988 to the present day. Naseem Khan, arts policy advisor and a previous Head of Diversity at Arts Council England, explains that the dawn of large scale cultural Melas like Bradford and Nottingham in 1988, helped the Asian community see themselves as significant contributors to British society, both culturally and economically: *“It was very impressive actually - hundreds and hundreds of Asian people together - and that sense of obvious strength and ‘solidarity’ and a sense of power, if only economic power. And the creative voice was actually quite affirmative at that early stage. Not only were the Asian arts actually coming out into the mainstream but you also have the shift in the playground... The Mela actually perhaps had a hand in showing the community back to itself, reflecting a sense of numerical power and creative vibrancy. To actually see something which was writ large across the face of society made you feel good. It was the sense of this being normality as opposed to being marginality.”*

Melas are now part of many of the UK’s significant annual events in cities and large towns up and down the country, and are often seen as good examples of the Government agenda around community cohesion. No longer is the Mela a place for just Asian families, but is

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increasingly a multicultural festival attracting audiences from all backgrounds. Audience research at the 2009 Bradford Mela suggests that around 50% of the 200,000 visitors over the two day event were non-Asians. Yet Melas are still perceived by some to be Asian events catering for the South Asian community. As they come of age, one of the greatest obstacles for Melas is to challenge these perceptions.

The Bradford and Nottingham Melas coincided with the explosion of Bhangra music in Britain in 1988 but as the Melas have grown and 'come of age' they have been significant in developing routes for artists into the mainstream. Artists such as Bobby Friction, Jay Sean and Nitin Sawhney have all performed at Melas, building up a fan base, prior to mainstream success. As Mira Kaushik, Artistic Director of Akademi Dance, points out: *"My daughter was part of the thirteen year-old girls' camp who started promoting Jay Sean in their network. This is five or six years ago before Facebook started. These groupies texted each other where Jay Sean was performing, and they travelled to every possible Mela around the South of England at least. They hung around the Mela circuit because it was free and accessible. She was not allowed to go to adult places but the Mela was outdoors and it was daytime."*

'Coming of Age' concentrates on the development of two of the country's first and most established and innovative Melas - Bradford and Nottingham. The project will result in a touring photographic exhibition together with a full colour book which will provide a retrospective look at the last 21 years of the Mela and its roots and progress in the UK.

The book is based on a series of conversations with Mela organisers and programmers, artists, musicians, cultural commentators and stakeholders. It places Nottingham and Bradford Melas within a national Mela landscape and celebrates some of their achievements. The launch of the exhibition and book will take place at New Art Exchange, Nottingham, on Friday 28th May 2010 and will be open to the general public between 29th May and 3rd July 2010. It will show at Cartwright Hall, Bradford, from 7th August to 7th November 2010.

The book and exhibition 'Coming of Age' will reflect on past successes and help audiences recognise the importance of the British Mela in the British cultural landscape.

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- Ends -

For further information, images, or to set up an interview please contact Mandeep Samra on 07793 047 220 or via mandysamra@hotmail.com

Notes to Editors

- The exhibition is being curated by David Schischka Thomas and coordinated by Mandeep Samra, featuring photography by Tim Smith and Nadeem Khan
- The launch of the exhibition and book will take place at New Art Exchange, Nottingham, on **Friday 28th May 2010, 6-8pm**
- The exhibition will be open to the general public at New Art Exchange from **29th May to 3rd July 2010**, opening times: Monday to Friday 10am to 7pm, Saturday 10am to 5pm.
- The touring exhibition is produced and promoted by Bradford and Nottingham Mela in partnership with New Art Exchange. To find out more go to: www.mela21.co.uk
- Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 28,800 projects, allocating over £4.3 billion across the UK. Website: www.hlf.org.uk
- This project has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Bradford Council, New Art Exchange, Nottingham Asian Arts Council and Oriental Arts.