

## PRESS RELEASE

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# British Asian Cool

The Nottingham and Bradford Melas were the first two national mela festivals in the UK, and have been catalysts for an industry that is now part of most cities cultural calendar. These melas have also helped promote Asian culture to local communities, and acted as a platform for British Asian talent to gain access to a wider audience.

In 21 years of mela history in the UK, Asian music and arts have become very much part of the style, fashion and fabric of mainstream Britain. Jay Sean has become an international R'n'B star; artists like Madonna and Kylie Minogue famously styled themselves around Indian themes; and Bollywood has started to appeal to western audiences with films such as *Moulin Rouge* and *Bride and Prejudice* taking influence from them, and more recently 'My Name is Khan' and many more being financed and distributed by Hollywood Studios. Asian music has also been sampled by Hip-Hop / Rap musicians, most famously with the Bhangra beat behind Missy Elliot's 'Get Your Freak On' and Jay-Z and Punjabi MC's 'Beware of the Boys'; British Asian artists like Talvin Singh, Black Star Liner, and Nitin Sawhney have all been nominated for, and won the Mercury Music awards, and gone onto gain critical acclaim. One of Britain's most respected visual artists Anish Kapoor, has just unveiled his plans for a definitive public sculpture as part of the Olympic Stadium, another example of how British Asian personalities are recognised and constantly coming to the fore.

British Asian culture and especially youth culture has become 'Cool'. Very different to the negative image of bigoted, fundamental extremists; the image the public often sees as representations of Asian youth in national tabloid press.

This journey from an often invisible community with no significant voice in Britain, to a community that has a significant say in Britain's artistic, cultural, political and economic

landscape is explored in a new book ***Coming of Age***. Mela festivals have been central to this growth, as an outlet of expression for Asian culture, values, and understanding between communities.

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, coincided with the emergence of an Asian youth scene in Britain. Melas quickly became the place to be seen, and the place to showcase popular Asian culture. *“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. If you remember way back, the idea of Asian kids was of being wimpy compared to black kids, and not being sexy and not having any kind of desirable image, and the whole thing of Paki bashing. 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.”*

The mela clearly plays an important role in developing new audiences for music artists, but perhaps the role is even more significant for artists that attract a strong youth following. Mira Kaushik, Artistic Director of Akademi Dance, believes that working the mela circuit can significantly increase an artist’s fan base and popularity. Her teenage daughter went from one mela to the next throughout the summer months with her friends, following Jay Sean. *“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... These kids have now grown out of those mela circuits but have created the market as buyers of CDs and therefore they are the ones who have made these people saleable. So I would say melas have a huge role in mainstreaming of South Asian artists by giving them a business platform to promote themselves.”*

The British mela has played a significant role in developing the careers of many of these artists, and helped develop a taste for Asian arts and culture within Britain’s wider community. But where does the mela go next? Melas need to engage with arts development agencies and the commercial sector which have yet to truly recognise the mela’s potential as a major, cutting

edge multi-arts festival, delivering high quality innovative work. It has evolved over the years with many Asian entertainment channels holding their own indoor mela-type events, usually a mixture of stalls, food, fashion and a Bollywood star thrown in for good measure.

As Nottingham and Bradford Melas mark their coming of age, their challenge is to position themselves as agents of change to ensure their recognition is appropriate to their achievements. Ben Pugh, Producer of Bradford Mela reflects: *“If there is one key thing that we can learn from the last twenty-one years, it would be the importance of the principle, ‘Why we do this, has to be the foundation for how we do this’. The Mela for me is so much about the beauty that comes from the sum of its parts. If we are celebrating the culture, creativity and communities of our district then we have to be open to what people want to bring – and recognise the tremendous value they bring along with their ideas and input. We need to find the best ways of supporting and facilitating the widest range of partners and stakeholders, and in that way the Mela will keep reinventing itself. It will keep being fresh and engaging and keep being true to its roots, its vision and the communities it is shared by.”*

## ENDS

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### Notes to editors:

- The launch of the exhibition and book will take place at New Art Exchange, Nottingham, on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010
- The exhibition will be open to the general public from 29<sup>th</sup> May to 24<sup>th</sup> July 2010
- It will be open to the general public at Cartwright Hall in Bradford from 7<sup>th</sup> August to 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010
- *Coming of Age* is a collaboration between Bradford and Nottingham Melas in partnership with New Art Exchange

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