

**Interview at CUMAA
Pasifika Styles Exhibition, Museum of Archeology and Anthropology,
Cambridge University, Cambridge, England 2006-2008**

I would like to explore the role of artists as social critics and to discuss with them what issues they are interested in articulating through their work

I am an artist of Indian descent, living in New Zealand, with alliances outside my traditional culture. I critique in my work mainstream hegemonies, whether it be Hollywood or Bollywood, pakeha or Hindu. I am interested in recontextualising national identities, especially those immigrants of Indian descent, in the new lands. My artistic sense has developed from a personal need to explore the social implications of immigrant communities and the effect of the new country upon them. I depict in the films individuals from the South Pacific Indian diaspora who create their own lives outside of traditional frameworks.

How do you describe yourself as an artist?

My lineage was steeped in the oral storytelling tradition. Becoming a film maker involved using this technique in a political way. My history was a people who were denied education, and entry into the institutions, due to the caste laws of the Hindu code. We have no cultural capital within Hinduism, except my indigenous artisan background. We were kept separate, working, not allowed to mix with anyone except our own caste. Film making is a collaborative process for me. The storytelling of film as well as its co-operativeness, was the reason I chose it above any other art form. Beauty, form, contents, social commentary-merged poetically to produce a wholistic, personal ethics.

What are your fundamental concerns in your artistic practise?

My concerns are for my people whose voices have been silenced. Whose stories have been absent because the "subaltern" is not allowed to "speak". I am concerned about portraying in a subjective way through my story, in hope that it resonates and speaks to others, who have also been hidden from history.

Are issues of 'authenticity' (in terms of the academic debate and your own communities views) important to your work as an artist.?

For me 'authenticity' is subjective, when one puts oneself in one's work, and one speaks from that position. My work is born out of my own experiences and social awareness. The films are a result of this awareness. Choosing to portray images of those whose stories are invisible, other than repeatedly portraying what mainstream, commercial films do.

Do you have a problem with the terms "traditional", "contemporary" used in describing current art forms and practise?

I do not particularly like these labels, as they have many connotations. The word 'westernized' likewise essentialises, and limits. Because these are cliches in the world of academia and art, the debates leaves out other perspectives, which fuse and evolve into other categories. They cannot see it makes everything homogenised, and labels our work, where in fact we are more than that.

What do you consider to be 'authentic' in terms of cultural artistic practise.....is this a term you find useful when describing artists and their practise?

Words like 'authentic' are contested in academic circles, therefore I never use the word to describe my artistic process. I consider 'authentic' in terms of 'cultural artistic practice' to be one's own subjective truth. It is exercising one's own intimate truth about one's experiences, and as a term it is useful as a way of differentiating between what is wholistic and from oneself, and what is merely an objectification. "Authentic" may be a useful term, because art relies upon incubating intuitively one's creative expression. And authenticity arises when one follows one's inner process.

Do you have artists you consider to be 'inauthentic' cultural art practitioners, and if so why would you describe them in this way?

Because I am an independent film maker, and film artist, 'inauthentic' would apply to those who do commercial films, in particular. Hollywood and Bollywood. The director and producers of the film, "Bandit Queen" interpreted the factual life story of a poor caste woman, but the translation misrepresented the woman. The Indian director promoted it internationally as an Indian film, but when you examine it closely, he is a man objectifying a woman from a poor caste who fought back against upper caste oppression. He also portrayed a caste who were distressed at the blatant portrayal of themselves as negative and sensationalised. Political women's groups throughout India thought the producers and director were misogynist. The makers of the film were like outsiders looking in, rather than speaking directly as an insider, or speaking "nearby".

Does notions of 'ownership' (tribal, cultural) effect your work.....ie use of materials, icons, patterns?

In India, Hinduism dominates, and before they came the indigenous cultures had their own artifacts, icons, and materials for which they produced art. Over the centuries they got appropriated and their culture became part of the dominant hegemony. It was no longer ours solely. Therefore what was ours was interwoven into their cultural practices, in the name of religion. Because these things were usurped, like classical dance and yoga, and sculpture and architecture, I am reclaiming and asserting my own identity of my own people who were hidden from history. Our beliefs and our rituals and our arts were underground. I am excavating them with my work.

How does living in New Zealand effect the concept/reflection of your Polynesian identity?

Living in New Zealand has effected my work, from the start. In my documentaries ("Poonam", "Taamara/Sangam", and "Varasda") Indian identity is fused with neighbors of the South Pacific rim, especially Maori. Since my great grandfather's arrival whanau has merged with Indian. In my work people of a similar value base group together, regardless of their ethnicity. For example, in "Naya Zamana" a short drama, the children go off to socialise with other subcultures, i.e. 'westies', and 'gay'. In another short drama, "Laxmi", the American soldiers in 1942 Auckland play poker and drink with Indian and Maori

men. My films to date reflect how Indian people live with people throughout New Zealand.

Have you felt tensions between the Maori and Pacific Island communities, is this been addressed by the artists?

I attempt to show in my work the alliances between some Maori and Indian people. Therefore I am making a statement alternative to the tensions portrayed by other film makers and artists, and feel this is important to depict. Conservative Pakeha and conservative Indians in New Zealand focus on the dissimilarities between the communities, but I choose to show our similarities which have been more hidden.

Have you noticed the effect of the "Pasifika" aesthetic has had on the mainstream European community in New Zealand, does this concern you?

In terms of the "Indian" aesthetic upon the mainstream European community in NZ, I would say that pakeha government, i.e. "Asia NZ Foundation", set up by the National Party, has organised "Dewali" (the Indian festival of Light) for us all, as their form of multiculturalism, therefore co-opting it and usurping it into a framework that is their own version of "Indian culture". The Indian bindi or dot on the forehead, which symbolises being Hindu, has been internationally contextualised by superstars like Madonna, and therefore promotes Hinduism, the religion which practices caste oppression. Bollywood films have been popularised to such an extent that they rival Hollywood, when their scripts promote a way of life and an ideology that is conservative, because the producers are elite. The masses are fed this propaganda as one way to sublimate their activism. The problem with such a machinery of artificial aesthetic which colonises the world with Indian-ness as an alternative to Hollywood, which also uses the same tactics, is we all end up taking on this aesthetic which can be powerful in a negative sense, and make a society confused about their own identity. This has happened in New Zealand with American popular culture.

Why has art, music and fashion had such an effect on the Polynesian youth culture of New Zealand..... Has this been an effective tool for the expression of identity

The above answer speaks about the colonising effect of foreign dominant cultures, and New Zealand is already a mixture of English and American culture, but now with Asian culture becoming a large influence, the youth culture will be affected by its forces. There is a fusion of identities coming along with various expressions. This has happened throughout history. Especially now with cultures on the move and globalisation to see who can colonise the quickest.

Is there a difference in 'value' to the artworks between the Polynesian community and the Art world ...is this an issue to you.....

Yes. My art and films are counter to that of Hollywood and Bollywood. This is an issue to me because first off, I don't get any money and have to do all the funding and marketing on my own. The other film art in galleries is also different because white western culture only wants me to make a Hollywood style Indian film, or a western Bollywood film. Stereotype Indian characters. For most funding bodies, the pakeha art world thinks my culture is like Bollywood and

they want me to represent myself that way. Or to represent myself like a British Indian director.

Do you take this into consideration when pricing your work?

Most of the time I take very little money for presenting my work, but mostly none. They are screened as part of a cultural and academic milieu, and the exposure of my ideas and the stories of my people are important enough that I am not concerned about payment. The work is too marginalised in the wider world to look upon it as a commercial viability. Also, the content is political and concerns poor people, which isn't exactly a world commodity.

Has awareness of the global art market affected your art practise?

No. The global art market has not given me any funding. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has acquired my short films, but this has no monetary gain, only prestige. The art market is a collectors realm, and films are different from paintings, etc. Given the funding I could write a commercial film, but I would still be an independent and own my own copyright. Therefore having control of my work and the final say.

Are you interested in museum collections containing early examples of material from their own culture's artistic tradition(s), and how do this inform your work?

When I went to the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. I saw early images of Indian art. Also, in the Metropolitan in New York. I would use these ancient images to excavate and to be further informed by the evidence that my ancestors existed milleniums ago, without dots on our foreheads. And the names of the statures were from ancient times, with our names, before India was Hinduised.