



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Between Kismet and Karma

Duration: 0:10:19

START AUDIO

Female 1: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast.

Interviewer: I'm joined today by Doctor Ananya Kabir from the University of Leeds, who's currently undertaking an Arts and Humanities Research Council Knowledge Transfer Fellowship. Doctor Kabir just tell me a little bit about your project.

Dr Kabir: Thanks Jake. The project began officially about 27 months ago and the start was officially the award of the Knowledge Transfer Fellowship by the AHRC. It was one of the first lot of KT fellowships awarded so we were pretty much on the cutting edge of knowledge transfer which as we now know really is the movement – exchange of knowledges between the higher education sector and different kinds of interest groups and stakeholders outside the University. In my case the museums and galleries and heritage sector.

What I wanted to do was, to put it in a nutshell, bring material, artefacts, things, objects, beautiful objects, from South Asia, by which I mean, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, roughly speaking. So I was interested in somehow bringing art objects from these countries that were currently being produced by contemporary visual artists to Britain and generate a discourse around these art works.

Obviously this is not something that any one individual can do let alone someone working at the School of English at a university. So the knowledge transfer fellowship was an excellent way to make links with people who do this kind of thing on a regular basis. And I

partnered with an agency called Shisa, it's full title is Shisa – Agency for South Asian Crafts and Visual Arts. It's a small Manchester based agency which brokers relationships between South Asian artists and museums and galleries in the UK. So together we worked to make this project happen.

Interviewer: And the project is called 'Between Kismet and Karma – South Asian Women Artists respond to Conflict.' So with somewhere like the India – Pakistan border where there's conflict, with Sri Lanka that's just coming out of a civil war – these women artists have an awful lot to be creative about.

Dr Kabir: Exactly. The genesis of this project really goes back to the fact that long before the knowledge transfer fellowship I came up to Manchester I was doing a research fellowship at Cambridge up at that point. I heard on the grapevine that a new set of exhibitions were opening in Manchester and across the North West, bringing contemporary art from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to the UK and an agency called Shisa, which had just about begun their life was in charge of this.

So I came to Manchester, this was 2001, it's really a long incubation period for my relationship with Shisa. I saw what they did, I was absolutely wonder-struck by the range and quality of the artwork on display and the impact it made in the museum space, in Manchester say, where I was seeing the big exhibition on Indian art.

And I approached Shisa and I said that I was interested in issues around conflict. My research in general has engaged with conflict in South Asia and how cultural production, broadly speaking can help us understand, the roots of conflict and also how we may set about, ambitiously perhaps, to stop conflict. How can we resolve long standing issues which are mostly to do with memory, community grievances, long histories of interaction between communities that are close and yet antagonistic. This is the case with Indo-Pakistan border and the relationships it predicates, with

communities in Sri Lanka as you mentioned, between Pakistan and Bangladesh, of course over Kashmir. So South Asia as a region is just fraught with old and new tensions.

When I approached Shisa with this idea, they already had in their heads the thought they might work with women. So we put the two together and we generated this idea that why don't we work with women artists who have something specific to say about conflict in different ways from the region.

Interviewer: And for the artists themselves, have you been out to the sub-continent to work with them when they're preparing for the exhibitions in the UK?

Dr Kabir: Yes. The AHRC fellowship actually allowed – well we asked for funding to travel to the sub-continent and we could do so thanks to the KT fellowship. My opposite partner in Shisa, Fareda Kahn she's the deputy director of Shisa, Fareda and I travelled to Pakistan, to Sri Lanka and to Bangladesh together and very enriching experience, we met a lot of artists, met a lot of people involved in the art world out there; learnt a lot travelling with each other – me from an academic background, her from a curatorial perspective. And the artists who are now exhibited – will be exhibited soon at the Leeds Art Gallery, we chose them through our curatorial visits.

Interviewer: And you mentioned the exhibition – that starts at the beginning of March.

Dr Kabir: Yes.

Interviewer: But you've got an awful lot of other events taking place as well around the project. So does this mean you've got a rather hectic few months ahead of you?

Dr Kabir: Yes in short. Hectic but very exciting and obviously we are delighted to have been able to manage this. We always thought that there would be a series of events. What's happened in the course of working with a number of partners nationwide, the programme has evolved into a critical mass of events, which will take place in this period of two months – 6th of March to roughly the end of May. At the core is the art exhibition, where there'll be eight artists from South Asia, many exhibiting for the first time and many works for the first time ever in the UK, at the Leeds Art Gallery.

But because we were very interested for example in drawing out cross-media, cross-generic, cross-audience conversations – hence the need and our success in also mounting a number of ancillary events, such as artist residencies, a full festival at Cornerhouse Manchester, a symposium and so on.

Interviewer: And some of the artists will be taking residencies whilst they're here?

Dr Kabir: Yes.

Interviewer: And that's across the country that's not just in the North?

Dr Kabir: We've got a residency in place at Gasworks in London. She is an Indian artist working mostly with video. We've got a residency at Wolverhampton, where an artist from Colombo, Sri Lanka is going to come up and she's a very interesting performance artist. She's going to – well we'll see what she does at Wolverhampton. A very interesting residency exchange that also evolved between the Blue Court which is a cultural centre at Liverpool working with Liverpool Hope University and the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi.

In the course of this exchange Lin Holland who's an artist based at Liverpool is currently on her way out to Pakistan as we speak. And she's going to spend some time in Karachi and Sadia Salim a ceramicist from Karachi will come to Liverpool.

Interviewer: And for all these events, the residencies, the exhibition, the film programme, are you hoping for members of the local South Asian community to come along or are you hoping for a much much broader audience?

Dr Kabir: The project has been about audience development in two ways. One issue has been drawing in new audiences from the South Asian community – people who may not – belief is or the assumption is that they may not feel interested or drawn to what's currently on offer, say at the Leeds Art Gallery. So that's one strand of audience development. But the other strand is to bring in audiences for this kind of art across the board. So it's not just targeting any particular community but doing that alongside new audiences built for South Asian art.

Interviewer: And for the project as a whole what are you thinking the legacy will be when it's all complete?

Dr Kabir: The metaphoric legacy and the actual legacy – well in terms of physical legacy there'll be publications, there's a website, there's obviously different ways in which the institutions involved, venues involved will have their own documentation mechanisms. But I think in a much more pervasive fashion we have ensured the presence and visibility of at least eight cutting edge, vibrant and completely, I think, unexpected kind of artists. Artists working in a very unexpected medium in the UK. And telling us something about how conflict is responded to in different ways – this is not work that would have been seen otherwise.

Interviewer: So the AHRC funding has been essential here to actually make it happen...

Dr Kabir: It's been essential because without the AHRC I wouldn't have had the time to do this.

Interviewer: Doctor Kabir, thank you very much. I wish you every success with the project over the next few months.

Dr Kabir: Thank you. Come and see it.

Female 1: Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast. To find out more please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk.

END AUDIO