

Beyond the Mela: South Asian Cultural Representation and Policy Inclusion in Belfast

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines how cultural policy in Belfast represents and supports South Asian arts and cultural organisations, drawing on a focused section of a wider study of cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland. Using policy analysis and grey literature, it considers Belfast City Council's cultural strategy, minority-ethnic cultural organisations, funding patterns and the prominence of large multicultural events such as Belfast Mela. The analysis finds that flagship celebrations can increase visibility and create shared cultural space, while also risking the compression of diverse South Asian traditions into a single public image. Smaller community organisations may face lower visibility, uneven access to funding and limited representation within cultural decision-making structures. The paper argues that inclusion requires more than attendance at multicultural events: cultural policy should recognise intra-community diversity, widen participation in funding and leadership, and create platforms for specific cultural practices beyond flagship festivals. The Belfast case illustrates the tension between shared-space policy and culturally specific representation in a post-conflict city.*

KEYWORDS - Belfast, Cultural Policy, Multiculturalism, Representation, South Asian Arts

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland operates within a distinctive post-conflict context in which questions of identity, recognition and public space have historically been shaped by the relationship between the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. Cultural policy has therefore carried responsibilities that extend beyond artistic provision to include community relations, participation and social cohesion [1]. Yet Northern Ireland has also become more ethnically diverse, and this raises a further question: how effectively do cultural strategies recognise communities that sit outside the traditional two-community framework?

This paper focuses on South Asian arts and cultural organisations in Belfast. South Asian communities form an important part of the city's minority-ethnic population, but their cultural representation is not necessarily captured by policies designed around broad categories such as minority ethnic, BME or BAME. Nic Craith's analysis of culture and identity in Northern Ireland shows how a bicultural political framework can marginalise identities that do not fit comfortably within established communal divisions [2]. The problem is not simply whether South Asian culture is visible, but how it is represented, who receives resources, and whether smaller cultural organisations have meaningful access to policymaking and funding.

The article develops one section of a wider MA Arts Management dissertation on the role of South Asian arts and creative organisations in cultural policymaking in Northern Ireland. Rather than reproducing the full dissertation, it isolates a focused argument concerning cultural representation, funding and policy inclusion. Belfast Mela is used as an important example of public visibility, but the analysis asks what lies beyond the flagship festival model. The central argument is that shared cultural spaces are valuable, while policy inclusion also requires recognition of the internal diversity of South Asian communities and the organisations that represent them.

II. CULTURAL POLICY, POWER AND REPRESENTATION

Cultural policy is not neutral. Decisions about what receives public support, which practices are recognised as culturally valuable, and which organisations are treated as legitimate stakeholders are also decisions about power. Belfiore argues that cultural value must be understood in relation to representation, misrecognition and the power to validate particular cultural and aesthetic practices [3]. This is especially relevant to minority-ethnic arts, where public recognition can depend upon institutions that have historically been shaped by majority cultural frameworks.

The Northern Ireland context adds a further layer. Migrant communities have used festivals, languages and community arts to establish visibility within urban space, while public policy has increasingly promoted cohesion, sharing and integration [4]. Belfast's cultural strategy, *A City Imagining 2020-2030*, similarly presents belonging, participation and shared civic identity as central ambitions [5]. These objectives create opportunities for minority-ethnic organisations, but they may also produce pressure to present cultural difference in forms that fit a generalised multicultural narrative.

Research on cultural distribution shows why visibility alone should not be treated as equivalent to equality. Saha's study of British Asian theatre identifies forms of 'segregated visibility' in which culturally diverse work is publicly present while structural inequalities in production, distribution and representation remain [6]. Hadley, Heidelberg and Belfiore likewise argue that inequality can be reproduced inside cultural institutions even where diversity and inclusion are explicit organisational goals [7]. These perspectives are useful for examining Belfast because they shift the question from whether South Asian culture appears in public space to how cultural organisations participate in the systems that allocate recognition and resources.

Hall's account of multiculturalism and cultural identity also cautions against treating minority communities as internally uniform. Cultural identities are dynamic, negotiated and produced through representation rather than fixed once and for all [8]. A category such as 'South Asian' contains differences of language, religion, region, ethnicity and cultural practice. For cultural policy, this means that one successful festival or one highly visible organisation cannot automatically stand for the full range of communities included within the category.

III. METHOD

The paper uses a qualitative policy-analysis approach drawn from the wider dissertation. The original study employed document analysis and grey-literature analysis to examine the relationship between Belfast's cultural strategy and the experiences of South Asian arts and creative organisations. The main policy document was Belfast City Council's *A City Imagining 2020-2030* [5]. Secondary material included council documents, organisational websites, cultural-sector reports, news coverage and published scholarship on cultural policy, multiculturalism and minority-ethnic representation.

The analysis was informed by a constructivist perspective: policy documents and community experiences may produce different understandings of whether inclusion has been achieved. This is important because a strategy can describe a city as inclusive while organisations experience unequal visibility, resources or access. The article therefore reads policy ambitions alongside evidence concerning South Asian cultural organisations, funding and public representation.

The present paper is intentionally narrower than the dissertation. It concentrates on four connected themes: flagship multicultural visibility; the diversity of South Asian community organisations; access to funding; and representation within cultural decision-making. It does not present new interviews or claim to provide a complete account of every South Asian organisation in Belfast. Its purpose is to identify policy tensions and questions for further empirical research.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Flagship Multiculturalism and South Asian Visibility

Belfast has developed a substantial public infrastructure of festivals and community arts. Within this landscape, Belfast Mela has become one of the city's most visible multicultural events. ArtsEkta, founded in Belfast in 2006, uses the arts to promote cross-cultural learning and organises programmes including Belfast Mela and the South Asian Dance Academy. The festival demonstrates the capacity of arts organisations to create shared public space and to place South Asian cultural expression at the centre of the city's cultural calendar.

This visibility matters. McDermott argues that festivals and cultural initiatives have been among the most noticeable ways migrant communities establish a public presence in Northern Ireland [4]. Belfast's cultural framework has also recognised the value of festivals in engaging communities and producing shared cultural

space. In this sense, the Mela model connects directly with the policy language of belonging, participation and shared experience.

However, the success of a flagship multicultural festival creates a representational problem if it becomes the primary public shorthand for South Asian culture. The dissertation identified a wide range of organisations and associations connected with Gujarati, Malayali, Sikh, Muslim, Tamil, Odia, Marathi and other communities. Their activities include religious festivals, language, food, music, dance and community gatherings. These practices reveal that South Asian cultural life in Belfast is plural rather than singular. The policy challenge is therefore to retain the benefits of shared festivals while creating additional space for culturally specific forms that may not achieve the same visibility.

4.2 Funding and Uneven Organisational Visibility

Funding is one mechanism through which differences in visibility can become institutionalised. Large organisations with established administrative capacity are better positioned to identify funding opportunities, prepare applications, document outcomes and build long-term relationships with public bodies. Smaller community organisations may operate through volunteers, informal networks or social-media pages and may not possess the same capacity to engage with formal funding systems.

The dissertation found that a number of South Asian community associations organised culturally significant activities without the public profile of major funded festivals. This does not demonstrate that every smaller organisation seeks public funding, nor that the absence of funding is always the result of exclusion. It does, however, raise an important policy question: whether funding systems are equally legible and accessible to organisations with different levels of professional infrastructure.

Belfiore's analysis of cultural value is useful here because it draws attention to the institutional processes through which some cultural practices become visible and validated [3]. Funding policy does more than distribute money; it can influence which organisations develop staff, websites, partnerships and public legitimacy. For culturally specific organisations, access to relatively small-scale development funding may therefore affect their ability to become recognised stakeholders in future policy consultations.

4.3 Representation, Leadership and Decision-Making

The question of funding connects to a wider issue of representation within leadership and decision-making structures. Alleyne's work on Black British arts management highlights how power operates through leadership, funding and the ability to shape cultural vision [9]. The dissertation used this framework to question whether minority-ethnic communities are sufficiently represented in the institutions and committees that make decisions affecting their cultural participation.

The point is not that demographic identity automatically determines fair decision-making, nor that members of majority communities cannot support minority cultural forms. Rather, the absence of varied lived experience can narrow the range of knowledge available inside institutions. Cultural specificity matters when decisions concern festivals, religious practices, community histories or forms of participation that may not be familiar to decision-makers.

This issue becomes more significant as Belfast changes demographically. Northern Ireland census data record increasing ethnic diversity, strengthening the case for cultural institutions to treat minority-ethnic communities as ongoing stakeholders rather than occasional participants [10]. Meaningful inclusion therefore involves both public-facing representation and opportunities to influence how cultural programmes and resources are designed.

4.4 Beyond BAME and the Problem of Cultural Compression

Broad administrative categories such as BAME or BME can be useful for identifying inequality at a population level, but they can obscure major differences between communities. The dissertation argues that a policy approach centred only on 'non-white' participation risks reproducing a similar problem at the cultural level: distinct histories and practices become compressed into a single multicultural category.

This problem is visible in the contrast between shared multicultural festivals and smaller culturally specific events. A shared event can successfully bring people together, but it cannot represent every tradition in equal depth. Hall's work suggests that representation should acknowledge the complexity and internal diversity of cultural identity [8]. Coello's discussion of multicultural policy similarly emphasises the need to protect group traditions without turning them into rigid boundaries [11].

For Belfast, a more differentiated approach would not require abandoning the shared-space model. Instead, it would complement major intercultural events with support for smaller programmes led by particular communities, artists and cultural organisations. Such an approach would allow cultural policy to operate at two levels: creating common civic spaces while also enabling groups to articulate their own histories and cultural practices.

V. DISCUSSION

The Belfast case reveals a tension at the heart of multicultural cultural policy. Public institutions understandably value activities that bring diverse communities together, particularly in a society with a history of communal division. Yet the emphasis on shared culture can become too general if difference is acknowledged only through large, celebratory events. In that situation, diversity may be visible without minority organisations acquiring greater influence over cultural policy.

Three implications follow from the analysis. First, cultural participation should be assessed not only through audience attendance but also through organisational development and decision-making access. Second, funding bodies should consider whether application systems are accessible to small and volunteer-led cultural organisations. Third, policymakers should recognise that 'South Asian culture' is not a single programme category. Supporting specific communities and art forms can deepen, rather than undermine, the wider objective of intercultural understanding.

These findings also complicate the language of representation. A city may feature South Asian performers at civic events and still have limited South Asian participation in leadership, commissioning or policy design. Saha's concept of segregated visibility is relevant because it separates the fact of public presence from the distribution of institutional power [6]. Hadley, Heidelberg and Belfiore similarly demonstrate that cultural organisations can reproduce inequality while adopting the language of inclusion [7].

The analysis should nevertheless be treated as exploratory. It is based primarily on policy and grey literature rather than interviews with the full range of South Asian organisations identified in Belfast. Future research should therefore examine how smaller organisations understand funding, whether they seek closer engagement with public institutions, and what forms of support they consider most useful.

VI. CONCLUSION

South Asian cultural life in Belfast is more diverse than any single event or administrative category can represent. Belfast Mela and other shared cultural initiatives make an important contribution to visibility, participation and intercultural encounter, but they should be understood as part of a wider cultural ecology rather than as comprehensive representations of South Asian culture.

A more inclusive policy approach would combine shared multicultural spaces with targeted opportunities for smaller cultural organisations to develop, access funding and participate in decision-making. This would move inclusion beyond symbolic presence towards cultural agency. The advantage of such an approach is that it preserves the civic value of shared events while recognising cultural specificity. Its main limitation is that the evidence in this study is document-based and cannot substitute for direct testimony from the organisations concerned.

The Belfast case has wider relevance for cities attempting to reconcile social cohesion with cultural diversity. Cultural policy is most inclusive when communities are not only represented to audiences but are also able to influence the conditions under which their culture is funded, interpreted and made public. Future research should extend this analysis through interviews and participatory research with South Asian organisations, artists, funders and policymakers.

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