Curating Political Art: Collating Political Aesthetics
Looking back at Organising Culture Components for WSF 2004

It was not accidental that the World Social Forum begun in 2000. The new millennium needed a new form of resistance politics, one that is more inclusive and less polemic than the previous ones. As the end of previous century witnessed splintering of all political thoughts and disorientation of all progressive assemblies in the face of all invasive global market, a new initiative had to be born to gather those dispersed strands.

 "From the moment when a subordinate class becomes really independent and dominant, calling into being a new type of state, the need arises concretely of building a new intellectual and moral order, i.e. a new type of society, and hence the need to elaborate the most universal concepts, the most refined and decisive ideological weapons.' Antonio Gramsci (1971)

Working for the World Social Forum was part of art making activities. Bringing art concerns and artists into the fold of WSF was political activism. In this paper, I wish to reflect on the experiences of working for a wide political configuration such as World Social Forum in the capacity of a curator of political arts and cultural activist. It was a macro attempt to collate and consolidate, within a displayable format, something as porous as political arts from something as wide as the world and carve out a space for culture as a part of the discourses within political practices. I assume that a few glimpses of the mega event and a few notes about the colossal ambition behind the project would help understanding the methodology adopted and making an assessment.

It was a hot May evening in Bombay, 2003. Some friends charged in, glowing in excitement- 'the World Social Forum is coming to India, infact to Bombay. If we did not join in now we would regret it later.' It was an informal gathering of friends, who had a fairly long history of working together for art activism or to put it differently, towards political practices within art making. But most had no idea of what those three words meant. But they sounded magical: 'world', 'social' and 'forum', but they also sounded extremely old fashioned. Some of us were apprehensive- it would definitely be an event for long speeches. What can we do except providing recreation in the evening. But haven't we always dreamt of such a community of audience - peasants, workers, indigenous people, gender activists, untouchables and intellectuals- all under one umbrella with a myriad articulation against war and globalisation? Where can art be placed in this discourse and assimilation? How to initiate that? Should art be included in the agenda by the leaders or should artists get engaged and squat out its space in the process? Or maybe a distinct form of art eventually would emerge from such a forum on its own accord and there is no need for an external agency to work on it. But why should the agency be conceived as external? Well…none of these were radically new articulations; we were mouthing some age old dilemmas regarding art and politics.

As we debated the possibilities, we never realised that it was just the beginning of a long journey and in that journey we would live with these issues all the way. So we got in, attended numerous meetings of the organising committee. Motley group of visual artists and filmmakers in the middle of a large number of trade unionists, environmentalists, peace activists and rights activists; waited with baited breath for our turn to present the cause of culture. More often than not the discussion on culture would come up at 6.15 in the evening while the rented meeting places needed to be vacated at 6.30. For

sometime we waited for a guideline to be provided by the 'organisers'. But the guideline never came. Firstly, because the WSF is, by way of principle, a forum for mobilisation and it has no pre-stated and over arching policy. Secondly, the agenda on culture was always kept for discussion for the next time. In fact, people wondered why we diligently attended the "political" meetings. But we had an agenda, a political one.

We placed one of our first articulations to the organising committee: *"In order to 'build that new intellectual and moral order' which would facilitate 'another world', it is extremely important a political task to ensure adequate representation of culture practices and discourses within the World Social Forum. The 20th century modernist trend of treating culture as an appendix or a mere service provider to real politics or as a post script chronicler of history has alienated many potential movements/initiatives from the people. Also the inability to recognise the political possibility and discourses hidden within community/location based cultural productions and the resistance to consider cultural practices as notes from the civil society have reduced many rich theories to possible hypothesis. Besides, in recent years, most of the imperialist agenda was played and contested through the devices of culture. In this context, we propose to scheme the cultural events at WSF 2004 as a composite spectrum of cultural and artistic forms which express themselves outside the corporatised mainstream and oppose enculturation processes of globalisation within its body itself. With the inception of the WSF in 2000, political activism has emerged as a plural entity with diverse input sources against the homogenisation of globalisation. Art making and cultural practices are essentially against standardisation. And thus a serious effort to mobilise arts, artists and cultures within the WSF process as one of the main contexts to evolve strategies, should be considered as a priority." [1]*

The articulation helped us in subverting some space for culture within the venue, scheme and infrastructure. We secured 25% of the fund and 30% of the space and the infrastructure. Within public-political spaces, such a proportion of facilities are never made available to culture, even in the most utopian situations. Political arts that are home grown by any organised political system have been, almost essentially, made to look minimal. Somehow it is believed that minimalism is a metaphor for spiritual integrity and thus stands for political vigour. The tendency is to confuse rudimentary as clarity; folk / rural / agricultural as real as against urban, fragmented and contrived; pre-modernist forms as more local than the modernist ones and more so to consider formal accessibility as an ideological virtue rather than as a hegemonic design. This tendency, atleast in the case of a post colonial country like India, comes from a deep rooted attachment with land, where the land related simple production process and its forms of social expression are still considered as the core of people's cultural life. The colonialisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, evolution of market, globalisation and so on are often expected to be part of the discourse but not to leave a mark in the body of the emerging cultural forms. The expectation of organised political schools from the cultural practices is a kind of landlocked stillness where the familiarity of the forms should correspond with the single layered life style of agricultural community and the memory of it, in the case of urban poor. In this logic system the moving people, the migrants are prescribed only the longing for the lost home land and denied any autonomous agency in cultural productions.

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[1] Excerpt from Programme Proposal, Cultural Committee, World Social Forum 2001

For example, at one point there was a demand that the opening and closing events of the forum should show case the variety and richness of Indian folk forms. The anthropological dubiousness of such a scheme was not an easy thing to convince the organisers. The blasphemy of staging community harvest songs or quasi-religious rituals in the city of Bombay at a large open air stage of 60 ft /80 ft dimension to a crowd of 70,000 people from all over the world would be obvious to anybody but to the political pedagogues. The dominant ideology has been to prioritise familiarity, accessibility, rhetorical and minimalism over experimental, avant grade, subversive and risqué. Against this dominant thought we embarked into the task of collating contemporary political arts within the World Social Forum.

"The work of critical inquiry cannot be content with fixed anti-positions, which were, in their own time, necessary (in regard to the war in Vietnam), but need to be problematised in the context of contemporary histories of political migration." Trinh T. Minh-Ha [2]

The WSF is not a community, not even a heterogeneous one at that. The people assembling under this umbrella are as varied as the non-violent peace movement of Japan to the indigenous people from the forest of Bastar to senior academics from the universities of northern countries to transgender entertainers from Asian tourists' zones and so on. In the 2004 edition, there were 130,000 people from 130 countries. How could culture be schemed for such an occasion? The utopian community of "movements against the hegemonic power structure" which encourages all sorts of plural voices as assertions of identities still tends to view political arts as a monolithic narrative of protest or as Trinh T. Minh-Ha terms it, a "fixed anti-position". How would we counter the insistence of the dominant forms of resistance? And instead foreground the gains of the others, less locatable forms of subjection and subversive cultures without resolving to tokenism? How would the "staged", "performed", "screened" and "displayed" arts become discursive interventions in such a multi-centre forum? Or is it only to become a cathartic device? Does art in political mobilisation is essentially a cathartic device? How would political articulation around contemporary art practices – issues of representation, access, distribution, patronage, copyright, hegemony and objectification – get included in the agenda? Under the huge task of collating and mounting such a great volume of works – how would we preserve, enhance and present the specific context of each? Without adequately engaging with the previous, would not the "show" become an anthropological display?

We needed a cue, a touch stone to asses the forms, the practices, the actions that required to be mobilised. We decided to explore the cultural instances that counter the notion of "globalisation" at different layers and in different registers. The task that the group took on itself was to trace and list all practices that simply defy standardisation. The political and artistic impulse against standardisation became the methodology to identify and collate political arts. The administrative and physical work of mobilising, collating and placing/mounting them within the format of display itself pushed some of the critical issues to the foreground.

We did not have any model in front of us, other than the socialist youth festivals of the '70s and the contemporary media based extravaganzas. Interestingly, they often looked very similar – youth centric, large spectacle, high decibel, rhetoric proclamation and high

[2] Framer Framed, Trinh T. Minh-Ha; Routledge, 1992.

pitched nationalism. We were almost equally fascinated and appalled by both – fascinated by their unabashed projection of scale and appalled by the over arching standardisation. For us there had to be a scale to ensure visibility, volume to attain representations, layers to bring forth the plurality, popular appeal to address the wide number of audience/spectators, radicalism in forms to voice dissent against homogenisation and stagnation, conceptual challenges to make the artist community interested and yet create a physical space and infrastructure where various forms of cultural expressions can co-exist without loosing their specificity, dignity, vigour and autonomy. Yet all works for WSF had to be free, no organiser or artist could work for remuneration. A charmingly old fashioned idea that had complicated the task even further.

We evolved a spiral methodology to negotiate the scheme - culture as a consolidation of diverse identities, identity as an assertion in art making, art making as collaboration between forms and genres within the autonomy of the specifics, autonomy in art production as against homogenisation of the global media, global articulation as against global endorsement and so on. We definitely wanted to break the walls of museums, art galleries and auditoriums, but we also wanted to create some kinds of museums, galleries and auditoriums in the meeting ground, at the workshop spaces and within the activists' agenda. The schemes needed to be monumental to attain visibility, but also somewhat agile to make an intervention. The chequers of the programme were to represent the wide spectrum of WSF mobilisation, but at the same time it needed to reach out to the local population of Mumbai, of India, of South Asia, of … How much "global" could be structured around a local context?

The projects were divided between collated events and facilitated events. According to the principle of the WSF - any art project or individual artist who, unless obviously against the charter of the WSF, volunteers to participate in the forum must be accommodated and facilitated. Hence, while we conceptualised a few projects to address and articulate our concerns over art practices, we also had to create schemes, infrastructure and navigating systems for 2500 artists of diverse background who participated as self organised events. I shall discuss only a few of the programme here, those which, in my opinion, created a space where both catharsis and discourses; impulse of art productions and desires for political change could remain in equal focus and be engaged in criticality. I shall also attempt to map a few road blocks where the conventions of art making and methodology of mobilisation came to oppose each other and thus destabilised the agenda itself.

Art of Protest and Public Archive
Baghdad! Baghdad! – Anti War-on-Iraq memorabilia exhibition

We shall always remember 2003 for the shameful beginning of the American invasion of Iraq. We shall also remember it as a monumental time in history which has witnessed such a colossal response in the form of protest and solidarity. "If you are not with us, then you are against us," hardly anybody was with Bush, except for the armies of some states. But we should also remember that moment as a beginning of a new era in art practices. Never before had so many artists, without any formal affiliation to any political outfit, come out in protest armed with their works. The reproducible technology that has always aided the lobbies in power boomeranged on them during the Iraq invasion. The

media corporations that came to exist as the arms of the capitalist world order too were countered by non-hegemonic media that were smaller, far more agile and aided by the digital reproductivity and outreach. Never before in the history of information productions the people were heard so loud and been so visible protesting against the invasive power. Blogs against the CNN bulletins, peace volunteers against the army, protest rallies against the Washington briefing, consumers' boycott against the mighty multinational corporations, artists against the commanders… witty slogans, evocative images, exposing testimonies and wide scale solidarity created an aura that was truly and for the first time international. The equation of big history and little history changed and changed through spectacles.

We decided to mount a show *Baghdad! Baghdad!* - not as a museum of protest but as a contemporary art show. Boisterous posters and banners, juxtaposed with subtle and intimate video arts and sound installation, punctuated by sublime poetry and angry slogans, news photographs from media and reproducible art works … all on the Iraq invasion, were collated from all over the world and mounted into a multi-disciplinary show which resembled a town square as well as a public archive of contemporary images – world protest against "global" invasion. It was the archive which existed only in public place and only as long as the public remain collected in that place. It was not a monument or memorial for war heroes or even for the victims, rather it was just a consolidation of the contemporary public culture, dense and yet fragile, and temporary. The idea was to honour the tradition of mass protests in general as well as to chronicle the new development in the language of protest art.

Quite expectantly, the WSF was flooded with rallies and as the forum got settled this venue automatically became a general choice to assemble before embarking on a rally. The archive of the contemporary turned into the space for further coalitions and collaborations.

Images as Property
With Love to WSF: Video Letters

130,000 people gathered in Mumbai to participate in the forum. There were a much larger number of people who could not make it but wanted to be a part of the WSF in spirit. Keeping this in mind, we conceptualised the Video letters to WSF project. An open call to filmmakers, video artists, media professionals, computer bugs, camera buffs and amateurs was sent out en masse for silent video pieces of approximately 5 minutes length. The motivation behind the programme was not only to facilitate participation in the forum, even in absentia, but also to expand the concept of artist and art making. Again, taking advantage of the digital technology, it was aimed to bring personal archives, impulsive documentations, fleeting narratives and occasional statements into the realm of political arts. This programme was schemed to expand the citizenship right to the art world. Anybody with an access to a computer and a desire to participate in a public discourse could send a video letter to WSF.

While the world was being plagued by the issues of intellectual property rights and control of access to images, this was a small effort to dig into the hidden resources and fling open the space of image making and image owning. It seemed, at that moment, possible to respond to the war of ownership over images by facilitating many more

image makers producing many more images than can logistically be owned or controlled by any agency. Digital image anyway is a logistic where the images are stored in combinations of digits. Can a combination of digit be owned? But open calls more often than not, are not so open. Communication and outreach methodology itself can become a self imposed selection process. Recognising and reaching out to the potential artists hidden behind various other entities in countries which are not on the highway of global communication was one of the focal points of this exercise, which of course we could not fully resolve.

In the end, we received 76 entries. There were 42 entries from India and 34 from other countries. An overwhelming number of entries were from students and youngsters from both India and abroad. Though 76 is an impressive number for such a venture of self produced films, it was completely inadequate for the scale of the World Social Forum.

Spectacle and Mobility
Sufiyana as artery practice

The opening and closing ceremony of the World Social Forum needed to be spectacular in scale. The first thought that came to mind in this context was the youth festivals of the 70s – Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte performing against war or apartheid. But what are the missing links between the 1970s and the 2000s? One thing for sure is that the era of the superstar is gone. In this era of mechanical/electronic reproduction, the merit or surprise attached to a single star performer does not have the same appeal as it had in the '70s. Besides art activism has matured since then to take the issue of representation as one of the central motifs. Hence, the programme needed to be mounted around the representation of specific culture or country / community, rather than around single performers.

For the closing evening, we planned to have a festival of *Sufi* music. The medieval "Sufi" music was part of the culture tradition in the whole of South Asia, Central Asia and a part of North Africa. As travelling bards, they came to be symbolised as peace messengers, initiators of communal harmony and also occasionally the inspiration for political rebellions. In spite of the modernist onslaught, till today "Sufi" musicians have survived in many pockets in the entire belt. Their art, which is also their lives, comprises of different local manifestations of the "Sufi" genre. We planned to collate various groups and genres of "Sufi" musicians to trace the medieval route of peace messages through music. The idea was to celebrate the commonality among several socio-cultural movements in the various cultures of Asia and North Africa as a statement against the homogenisation of culture under "globalisation". But our "Sufi" mobilisation scheme came to face serious logistical and political obstacles. A major impediment was the difficulty in contacting "Sufi" musicians as they are not generally contactable on the phone or via electronic mail and many of them are not even adequately literate. Moreover, though geographically within close proximity, many of the Central Asian and North African countries do not have an Indian embassy. It might not be due to any serious political consequences but sheer amnesia about smaller and poorer neighbouring countries.

The second issue came to be the size of the groups. Individual Sufi bards might have trekked across the region in previous centuries but the contemporary practice is mostly community based. They perform in large groups broadly within the space of socio-

religious rituals. The groups consist of children and men of all age groups. Though there are identifiable principle singers in each group, to get only parts of the groups to perform would have been an act of de-contextualisation and imposition of modernist notion of commodified performance. But it was impossible, both administratively and financially, to transport such large groups located in various countries in Asia and North Africa to India. For many of these countries the flights to Indian sub-continent are connected through complicated routes sometimes even involving an excruciating detour to Europe. People from Mali need to travel to India via France and from Gambia through Casablanca and Dubai to Mumbai.

Due to the very fact that the arm of global communication did not feel fit to reach these pockets, we could not mount the festival of "Sufi" music at the 'anti-globalisation' forum. The philosophy and the form which have been so celebrated for their fluid movement across the lands could not move, neither physically nor culturally, as easily as the others in the era of globalisation.

Contemporary and Past in Memorialisation
Bombay/Bambai/Mumbai

"Climbing down the Sahyadris,
a quilt across his shoulder

My father at your doorstep stood
with nothing but promise of labour …"

Mumbai by Narayan Surve

(Bom Bahia, the land of plenty, called by the Portuguese colonials; the British who got the cluster of islands from the Portuguese as dowry named it Bombay; the parochial government changed its name to Mumbai in 1995.)

This exhibition, comprising of installations, film clips, literature, photo arts and urban planning data, was created as a collaborative project between architects, town planners, filmmakers, visual artists and housing rights activists working on urban issues in Bombay. It was centred around a chimney, the symbol of the textile industry and the most important landmark of the city's history and the cityscape. There were walls of "chawls", the traditional community residents of the working class, pasted with the history of the trade union movement. In one section, there were excerpts of films, both mainstream and alternative, made on Bombay/Mumbai over the last hundred years. The factory line of central Bombay overlapped with the desired world of cinema in the northern suburb which got blurred within the artery line of the local train which ran into the colonial city of "heritage" buildings in the southern end.

It was not only a tribute to the working class base of the city, but also an assertion of its diverse and multiple cultures. The communal Bombay, the multi-lingual Bombay, the Bombay of pulsating visual arts, the Bombay of closed factories, the Bombay of popular culture, the Bombay of sprawling slums and the under world wealth, the Bombay of real estate crimes and the Bombay of the super-urban ethos had the right temperament and credibility to host the forum.

The site became popular and was visited by the local working class people and organisations in large number. One way of looking at it is that the protagonists of the project had endorsed the effort of foregrounding their history. Yet this very act itself makes it clear that the working class of the city has come to accept the history of the industries and industrial culture as a matter of glorious past that needs to be displayed as memorial and visited as in rituals. The initiative of archiving the city, ironically also made it clear what in the city is in the verge of disappearance and thus needs to be archived. The city of Bombay which was the centre of radical trade union activities till the last quarter of the 20th century has witnessed a colossal destruction of industry and industrial cityscape through the last two decades. The service industry in the wake of globalisation was resourceful and agile enough to take over the vast track of land that was earmarked for manufacturing industry. Such is the permeation capacity of the service and entertainment industry that even the displaced working class of the city could not resist participating in creating its own memorial.

Spacing / Location-ing
Stages, Exhibition Spaces and Cinema Halls

Eight stages, three exhibition spaces and two cinema halls were structured and named after artists and culture activists of various genres. The categorisation of the performances, though not ideal, had to be made for the sake of space management and navigation. We wanted to reduce the possibility that the surprise element of a performance from another land or unfamiliar culture could border on exotic objectification due to inappropriate context and erroneous location-ing. The stages were of varied dimensions, structures and capacity depending on the genre of performances they were hosting. At any given time, the choices were multiple and we wanted the audience to actively negotiate their choices. Put differently, we wanted to facilitate a state whereby the audience could curate their own programme by navigating through the multiple choices.

1300 performers of 125 groups from the Indian subcontinent and 47 groups from other parts of the world performed on these stages during the four days of the forum. The exhibition spaces were sprawled around 15000 sq metres of area. The visual art exhibitions were many in number, some were initiated by us, while others were organised by the participating groups themselves. Designing the space for these exhibits was a challenging task. The space had to be fluid for the essence of the WSF, it had to do justice to the labour and commitment put in to make the works, it could not iconise art, it had to be protected from the chaos which arises from such an assimilation of humanity, it had to be displayed in the proper political context, it could not alienate people, it could not alienate the artists either and so on.

The saving grace was the venue: tall and wide industrial shades, a reminiscence of a factory shed in the post-industrialised mega-metropolis of Mumbai. With the risk of dwarfing some of the important works, we decided to enhance the largeness and the industrial texture of the workspace of the working class. Hence, many works had to be hung from the high ceiling of the shed, a task not only difficult but dangerous. It enhanced a sense of physicality in the exhibition space, a design element that is common among the artisanal practices. That in turn muted, to an extent, the alienation that is commonly associated with visual arts.

Next, we decided to physically break the barriers and the hierarchy between various art conventions. Hence, a visual artist from Amsterdam sat next to the charred houses in the Gujarat exhibition the entire day and made her migrant's home with paper straws or the television sets in the Bombay "chawl" showed video letters from all over the world or the chimney of the closed mill in the textile factory were adorned by a poem and a date line, and artists from India, Pakistan and Sweden painted a collaborative mural for peace at the wings of Stage Brecht while transgender sex workers from Malaysia rehearsed their play and so on.

Afterthought

"Yes, it will cling to the hem.
Of your scarf
Blood is a hungry flame" Sahir Ludianavi[3]

Each space, performance, screening and interaction got over flooded with audience participation, the fragile infrastructure of temporary sites in the open ground and industrial shades collapsed almost daily. There had been stampede, damages, stealing, fire, animated discussions and angry protest by the sea of humanity coming from 130 countries. Discourses and debates, strategies and networking activities flew out of the seminar rooms and swept the cultural spaces. Artists and performers were spontaneously invited to participate in complimentary seminars and workshops. Seminar participants entered the cultural space to join in various post-performance, post-screening discussions. One was often quoted by the other in their presentations. At that instant, it seemed possible to make comprehensive art interventions in political discourses and actions. But, for that, artists need to feel part of the map and not interlopers or even squatters, for that matter.

The participation of artists and culture practitioners in the WSF process; was overwhelming. Images and programme poured in as copy left, free accessed, heterogeneous, non-funded, non-marketed and non-hegemonic productions. But the question remains or maybe now it becomes more important than ever, that is, how do we sustain and also protect this energy; this need on the part of the artists to be an active agency in political action, not only as campaigners but also as an agenda. Would this energy and desire for collaboration sustain beyond the lure of the mega event?

Evolving alternative pockets for production of copy left images does not necessarily resolve the issue of accessibility and representations. We ran a video documentation network with the help of students from media colleges who produced daily bulletins during the forum and shot 110 hours of material. The material was meant to be copy left and accessible to all. But as the forum progressed we noticed the dominating trend to access and circulate only those images that so easily correspond with the mainstream media images. For example, the documentary filmmakers would always ask for the images of the indigenous people and media personnel would line up for the sound bite of the Afghan woman activist talking about gender oppressions by the Talibans. The play staged by the transgender sex workers from Malaysia witnessed a violent stampede.

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[3] This is an excerpt from Sahir Ludhianvi's poem. The poem was used by Habib Tanvir in his play *Jis Lahore Ni Dehyia (who has not seen Lahore)* which was performed during WSF 2004.

These tendencies are not simple to asses; they border on voyeurism and solidarity, at the same time and rate. The hegemonic practices of cultural consumptions often overwrite the pedagogic political convictions. Alternative sources of the production and distribution network cannot, by themselves, influence the dominant practices of selection, exclusion and consumption.

Issues over curating and presenting art works and cultural productions from the south in the spaces of galleries, auditoriums and festivals in northern metropolises have been argued and contested through various discourses in the last one decade. But an initiative such as the World Social Forum as well, in a round about way, questions the myth of a homogenised South and one corresponding cultural narrative emerging from it. A debate around the hegemony of dominant cultures within Asia, such as Hindi film industry of Bombay (popularly called Bollywood), which threatens other popular cultures in the vicinity, such as "Sufi" music or artisanal practices or experimental filmmaking, too surfaced when the question of location-ing various genres of arts within the venue came up. Which school of work deserves a better visibility: the one which is hailed as popular culture in terms of outreach, reproductions and discursive initiatives both within southern and northern academia, or the ones which are increasingly becoming obscure and esoteric due to their inherent inability to become a reproducible form?

This takes us to the next obvious question of translation, both linguistically and culturally. Certain refraction in the meaning of images occurs when the context of production and that of the reception vary and thus, the related narratives shift / alter continuously from the moment an artwork is placed in the public domain. These shifts need to be negotiated – but who initiates the negotiation? A negotiation towards translation – how agile could it remain within the framework of the designated space and the authorised audience? Which translation can schematically keep open the narratives for yet another intervention?

On the closing day, the ground was bustling with a boisterous crowd of 50000. But, close scrutiny revealed that the working class of the city was very thinly represented. Somebody opined that the multi-cultural, multi-lingual nature of the programme was too elite, distanced for them. We wondered whether it was a lacuna in the political process or whether we needed to evolve many more negotiating layers before addressing "world" culture in a local context. Maybe both.

Madhusree Dutta