

Positioning and Soliciting Myself – A Business Strategy

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I came to Aotearoa New Zealand in December 2001. I had a return ticket and only intended to have a holiday and get my Returning Resident's Visa. It is 2006 and I am still here. I had not reckoned with the lure of this land. The long white clouds and welcoming bush. Black sands, white sands, ninety mile beaches, gannet colonies, winds from the Hauraki and the spirit of Reinga. Neither had I reckoned with the covert disdain.

Suddenly I was an 'ethnic' brown face in a land of immigrants. It was the first time I experienced racism, the feeling of being subhuman and 'exotic' all at once. It was strange and challenging. What did I have to do to prove that I was a regular person with a regular needs and wants who was trying to make space for herself without stepping on anyone's toes? And really why did I have to 'fit in and blend' anyway? I just wanted to be recognised for who I am. Brown skin and all. After four and a half years, a degree from the University of Auckland, many odd jobs and projects later the recognition is beginning to happen. I feel the occasional pang of not being able to practice medicine any more. But media and creative practice are just as good. All because, here in Aotearoa, the challenge for me is to create a new life. To fill blank pages, to maximise every experience and savour new adventures. More and more I realise that I need TO STOP COMPLAINING. There was a time when I would have (I still sporadically do) whined about discrimination in New Zealand. If Dr Brash is popular in certain circles for taking Māori, Muslims and all other (coloured) immigrants to task; for making it essential to understand 'New Zealand values' then the other side of this populist argument, of only being a victim, is just as bad. It is so easy to indulge in the Great Bandwagoning Exercise. As a media

and creative practitioner all I have to do is make a long list of complaints about the mis and non-representation of ethnic communities by the mainstream media and hence the lack of creativity because of the lack of role models and all that. Alas and alack! Poor us ethnic immigrants! Dr. Brash is so wrong! It is just too easy. Besides, every self styled pillar of the community jumps on to this bandwagon. It is the fashionable thing to do. But is the end result constructive? Instead, as is my wont and my new business strategy, I want to do the hard thing. I want to argue that both mainstream media and ethnic communities in New Zealand actually endorse ethnic stereotyping and that creativity can be used to counter these notions as well as defy varying forms of hegemony. I will talk only from the Indian (and non resident Indian) 'ethnic' point of view because I come from India.

It all starts with a basic question. Who is ethnic? One of the meanings Dictionary.com gives is "pertaining to or characteristic of a people, esp. a group (ethnic group) sharing a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, or the like."¹⁶ Most lexicons of the world usually give the same meaning. Which means everyone in the world is

¹⁶ See: dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ethnic

ethnic. We all come from somewhere, we all belong somewhere (even in a metaphysical sense) and we all have our own cultures and languages. We are all ethnic in many different ways. We all have myriad affiliations and multiple identities. It is simple common sense. Yet most mainstream English media deny this ambiguity of ethnicity. Anyone who is not white, comes from a non-Western culture, does not speak English, wears non-Western clothes (or does not hang out the boobies) and is not Christian or Jewish is 'ethnic'. The last is not a figment of my imagination. One of the definitions of 'ethnic' by the American Heritage Dictionary is as: Relating to a people not Christian or Jewish; heathen¹⁷. Centuries of propaganda, of perpetuating that democracy, freedom of speech, media and expression are Western concepts and based on ideas that came out of the West have created the paradigm of the 'ethnic'. This ethnic then is always the Other. Everyone believes in it, even the 'ethnic'. It is a way, to oversimplify Edward Said's Orientalism, for the West to maintain its own supposed superiority and sense of identity and to contain all that is threatening. So the approach to the Other is magisterial or anthropological or singular wondrous despair at the inevitable clash of civilisations.

Situated as I am in the Other, I automatically become 'ethnic' in the scheme of the world. It might seem an uncomplicated place to be in. I stand on one side, throw stones at the other side and counter the West. But there are degrees of hegemony and patriarchy in this Other as well. Being a part of the Indian diaspora, or a non-resident Indian (NRI) has its own issues. To the Indian media (and hence consumers of this media), India is shining overseas. Just being an English speaking, highly qualified Indian is apparently sufficient currency to negotiate developed Western spaces. They love us! Whereas the Indian media in New Zealand defines ethnic affiliation by constantly questioning how 'Indian' you really are. How much do you love your motherland? How much of the 5000 year old Indian culture do you retain? Maintaining Indianness then comes through the sum total of watching satellite cable television, Bollywood films and celebrating Diwali and Independence Day. Or necessarily joining various Indian associations and being jingoistic at all times.

The post-globalised, partially webbed, urbanising scenario of an easily travelling, economically empowered Indian from India and of NRIs frequently going back 'home' has actually reduced the plurality and heterogeneity of being Indian. Religious, regional, linguistic and political differences asides, being Indian is a construct that is Punjabi-Gujarati, a conservative Hindu, modern and traditional with strong attachment to Mother India and who aspires to rule the world. This definition has no place for the semi-literate, poor Indian labourers in West Asia because they deny us our socio-economic and cultural aspirations. Neither is there place for the generation(s) born in the West unless it is to constantly remind them about Indian values, morals and the glorious, mythical past. Or as consumers of Bollywood. The global pan-Indian being has come out of the imagery put together by the Western media and Indian media out of cultural and existential insecurity on both sides. Each one feeds off the other to thrust a singular identity upon a heterogenic people such that the people actually begin to believe it. This where the problems begin, this where creativity can play a role.

That brings me to the definition of creativity. Dictionary.com gives one of the meanings as "the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination..."¹⁸ More than just being creative it is the attitude towards creativity that matters. Western, Indian and diasporic discourses have diluted this creativity into popular representations like Bollywood films and related song 'n' dance competitions, Bharat Natyam and classical music performances and passive participation in festivals that showcase Indian culture. Freezing culture and creativity into desirable, safe and traditional bytes for consumption. And it is through this quagmire that I have to make sense of my creativity.

After doing time freelancing I have established Holy Cow Media Ltd, a business that will write and produce content for various media. A business means legitimacy and transparency. Not an ethnic, shady, fly-by-night ghetto producer for print, radio or community television that gets away with 'free' work

¹⁷ See: dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ethnic

¹⁸ See: dictionary.reference.com/search?q=creativity

from talent or being populist, retrograde mouth-pieces for individuals. A business essentially means having a platform from which to reach wider audiences and deal with funding bodies, sponsors, the industry and government. It is the need of the hour for creatives to be businesspeople as well. Especially 'ethnic' creatives. It is not enough being just another in a long line waiting for politically correct funding that adheres to the Charter. And it is certainly not enough to only be called upon by broadcasters or 'non-ethnic' producers as cultural consultants when they seek 'ethnic' programmes or characters. A business means being pro-active in seeking work, going after opportunities and creating your own space. For me then mainstream media and community/ethnic television (because it is not run or owned by Indians but taxpayers money) are both fora to defy hegemony and stereotypes with my brand of creativity. They are the means to an end which is irreverence-the motto of Holy Cow Media. Having a business also means marketing, branding, networking, a game plan and strategy. Part of my strategy is to position and solicit myself. Which means constant analysis.

I was a passive recipient of media, culture and creativity once. Back in India when I practiced medicine. Until I decided to write. Even then the stories came out in an unconscious manner. It was only after self-conscious engagement with media and its production that I realised how to use creativity to break stereotypes. This engagement happened more in New Zealand than in India. It is an interesting place, this Aotearoa. Colonised and coloniser all at once. There is the discourse with England, the hesitant reconciliation with Māori, denial about changing demographics and a still evolving national identity. Then there is me with my own discourse with India as an NRI, the post-colonial India with its fixed sense of identity in which I grew up, negotiating Aotearoa New Zealand and all my multiple identities. It is a unique position to be in. Adds spice to my creativity. Another special aspect about New Zealand is the Treaty of Waitangi. I come from multicultural India. It is a way of life. Indians, in my experience, are happily tolerant and multicultural amongst themselves but find it tough dealing with unfamiliar peoples and cultures. I used to be like that. In all my years in India I never encountered more than ten foreigners at the most. India is chock full of Indians, of course. Multiculturalism takes on a different meaning in

New Zealand. It took living in Aotearoa, the Tiriti o Waitangi and the status of the tangata whenua to understand the agreement of mutual respect between cultures and how to implement it in creativity. Then there is the wonderful intercultural mix in the different subcultures of New Zealand. In today's economy this amalgamated cultural knowledge allows more creative power. But what use this creativity if it does not have an outlet? Television and film in New Zealand are small and saturated with the same players putting out the same tired programming. These producers and executives reckon to know what the audience wants. And in classic capitalist fashion claim to give it exactly that. None seem to have faith in the audience's ability to desire and consume various well done creative forms and content. In this scenario it is important to look beyond New Zealand because the whole world is a potential audience. So I think in terms of markets on and out of New Zealand. Being multicultural helps.

Joseph Nye Jr, who served as undersecretary in the first administration of Bill Clinton, coined the term 'soft power'. This is the ability to influence through cultural and ideological means.¹⁹ To me it is nothing but what Mahatma Gandhi and many wise men taught – to use charm, love, affection and a sense of humour to deal with and gradually influence people. I apply it to my creative work. On the nose, aggressive lecturing and shoving ideologies down audience throats in the name of creativity is threatening. THE MAN has been using soft power through media (whether Western or Indian) for a very long time. Most of us don't even realise it. Now it is time to reverse the situation. I believe that patriarchal ideologies should be fought within the paradigms that the patriarchy understands. USE THE SAME CORPORATE TOOLS TO FIGHT THE MAN. Just don't say it. Instead be softly political, defiant and creative.

Thus I position myself and thus I will solicit myself (and Holy Cow Media). It is a problematic positioning but then nothing in life is easy, not even creativity.

Further Readings

- Amartya Sen, Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny. Allen Lane, Penguin Group, 2006.

¹⁹ See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power

- Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity. Penguin Group, India, 2005.
- Edward W Said, Orientalism: Western Conceptions Of The Orient. Penguin Group, 1995.
- Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, Blackwell Publishing, 1991.
- www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=Web210214166241Hoot121849%20PM1087&pn=1
(The Global Indian-Part III by Subrano Chattarji)

Sapna Samant practiced medicine in India, has got a MA in film, television and media studies from the University of Auckland, has organised the Asia Film Festival Aotearoa, produces documentaries for National Radio and was runner-up in the Best New Broadcaster category of the New Zealand Radio Awards 2006. She also director of her company, HOLY COW MEDIA LTD.