



London Mela Finale - UK/France Co-production - Dhol Academy meets Trans Express ©Victor Frankowski

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The Mela Report

Past, Present & Future

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the Mela Report



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The Mela Report

In the commissioning of this report, Nutkhut and the Mela Partnership wished to bring together a range of perspectives: independent, collective, historical and future facing, to the wonderful world of Mela.

We hope this report is a useful and helpful contribution to the broader debate around community celebration, outdoor arts and how we all have a role to play in creating harmonious and happier communities.

The think-tank British Future have helped shape and inform the process through research and interviews resulting in recommendations for future policy.

This report was made possible by funding from Arts Council England.

Mela Partnership

Initiated and led by Nutkhut, the Mela Partnership is a diverse, national membership network of festivals, volunteers and producers. The Partnership develops high quality creative programming, shares learning and builds capacity.

The Partnership supports the commissioning and touring of new and innovative outdoor arts productions, facilitates networking events and seminars and supports the professional development of the next generation of Mela makers.

Our strength, impact and growth is a result of our diversity of faith, class and gender.

Published by Nutkhut ©
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The spread of our network throughout the UK

“As a founder member of the Mela Partnership, Manchester has benefited hugely to the many initiatives and opportunities the Partnership has on offer. Action combined with a deep sense of understanding the audiences we serve is at the heart of this network”
 Khairul Alam - Manchester Mega Mela

“Mela has the power to bring many different groups of families together, through so many different lenses; the arts, culture, heritage, faith, all in a sharing and nurturing way”
 Fahim Qureshi

“We are not a Mela and that’s the real strength of the Partnership. The ability to bringing a diverse range of experiences together- local authorities, volunteers, National Portfolio Organisations all coming together and having conversations, open supportive conversations without feeling like an outsider to the process”
 Andrea Francis - Arts By the Sea - Bournemouth



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“Mela has played an important role in the cultural lives of many communities in the UK over the past 30 years. The Mela Partnership was initiated to support the voice of the wider Mela community and to interconnect with the wider cultural sector”

Ajay Chhabra - Artistic Director, Nutkhut

Mela. / (mi:lə, 'mɛlə) / noun

from the Sanskrit “to meet”, related to “milana” the verb to mix, to tune, to come together and used to describe a large gathering of people – a fair or a festival.

Foreword

Welcome to the Wonderful World of Mela!

The meaning of Mela itself is the meeting, the coming together, the mix, the blend of unique aspects of our society - creative, resilient, spiritual.

Mela has had a profound impact on my practice and is beginning to finally receive the attention it deserves.

The Pandemic proved to be a pivotal moment for Mela. Colleagues across the nation came together at the height of the pandemic. The Mela community's response was simple, from artists and audiences, delivery drivers, shopkeepers, and healthcare workers asking the question ...*'how best can we support and engage and help our communities?'* From the running of covid test centres to vaccination clinics, from advice centres to food banks, during that period, our partners played an important and vital role nationally.

As with many art forms that have been born in the UK as a result of its diaspora and exported globally, Mela has had a broad and lasting impact. From international collaborations with technology entrepreneurs, to truck art with local faith craft groups, the dimensions and layers of Mela are many.

Melatria in 2020, was the world's first Digital Mela in Virtual Reality - transmitted live, over a 12 hour continuous online multi platform feed, to a global audience with Artificial Intelligence built into our feed. Across 5 continents through 8 time zones, an exhilarating experience, all made possible through the co-operation of the Mela Partnership.

Our 'Elephant in the Room' seminars tackle the issues of our time. The challenges of class, so deeply rooted in the Arts in the UK and we encourage healthy debate around Sustainability in Outdoor Festivals.

What is it that makes Mela so compelling? In financial terms Mela is a poor cousin amongst outdoor arts festivals and organisations, it's the cousin that intrigues us all, the flamboyant, the charismatic - where do they get the drive, how do they make things work?

Our strength is in our diversity, from consultant surgeons to serving officers in the British Army, from taxi drivers, to teachers from arts entrepreneurs to retired health workers. Our partners come from all walks of life, many started as volunteers, with a web of connections through the lens of faith, family, schools and community groups.

This report makes no attempt to be a detailed historical account, it's simple in its purpose, to provoke debate and encourage dialogue towards constructive and thoughtful recommendations.

Mela matters and will continue to matter. Whilst holding true to its original meaning of 'meeting', we use Mela in its purest form, as a metaphor, through moments of universal connection and joy in bringing people from all walks of life, together.

Ajay Ajay Chhabra

Executive Summary

This report looks first at the format, content, profile and funding of Melas. It is an attempt to highlight the landscape in which Mela operates and to present real world, practical challenges and recommendations.

The Mela Partnership was formed following a number of iterations of partners in the sector coming together. Initial meetings with Manchester and London Mela's resulted in the regular sharing of info on - artists, stallholders production, crew and volunteers. It became clear the Mela Partnership was addressing an important need.

Melas have been held in the UK since the 1980s, starting in locations with sizeable South Asian populations but held increasingly in those with a smaller presence. In the Indian subcontinent, where Melas originate, the term is used to refer to events of all sizes and purposes, including of a religious or commercial nature. In the UK Melas are festivals, with a programme typically of music and dance among other art forms.

Entrance is largely free, but some Melas include ticketed events. Costs are often, not always, kept low, by the commitment of volunteers who are likely to have a Mela interest in their continuation and growth, as well as to their social and cultural aims.

While open to all, Mela is the highlight of the social and cultural year for many people of South Asian heritage: for some, Mela may be the only large cultural event they regularly attend, and for many the highlight of their social and cultural year.

But Melas also have the aim of showcasing the richness and variety of South Asian arts and culture and conveying it to new audiences in the communities across the regions of the UK where they are held. In this way they have the potential to help increase cultural understanding and cross divides in towns and cities with a South Asian presence across the UK.

Recommendations:

1. Stakeholder Engagement

- To bring together key stakeholders to commit to an increase in funding and resources, based on evidence, to the Mela sector and for this initiative to be led by organisations with leadership and commitment from South Asian directors and chairs.

2. Resource & Research

- To identify a University partner with an intention to develop a Centre for Mela Practice.
- Evidence impact on inequality of funding and grant making processes.
- Understanding and developing South Asian talent pipelines through the lens of Mela.

3. Collaboration & Co Design

- Support and co-author reports on Sustainability and Disability in Mela.
- Evidence and articulate local and regional cross sector collaborations.
- To recognise and value capacity levels and develop pathways for shared knowledge.

4. Volunteer & Engage

- To evidence the impact of Mela on communities and individuals.
- To identify new and structured volunteering opportunities in Mela.



Our Approach

Methodology

British Future's research gathered information on Mela partnership organisations and their events and programmes (See Appendix 1). Of the 12 Melas surveyed, four were first held in the 1990s, a further four between 2000 and 2010 and the remaining four from 2011. The newest Mela, held in Hull, is nine years old. Appendix 2 sets out the methodology used by British Future and the small number of recently established Melas included is likely to reflect the funding environment for arts events, as well as challenges for Mela funding in particular.

Melas vary in length: five of the responding Melas are one day events, six take place over three days and one, Arts by the Sea in Bournemouth, is a three day event. Reflecting their size and whether in a large city or less populated location, some Melas attract largely local audiences, others national and sometimes international attendees.

Audiences

Members of the Mela partnership were asked about the direction of audience numbers and how their most recent live event compared to 2016. Five said that their audience numbers had increased: these included larger Melas such as London and Birmingham, and smaller events such as Preston City Mela. Five Melas said that their audience numbers were lower than in 2016, while two others said they were about the same.

Structure

Members of the Mela partnership vary in their organisational structure and size, among other characteristics. Most hold Melas with a full programme of South Asian arts. Others hold Mela or South Asian performances within non Mela events. The variety of models is seen as a strength by some Mela organisers and stakeholders. Discrete Mela events can showcase and promote the range of South Asian arts in a concentrated and focused way.

Resource

Holding Mela events within other programmes allows South Asian arts and culture to be conveyed to Asian and non-Asian audiences where a full Mela is not feasible for resource reasons. Holding Mela events within a wider programme has the benefit of reaching audiences in areas where Asian communities are small and where it

would be difficult to attract non-Asian audiences to a full Mela. In such areas, Mela can have a particularly strong impact on cultural awareness. As one organiser put it, it enables Mela 'to speak to the communities who only know about Uber drivers and waiters'.

Art Forms

Mela organisers were asked what art forms and activities their events included out of 11 possible choices: dance, music, singing, craft, visual arts, comedy, procession, film, sports, theatre and wellbeing advice (see Appendix 3). The top five art forms were, not surprisingly, dance and music, which all responding Melas included. Visual arts feature in all but one Mela, and most included singing and craft activities. Seven Melas hold a procession. Other art forms, featuring in a small number of Melas are cabaret and comedy, film, sports, theatre and health and wellbeing activities. On average, the Melas had up to eight art forms and activities in their programme regardless of their size. However, Melas with a higher annual income were more likely to have a minimum of five activities or art forms at their event.

Uniqueness

Melas differ in the extent to which they include performers and art forms which are not South Asian. This is done in different ways, such as:

- Including non-Asian artists in arts and crafts demonstrations and activities,
- Including a community stage.
- Including a small number of performances by non-Asian artists but which have a link to South Asian art forms. One Mela (Manchester) which had taken this step found it had increased its non-Asian audience.

“The partnership is fundamental in providing a platform for Mela across the country and to support and encourage joint working opportunities”

Dahlia Jamil - CEO - Art Asia



© Nutkhut - Diwali Mela/English Heritage- Kois Miah

Mela's Role in Crossing Divides

Aims and objectives The role of Mela in increasing cultural understanding and crossing divides varies between Melas. However, a consistently shared aim is to provide an arts and cultural offer in the form of a large-scale social event to South Asian communities. Many organisers are aware that South Asians are offered very little in the way of arts and culture from their own heritage outside of Mela.

Melas are keen to convey that they represent the arts and cultures of diverse South Asian nations including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. They also represent the contributions of the various South Asian (and world) faiths, including Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Some Melas therefore have aims of increased cultural and spiritual understanding among South Asians in the UK. Addressing divisions arising from caste discrimination is also an aim of some Melas. Other core objectives of many Melas relates to legacy and cultural continuity: to educate children and young people about their South Asian heritage, and to give emerging and younger artists an opportunity to perform and build their profile.

Alongside its role in raising the profile of South Asian culture, Mela organisers are proud of the history of Mela in relation to wider community cohesion goals. In the 1980s these were formed around the concept of multiculturalism, moving to anti-racism goals in the 1990s:

Moving into the current century, the focus is on social cohesion, and in reducing the isolation and separateness of lives of people of some ethnic minorities in the UK. Mela organisers interviewed felt that they had a particular role to play in challenging stereotypes about South Asian culture which prevent social mixing.

As one Mela organiser put it...**'South Asian culture is not all about jihad and prayers'**.

Mela is also seen as having an important role to play in promoting Asian culture and Asian arts, including showcasing emerging talent. A number of Melas gave examples of where some of their top acts had started out performing on Mela community stages. For example: Riz

Ahmed to Rishi Rich, from Usha Uthap to the head of some of the sub continent's oldest schools of music have already performed side by side to Mela audiences Their origins continue to influence Mela organisers, especially the aim to share and to celebrate the range of arts and cultural forms with origins in the five South Asian nations represented, and to showcase the diverse contemporary and historical art forms. Melas share the aim of raising the profile of their events, strengthening their brand and gaining more respect for South Asian arts.

“The Peepul Centre has always been an arts centre that works across sectors, from health to education to wellbeing. During Covid, whilst other theatres and arts centres went dark, our doors remained open and we became an essential vaccination clinic and food bank. We exist because of our community.”

Anil Bhanot OBE - Peepul Centre - Leicester

“Seva (community service) is a central value of Melas; without this aspect of volunteering we become unsustainable. We don't have the same resources as the better funded larger festivals so Seva becomes that much more important - we punch above our weight, we work hard to make ourselves heard”

Gulab Singh - MBE DL - Preston City Mela



© Hayley Madden

Growing Mela Audiences

Melas are of varying size, some are very large events attracting tens of thousands: two within this research – London and Bradford – attract more than 100 thousand people. The research examined the proportion of people who come to Melas from different demographic groups. While South Asian attendees are the clear majority, Melas reported attracting a mix of people across the age bands from the Asian community and White British people. Groups which were reported as less well represented in Mela audiences included White non-British people and those from higher social class groups.

New Audiences

The ability of Melas to attract a more diverse audience was related to location, with London

and Birmingham reporting a broader demographic profile among their attendees. While most Melas were able to give a general indication of the composition of their audience in the survey, the extent to which Melas collect audience data varies. As one arts stakeholder observed, audience research could help to understand preferences of attendees in relation to the event, as well as identifying demographic gaps among attendees.

Increasing Audiences

The survey undertaken asked Melas whether they are trying to increase audience members from different demographic groups. With one exception, all Melas surveyed said they were.

“It promotes better relationships with all communities. We also get a huge number of African and Caribbean families coming to Mela. If you want to promote better relations between our culture and ALL our communities, Mela is the proven way, it has helped a lot” Khairul Alam - Manchester Mega Mela

“We just don’t do arts speak and the jargon that comes with it – we are conscious of the relationships amongst existing networks of arts professionals. We don’t have those and keep a check on ourselves” Graham Callister - Leicester City Council

“Our Mela has been at the heart of our community – The Mela Partnership engagement has allowed us to be more confident with our bigger arts partners in the city” Tapan Mahapatra - Hull Indian Mela



Photo: © Eden Arts - Winter Driving procession - Graham Wynne

Raising Awareness & Adapting

Raising awareness through publicity

Mela organisers described the strategies in place to increase the size of their non-Asian audiences. The survey and interviews included local press, radio, social media, posters and word of mouth. Other methods included banners and word of mouth, which were used by Melas reporting few paid staff. Melas also distribute leaflets in venues such as pubs and libraries. Melas attract media coverage with all but one saying their performances or events were broadcast on radio, television or social media.

This is likely to raise awareness of Mela and encourage attendance at future events. Some research participants saw opportunities for Mela to make more use of social media to increase attendance. Arts stakeholders interviewed saw publicity as key to attracting non-South Asian audiences to Mela, since it sends out the message that the event welcomes all. It is important to Melas that they are free events and held in public places that are visible and easily accessed. Some had relocated to increase their profile, visibility and grow their non-Asian audiences. Others had held smaller South Asian arts performances in accessible venues to raise awareness and encourage attendance at Mela: There is a consensus that widening participation in Mela and attracting new audiences may require expanding or changing its programme or the event in other ways.

Melas said in the survey that they plan to make major changes to their event, and this was to extend its length. Increasing promotional activity, strengthening the brand and carrying out community activities to raise interest in larger events are thought to be important in attracting new audiences. Some Melas have outreach programmes targeted at specific groups such as Muslim women, young people and non-Asian ethnic minorities.

Melas engaged in such work include Preston City Mela, Penrith’s Winter Droving and Bournemouth’s Arts by the Sea Festival. In addition to outreach, a number of Melas said they were seeking partnerships with local community groups, or with local schools, colleges and universities.

Adapting the Mela programme

At the same time, there is a strong feeling among Mela organisers that diversifying audiences should not be at the expense of its essential essence and focus on South Asian arts and culture. Mela’s historical, political, context in the UK makes organisers reluctant to introduce significant changes to programmes, particularly where this could result in a dilution of Mela’s South Asian identity.

Mela organisers also feel there should be some element of fusion to keep Mela contemporary. The organiser of a Mela in the North East of England (Middlesbrough) described their long term aim to open up Mela, with the explicit aim of reducing racism and increasing social cohesion: This Mela organiser, among others, commented that their strategy has been successful in both increasing attendance from Asian and non-Asian audiences alike.

“Mela Partnership ‘Go and See opportunities’ offer time to reflect and respond as well as provide opportunities to our Mela and wider programme. It was also inspiring to attend an event in Bradford, the next UK City of Culture” Holly Glover - Middlesbrough Council

“This Mela go-see (City of Culture 2025 Bradford) was extremely valuable. It not only allowed for time for Mela partners to join together to discuss common threads and gain updates, but it allowed us to network with the wider creative sector, enabling wider conversation, research new shows and potential companies and it allowed us to join in wider cultural conversations” Lisa Storey - Redcar and Cleveland Council



© Nutkhut - Toby

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Data & Statistics

The survey, undertaken by British Future, collected data on the Mela programmes, methods of publicity, audiences and plans to diversify these. It also included questions about staffing and funding. The Melas participating in the survey and their characteristics are shown in 'Table 1' below.

Appendix 1

Name	Location	Year Founded	Days	Audience
Arts by the Sea Festival	Bournemouth	2011	3	65,000
Bradford Festivals	Bradford	1988	2	100,000
BD Festival	Bradford	2022	2	15,000
BD is LIT	Bradford	2021	2	15,000
Big John's Mela	Birmingham	2012	2	70,000
Gravesend Mela	Gravesend	2004	1	2,000
Hull Mela	Hull	2013	1	3,000
London Mela	London	2003	2	100,000
Manchester Mega Mela	Manchester	2003	2	50,000
Middlesbrough Mela	Middlesbrough	1990	2	50,000
Newcastle Mela	Newcastle	1993	2	28,000
Preston City Mela	Preston	1996	1	3-4,000
Southampton Mela Festival	Southampton	2001	1	30,000
Winter Droving	Penrith	2011	1	20,000

"Mela is about distinctiveness, visibility, identity, valuing differences for communities and a place to value cultures as a part of a neighbourhood"
 Angela Chappell - Arts Council England

Appendix 2

Methods: The research involved consultation with Mela producers and stakeholders, through a round table focus group discussion, interviews and a survey during late 2021. The round table was attended by 11 representatives of Mela partnerships (see Appendix 1), including those running whole Mela events, others arts programmes with South Asian content and stakeholders. Interviews were held with four selected Mela partners and arts funding stakeholders in two areas.

In addition to a survey completed by twelve organisations from the Mela Partnership, the research included a round table and one to one interviews which examined the successes and challenges Mela had experienced:

- Increasing cultural understanding and crossing divides,
- Diversification of audiences
- Access to funding
- Increasing profile and growing reach

"All this provides different acts for different audiences. One big main stage is not enough to develop the different strands of audiences and generations that we could be reaching and the Mela Partnership opens up to new ideas"
 Gurvinder Sandher MBE DL - Cohesion Plus, Tunbridge Wells Mela

The Mela Partnership regularly holds regional meetings with partner organisations and brings together key partners - artists, community groups and action groups to make Mela and what it represents, more visible. Regional meetings have taken place in: Manchester, The Hive Newcastle, Newcastle Arts Centre, Wolverhampton Arena Theatre, Luton Hat Factory Birmingham Hippodrome, London - Richmix, Penrith - Eden Arts, Southampton - Art Asia, Solent University, De Montfort University.

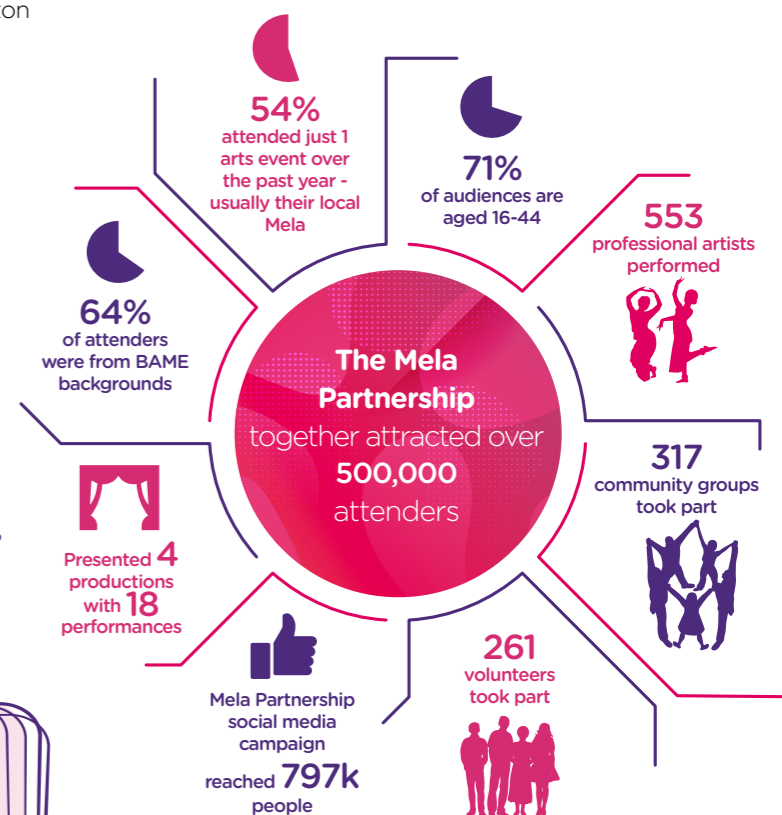
We are regularly invited to speak at networking events and academic seminars.

The Mela Partnership has advocated for the sector at the following at events: •Outdoor Arts UK Conference, • Devoted and Disgruntled, •101 Outdoor Arts Creation Space, Newbury • Oslo Festival Conference, Oslo, Norway • San Francisco Art Commission, San Francisco, USA • House of Lords Mela advocacy meeting, London • Academic Seminar, University of Greenwich • Academic Seminar, University of Kent • Academic Seminar, University of Wolverhampton.

"We want to reach wide audiences, and if Melas want to break out of the stereotype, it probably has to start from the programming of the Mela. It is all about the content which defines who you are attracting. We have a wide repertoire of artists: musicians and performers. The programming relationship can go both ways" Adrian Lochhead - Director - Eden Arts

The annual combined impact of our partnership:

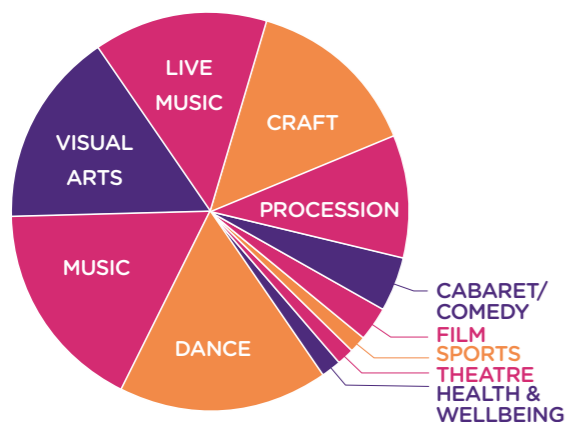
These statistics are drawn from data-collection undertaken by the Mela Survey Team; analysis from the Made in Mela Evaluation Report by Sam Projects, figures in the public realm.



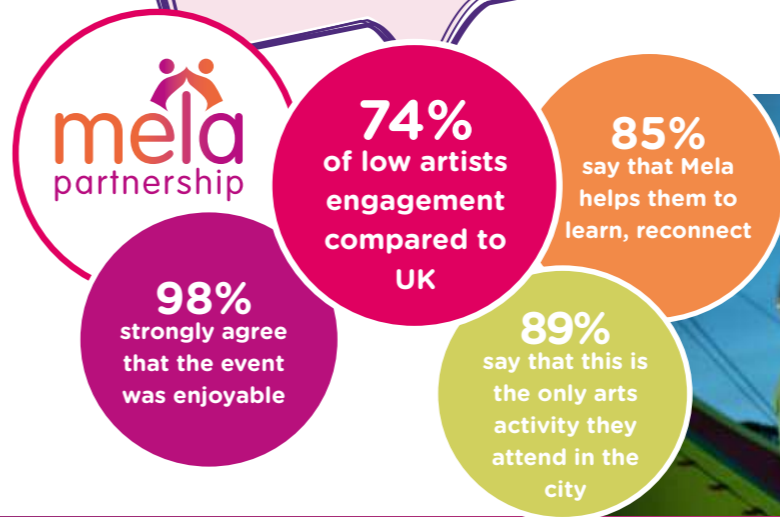
"The demographic has changed: we have new audiences and visitors to Mela communities with strong family and faith values, Polish, Somalis and Afghans and our Mela programme is beginning to reflect that" Kash Patel - Chair, Middlesbrough Mela

Art forms featuring in Melas

Appendix 3



This report looks first at the format, content, profile and funding of Melas. It then looks at their role in crossing divides and increasing cultural understanding of South Asian communities in the UK. Finally, it considers how audiences can be grown, and younger people engaged as current Table 1 - Melas participating in the survey and future participants in Mela. The report draws on the views, experiences and perspectives of a range of Melas, within the confines of a modestly sized project. It makes some conclusions for the future of Mela, and relating to its role in increasing cultural understanding and crossing divides.



Developing Talent Pipelines

The next generation

We have already described how some Melas feel that the age range of their audiences is insufficiently diverse and would like to attract more young people. It is important to note that Mela is by no means alone in having these concerns which are shared by other sections of the arts sector.

Most of the Melas responding to the survey include a special programme or events for children. However, this was not seen as sufficient to encourage sustained interest in attending Mela among young adults. Melas identified particular challenges in engaging third generation young people of South Asian heritage. As one Mela organiser stated...
‘They don’t come to the Mela as a natural thing, so the challenge is, how do we engage?’

Families

Round-table attendees agreed that, while young people’s musical taste is different from their parents and grandparents, they are often interested in Asian arts and culture and could be attracted in higher numbers to Mela. The experience of some Melas is that parenthood is often the point at which interest in Mela is regenerated among families wishing to engage children with their heritage.

Schools

Some Melas are currently working with schools, as part of their aim to promote interest among a younger generation of festival goers in Mela, as well as raising awareness of South Asian arts and culture. Lack of funding affects the extent to which Melas can carry out this work, which could attract new audiences as well as increase cultural awareness.

Some Melas see schools work as one way of raising awareness and interest in Mela among young people. The schools work carried out by Manchester Mela has a particular focus on schools with few Asian students, as a way of raising awareness of Asian arts and culture. The Mela’s programme includes a relatively high proportion of events aimed at young people, in the region of 35-40%.

Instability

Southampton Mela also has a strong focus on schools work: this has involved schools across the city but targeted particularly at schools in areas of deprivation. It has also worked closely with other educational institutions, including universities in recent years. Their strategies include increasing young people’s involvement in organisational aspects of Mela, for example programming and events management, rather than just the arts and cultural aspects. Mela organisers had found their success in engaging schools often dependent on the interest and commitment of one individual, giving this work a degree of instability. It was nonetheless considered essential for the future of Mela.

“As a newcomer to this kind of event, and someone on the younger end of the age spectrum of people working in the industry, it was really inspiring to see that there are people who have made a career out of socially beneficial and culturally stimulating Mela arts events”
Lakota Kendal - Eden Arts - Cumbria

Melas and arts funders also talked of the importance of involving younger people of South Asian heritage in Mela planning and development. Such individuals are likely to have the cross-cultural knowledge needed to develop Mela. However, interviewees remarked on the near absence of people of South Asian heritage in arts organisations, and particularly in festival management. Melas could help to address this issue by participating in training programmes, including apprenticeships. This is likely to be difficult for many Melas, given their small size and reliance on volunteers. However, there may be scope for collaboration between Melas to help develop festival direction and management skills among young people with South Asian heritage.



Photo: © Southampton Mela

“It’s been crucial to describe the importance and need of Mela to mainstream arts professional in the outdoor arts sector and beyond. Mela is more than just booking an act, Mela connects across its communities through health, social and environmental issues and this can go missing for the less observant”

Phil Hargreaves - City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council

“Over the past decade various smaller Mela network initiatives have come and gone - often led by personal or institutional motivations - the Mela Partnership has a more inclusive approach”

Khairul Alam - Manchester Mega Mela

“We’re very keen to open up our Mela, while still having that strong South Asian identity and including other cultures that have moved into the area. We use Mela as a tool to help people understand one another, to eradicate racism within our communities and to help people appreciate how much value all of these cultures bring into the area - Mela is more than a festival”

Mohammed Yaqoob - Newcastle Mela



© Tim Smith - Bradford - Zamana



© Tim Smith - Bradford - Zamana

Profile & Funding

Melas differ markedly in size of their programmes, audiences and funding. However, many are relatively small. Most have a mixture of paid employees and volunteers, with the former ranging from a handful to 30. Many of the Melas said they had paid employees, though in some cases these were working on arts events in addition to Mela. Income and audience size are, as would be expected, strongly related to employee numbers. For example the largest event, the London Mela employs 35 people. Mela employees will also consist largely of temporary or seasonal staff employed for the period of the Mela.

Volunteer Input

All Melas rely on volunteer input and many have strong volunteer workforces. While smaller Melas typically have 10-30 volunteers, larger ones have many more: London Mela has 35 and the Hull Mela has around 200. Volunteers are involved in all aspects of Mela organisation and delivery. Volunteering can help bridge divides, with Mela providing opportunities for people to mix with others. Mela volunteers may also be involved in other forms of volunteering. The volunteering opportunities offered by Mela and their impact on individuals and communities need to be better understood.

Resource

Many Melas are run on relatively small budgets and rely on a range of sources of income, as well as in kind support. Eight Melas responded to the survey question about funding, reporting income of between £10,000 (Hull Mela) and £300,000 (Arts by the Sea Festival): a number of incomes were in the region of £100,000. Funding sources reported in the survey vary between Melas but include: • **Local councils** • **The Arts Councils** • **Sponsorship** • **Donations from temples** • **On the day collections** • **Income from stalls, sales of food and refreshments and items such as clothing and jewellery.** • **Public information stalls from organisations such as the police, health and education services.**

Enrichment

As well as enriching the Mela experience, the presence of stalls represents a contribution to local businesses, including those which are owned and run by ethnic minorities. This contribution could be measured to gain a better picture of the economic

contribution of Mela. This could also identify untapped opportunities for Melas in involving local and national businesses

Status

The survey did not ask about expenditure, but it is clear from the qualitative interviews that many Melas are delivered on a limited budget and that funding is a key concern of many organisers. While funding is a challenge in its own right, for many Mela organisers, the problem reflects the relatively low status of Mela in the arts and cultural world. A central theme of the research discussions was the temporary nature of funding, which allows for little longer term planning. The minority of organisations in the partnership which are National Portfolio Organisations, funded by Arts Council England, have certainty of funding for 3 years, however income of two or three years for a greater percentage of Melas would make sustainability and long-term planning more feasible, allowing Melas to be more strategic, including in relation to their future audiences and programmes. For those Mela's funded by Arts Council England, the level of delivery expectations outside of the core Mela can put pressure on capacity.

Funding

The Arts Council is a source of funding for some Melas, either directly or through the arts organisation from which the Mela is run. A number of Melas feel that income from the Arts Council is insufficient. There is a feeling among some Mela organisers that the value of Mela is overlooked in the mainstream arts world, and its cultural contribution is overlooked.

Contribution

Mela organisers are clear about its contribution to arts and culture in Britain. However, their experience is that arts funders have questioned its creative and artistic contribution, though recognise the importance of its social mission in increasing understanding of South Asian culture. Among the funders interviewed, the perceived limitation of Mela for arts funding was seen to stem in part at least from the reliance of many on volunteers. While the value of volunteers to Melas, and to achieving their aims, is recognised by funders, the lack of a core permanent staff team is also seen as affecting their ability to innovate, develop, fund raise and plan long term. It was also felt that

Melas insufficiently evaluate their events, again often using volunteers, and can have insufficient information from which to plan changes in content and direction. This points to the need for funding and other forms of support for Melas to evaluate their contribution to the towns and cities where they are held.

Local Authorities

Local authorities have been a key source of funding for Melas, some of whom have recognised its role in increasing cultural understanding. The level and consistency of support from local authorities has been mixed, often dependent on political will and budgets. Funding sources which have seemed secure have been lost when political control changes. In some locations it has continued, with the Mela recognised as generating income for the local authority and seen as good for economic development.

Political Landscape

Funding for Melas from local authorities has reduced in recent years and in most cases, reduced local authority budgets were seen as the main reason, though political considerations and antagonism from some sections of the white community were cited as another factor. An arts funding stakeholder commented that when funding is squeezed.

Shortages

There was a view that, faced with funding shortages, local authorities have concentrated on their own events. Some stakeholders felt that cuts to Mela funding had not been as strongly challenged as they could have been. It was argued that Mela organisers have been 'too polite' and that they should lobby their local authorities harder in order to secure funding. This included ensuring Mela is included as part of their cultural budgets. It was also felt that local authorities often lack sufficient staff of Asian heritage who understand and can advocate for Mela. Some Mela organisers have found a lack of understanding of the event among local authority officials, and councillors. However, there was also a view that some local authorities are more likely to support Melas where they are seen to have a strong and innovative programme, collaborations with arts and cultural partners and have effective leadership.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a source of funding for Melas. Income from sponsorship varies with some Melas reporting that support of this kind comes largely from Asian businesses. Mela organisers expressed concern that levels of such support are likely to be lower in 2022 than in previous years because of the impact of Covid-19 on businesses. Melas also receive income from stallholders who also add to the Mela experience for attendees. Funders expressed the view that Melas might collaborate more to share information on sponsorship and stallholders, though clearly there might be concerns from Melas about competing for the same resources.

“We’ve observed and supported the growth of the cultural opportunities that have been associated with the Nepalese community in the borough and we can support all communities to interconnect”

Jenny Atherton – Rushmoor District Council

“Visibility, a better understanding of our communities and deeper connection with our respective identities has been our driver”

Lieutenant Colonel T K Saukuru MBE QGM RLC

“As one of the new members we are looking forward to the shared learning opportunities and to speak to our peers in a safe and constructive creative environment”

Mariam Hassan – Camden Mela, London



© Nutkhut - London Mela



© Nutkhut - Mela in the City

Conclusions & Recommendations

Recommendations

1. Stakeholder Engagement

- To bring together key stakeholders to commit to an increase in funding and resources, based on evidence, to the Mela sector and for this initiative to be led by organisations with leadership and commitment from South Asian directors and chairs.

2. Resource & Research

- To identify a University partner with an intention to develop a Centre for Mela Practice.
- Evidence impact on inequality of funding and grant making processes.
- Understanding and developing South Asian talent pipelines through the lens of Mela.

3. Collaboration & Co Design

- Support and co-author reports on Sustainability and Disability in Mela.
- Evidence and articulate local and regional cross sector collaborations.
- To recognise and value capacity levels and develop pathways for shared knowledge.

4. Volunteer & Engage

- To evidence the impact of Mela on communities and individuals.
- To identify new and structured volunteering opportunities in Mela.



Conclusions

Achieving Melas aims

There is a strong sense among Melas that they have a role to play in increasing cultural understanding and crossing divides. They wish to attract a diverse audience, reflecting their local community and many are proud at the number who travel some distance.

Melas see the programme as important in their ability to attract diverse audiences. Their challenge is to make it sufficiently innovative to attract new non-South Asian audiences while keeping their core aims and objectives for South Asians in the UK.

Melas may need stronger messaging to convey their aims and objectives in relation to the profile and status of South Asian arts and culture, and their welcome to all. A stronger message that the Mela is part of the cultural, arts and social calendar

in localities across the UK, alongside a message of welcome could help increase participation of non Asian audiences.

Messaging aimed at increasing the status and profile of Mela could also help to achieve the objectives of many to attract younger attendees, including those with South Asian heritage.

Challenges and opportunities

Melas wish to grow and diversify their audience but are constrained by funding. The short-term nature of funding for many Melas makes long term planning difficult. There may be opportunities for Melas to diversify their funding, taking in those who support social cohesion projects, as well as arts and cultural endeavours.

Partnerships are key to the success of many Melas, and these include strong relationships with other arts and cultural organisations, as well as schools.

Melas should ensure they are linked to wider arts and culture initiatives in their localities, including City of Culture partnerships and legacy organisers. Melas feel that there is insufficient appreciation of their artistic contribution among arts funders. This reduces funding opportunities and profile given to Mela, and in turn the work they can do to cross divides.

Lack of diversity among arts funders may contribute to this problem, and the causes of this need to be understood and addressed.

Melas would benefit from a more detailed understanding of their current audience, but probably more importantly, who they are currently not reaching: many currently collect this data through volunteers and have few resources for analysis and follow-up action. More needs to be known about what deters and what attracts attendees, whether this is the artistic programme, the venue, the stalls or the food. .

Making more of volunteers

Volunteering can help bridge divides, with Mela providing opportunities for people to mix with others. The volunteering opportunities offered by Mela and their impact on individuals and communities need to be better understood. Reliance on volunteers means that arts funders tend to see them as less professional than other festivals, and less able to be innovative – assets which are valued by arts funders.

Melas may therefore need to be clear to funders that they have professional skills in festival delivery, and that their strong voluntary input is an asset which brings them closer to the communities in which they are held.

To ensure that Melas, but also local communities maximise the benefits of their volunteer workforces, Mela organisers should ensure they are supported to work with volunteers and are linked to local volunteering networks and users.

Raising profile and impact

Increasing the presence of South Asian arts within other programmes may encourage those who are not familiar with Mela to attend events, while increasing cultural understanding in their own right. Local and national partnerships have an important role in integrating South Asian arts into other events.

Impact of Mela

The impact of Mela has not been measured: they will include social impacts such as increased community cohesion and social connection; increased voluntary activity and involvement of people in community activities; and economic impacts through sales of food, refreshments and other items on stalls. The impact of Melas may also include increased take up of services such as health and policing, as a result of information distributed at Melas. Data on impact can be collected by individual Melas but is also a question which should be explored by arts funders and researchers. Many Mela impact reports are conducted by external agencies or Universities with little to no cultural understanding of Mela audiences, history or the political landscape.

The Mela Report

The research undertaken by British Future is central to this report which aims to inform the future national and local strategies of the Mela Partnership and of individual Melas around the country. It has provided the context for this report which contains actionable, practical recommendations for Mela producers, in the Mela partnership and beyond. This report draws on the views, experiences and perspectives of a range of Melas and makes some recommendations for the future of Mela, recognising its role in increasing cultural understanding and crossing divides, namely:

- **Social impacts such as increased community cohesion and social connection**
- **Increased voluntary activity and involvement of people in community activities**
- **Economic impacts through sales of food, refreshments and other items on stalls**
- **Increased take up of services such as health and policing, because of information distributed at Melas**
- **Extend the profile and public reach of Melas.**
- **Cross divides and bridge a range of existing and new audiences**
- **To bringing about greater social integration and cohesion**
- **Assist in making a compelling case to key stakeholder and public audiences about the important contribution of Mela**
- **Extend the profile and public reach of Melas.**

Acknowledgements

Our Mela Partners are:

- Arts By the Sea - Bournemouth
- Bula Festival - Aldershot
- Camden Mela - London
- City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council
- Desi Fest Luton
- Eden Arts - Cumbria
- Hull Indian Mela - Kingston upon Hull
- Leicester City Council
- Manchester Mega Mela
- Middlesbrough Mela
- Newcastle Mela
- Peepul Centre - Leicester
- Preston City Mela
- Redcar and Cleveland Council
- Rushmoor Borough Council
- Southampton Mela - Arts Asia
- Tunbridge Wells Mela - Cohesion Plus



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What is the Mela Partnership?

Initiated and led by Nutkhut, the Mela Partnership is a diverse, national membership network of festivals, volunteers and producers. Mela is simply a metaphor for the coming together of our shared vision and values. Our strength, impact and growth is a result of our diversity of faith, class and gender, not all our partners are Mela's and this diversity is our strength.

Every year thousands of people across the country flock to these large-scale festive events, to meet friends and family, to celebrate and to engage in cultural activity. Mela's highlight the discoveries, delights and challenges of our shared cultural identity, they are a welcoming place in which different ethnic and cultural communities can come together.

Melas have been part of the UK's cultural landscape for over 30 years and attract audiences of 500,000 people a year. Melas draw in audiences who have low engagement in the arts, that many other cultural providers find 'hard to reach'.

The Partnership develops high quality creative programming, shares learning and builds capacity. The Partnership supports the commissioning and touring of new and innovative outdoor arts productions, facilitates networking events and seminars and supports the professional development of the next generation of Mela makers.