

# Oz Fest India: Why *Masterchef Australia*—Garnished with Comedians, Film, Contemporary Performance, and Music—Was the Best Recipe for Australian Public Diplomacy in India

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*Following a tumultuous period in the Australia-India bilateral relationship, the Australian Government undertook the largest cultural diplomacy initiative ever staged in India. Bold and ambitious, Oz Fest aimed to introduce contemporary Australia to contemporary India. Key to its success was the focus on contemporary culture and careful program curation that presented highest quality work with an eye to Indian tastes. Rather than rely on more traditional government-to-government partnerships, Oz Fest sought dynamic nongovernment players in the creative industry landscape to build partnerships that spoke directly to the target audience. Relationship building and artistic collaboration was prioritized to ensure the cultural conversation continued long after the big event was over. Then there was Australia's public diplomacy secret weapon—Masterchef Australia. By sharing reflections from the perspective of the arts practitioner engaged to co-curate and produce Oz Fest, this practitioner essay offers insights into creating effective cultural diplomacy for the twenty-first century.*

**Keywords:** Australia, India, Bilateral Cultural Diplomacy, Gastro-Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, The Arts, Oz Fest, Artistic Collaboration, *Masterchef Australia*.

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A great public diplomacy test rests in the conversations you have with strangers at dinner parties. When I first moved to India in 2011 to begin my contract with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), I was perplexed at the interactions I had with educated, globally aware Indians after I declared myself an Australian. More to the point, I was perplexed by their negative perceptions from, “Why do all Australians hate Indians so much?” to “My cousin was going to study in Australia, but now it’s too dangerous so she’s going to America,” to “If I visit Australia, how do I stay safe?”

I was shocked. The perception of Australia in India bore no resemblance to the reality of my contemporary society. The issue of racially motivated attacks against Indian students and the ensuing student safety crisis (see Byrne and Hall 2013; Wesley 2009) had come and gone in the Australian consciousness, but seemed to have taken a life of their own in India. Debated endlessly on news chat shows and media conferences, even Bollywood’s biggest stars weighed in, refusing high-profile Australian awards. The issue dominated the bilateral relationship, deeply staining the perception of Australia (Wade 2015).<sup>1</sup>

But a few months later, a curious thing started to happen. Conversations began to shift to a new Indian obsession—*Masterchef Australia*.<sup>2</sup> Indians enthused about Australia’s multicultural population and cuisines, asked for my tips as they planned their visit to Melbourne’s café culture, and shared stories about their favorite contestants and their warm, friendly, down-to-earth personalities. It seemed Indians were finally being introduced to contemporary Australia, and they loved it. *Masterchef Australia* was selling the message that Australia was tolerant, diverse, and modern. It was public diplomacy in action, beamed right in to the lounge-rooms of India. It is easy to trivialize the importance of a television program. But *Masterchef Australia* seemed to be changing perceptions of Australian culture in an authentic way at a time when it was desperately needed.

Until the student safety crisis, cricket had dominated the top of mind perception of Australia in India. Then, suddenly, racism and violence became the overriding narrative. *Masterchef Australia* seemed to be ushering in a new, positive perception that Indians shaped for themselves based on their own assessment of real Australians. Reporting in the *Wall Street Journal*, Aarti Betigeri (2012) commented: “[t]here was a point last year when India’s general attitude toward Australia seemed to shift. No longer was there a sense of antagonism

<sup>1</sup> As Wade (2015) notes, violence against Indians resident in Australia became an increasingly sensitive issue following protests by students and taxi drivers across 2008-09 and a small number of high-profile violent attacks in 2009 and 2010 that Indian media, politicians, and commentators claimed were racially motivated. The issue gained intense media traction in India, becoming one of the biggest news stories in India especially in the intensely competitive and sensational television news market.

<sup>2</sup> *Masterchef Australia* is an Australian competitive cooking game show based on the British original *Masterchef*. It has enjoyed significant popularity in India after its debut on Indian television in 2010 (see Bhattacheryya 2016).

about sledging cricketers or perceptions of racism. Rather everyone wanted to talk about ‘Masterchef Australia.’”

It is important to note that *Masterchef Australia* was a happy accident for the Australian government, with its market success a product of the commercial alchemy that is the right product for the right market at the right time. However, the efficacy of *Masterchef Australia* as a public diplomacy vehicle was worth further reflection: this was a quality, well-produced product that resonated with local audiences and their cultural preferences with public diplomacy messaging carried by the authentic voices and stories of the participants. The interesting question for me was, can these be elements be replicated by a government in the design of their own public diplomacy activities?

### **An Appetite for Cultural Diplomacy**

For the purposes of clarity, I will spend a moment with definitions to frame this discussion. I view cultural diplomacy as a subset of the broader activity of public diplomacy using Milton Cummings’ (2003, 1) definition of cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.” As such, I view cultural activities as the key instrument for cultural diplomacy.

Bruce Gregory’s (2011, 353) description of public diplomacy as an “instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values” encompasses the broad range of activities that fall under the umbrella of public diplomacy within an overseas mission context. Cultural diplomacy can have public diplomacy benefits, as is discussed through this article when describing specific elements of the cultural diplomacy program Oz Fest. The *Masterchef Australia* example also powerfully describes the effect that nongovernment initiatives can have on the public diplomacy landscape: A complicating factor that makes the reality of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy a dynamic and often elusive area to operate within when working in the field.

My intersection with the world of cultural diplomacy came after 15 years as a producer and curator in the arts sector. I had been engaging with artists and institutions in the Asia-Pacific throughout my career including initiatives in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and China. In 2011, I was engaged by the Australian Government to work within the Australian High Commission (AHC) in New Delhi as co-curator and producer of Oz Fest.

Before traveling to India, I had rarely given much thought to the formal discipline of public or cultural diplomacy, even though much of my work was serving the purpose through cultural exchange and cross-cultural collaboration. Australia does not have a formal agency for public diplomacy, such as the British Council, nor a strong cultural diplomacy policy articulated outside the

narrow confines of its DFAT. Frankly, many artists are uneasy about the idea of cultural diplomacy. Visions of paintings shoved in the corner of an Embassy reception, or performing at an ill-suited venue to a room full of expatriates comes to mind for many artists who have found themselves the subject of a badly conceived cultural diplomacy function. For professionals in the arts, the concept of contributing to a government's soft power narrative can be problematic (Mar 2014), especially in Australia, where we enjoy the freedom of a robust arms-length funding relationship with government.

Yet the AHC in New Delhi had a big challenge ahead. The decision to undertake a large-scale cultural diplomacy initiative in India had been announced at the highest levels of government, and the AHC wanted to approach it in a different way from previous programs with more of the style and impact of a festival. To realize this, AHC New Delhi identified the need for cultural production skills, but recognized there was far too much sensitivity in the bilateral relationship to rely on an external agency delivering the program at such a delicate time. So they decided to trial a new arrangement, whereby a producer from the cultural sector was embedded within AHC New Delhi to work hand-in-hand with diplomatic staff to develop and deliver the festival.

AHC New Delhi had the advantage of being led by experienced diplomats that genuinely believed in the importance of public diplomacy, and a dynamic public affairs counselor with a background in the arts. Far from my assumptions of a conservative, old-fashioned diplomatic environment, there was an appetite to try something new.

### **Our Mission**

Considering India's staggering size and population, it is unlikely that most Indians will ever meet an Australian or go to Australia. Therefore, perception—received most commonly through the consumption of media, sport, and popular culture—plays a large role in the bilateral landscape.

What Indians think about Australia is important, because the nation increasingly relies on Indians wanting to come to Australia to live, visit, study, and invest. Between 2010 and 2015, about 180,000 Indian migrants arrived in Australia—more than from any other country. India is Australia's largest source of skilled migrants and, with some 53,568 Indians enrolled in Australian institutions during 2015, is the second largest source of Australia's international students (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT] n.d.).

Perceptions of Australian in India suffered after the violence against Indian students in 2009. Australia's reputation in India as a welcoming country fell dramatically from fifth place in 2008 to forty-ninth in 2010 (Australian Polity 2012; Cull 2010). Enrollments of Indian students in Australian institutions dropped significantly, visitor numbers declined, and Australian politicians and diplomats faced a dramatic deterioration of the bilateral relationship (Wade 2015).

Diplomats observed that India did not have a strong impression of Australia as a contemporary, sophisticated nation to build on. Exposure to Australians came mostly through (monocultural) cricketing stars, and the general perception of Australia seemed based on a set of bland stereotypes derived from our perceived commonalities, cricket, commonwealth, and democracy (McCarthy *et al.* 2012).

The time had passed whereby diplomacy could be sustained within the narrow government-to-government bandwidth. Rather, it needed to reach further and speak directly to opinion shapers in the media, and the public at large, projecting a more nuanced view of Australia. As Australia's High Commissioner in India at the time, Peter Varghese (quoted in Hodge 2012) remarked, "It was always going to be necessary to give India a more rounded and modern sense of Australia. If you want a serious relationship with any country you really need to have communication at a people-to-people level, which means you need a pretty clear understanding of each other." Although not initially conceived as a remedy for crisis in the bilateral relationship crisis—DFAT's intent to host an Australian International Cultural Council (AICC) Focus Country Program<sup>3</sup> in India was announced before the student safety issues really took hold—cultural diplomacy became an important part of the repair strategy.

The mission then was to create a cultural celebration with reach and impact, reinforcing key government messaging that Australia is contemporary, diverse, and innovative nation. Varghese (quoted in Betigeri 2013) sums up the approach: "What we wanted to do [with Oz Fest] was to capture and project things about the Australian character, spirit and ethos, and get people to understand that we are a diverse, dynamic, outward-looking country."

### Our Audience

In a country like India that is home to a diverse population and an incredibly dense media and cultural landscape, identifying clear audience priorities was key. India is one of the youngest countries in the world, with 65 percent of the population under 35 years of age (Australian Government 2012), and Indian youth will play a major role in future bilateral relations between Australia and India. Therefore, Oz Fest set its sights very clearly on young Indian audiences, aged between 18 and 35 years, and the elite tastemakers in

<sup>3</sup> DFAT delivered Oz Fest India as part of the AICC Focus Country Program between October 2012 and January 2013. The AICC (abolished in 2014) was the Australian Government's principal cultural diplomacy mechanism, raising awareness and understanding of Australia's contemporary identity, values, interests, and policies, across the globe. This has now been replaced by the Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program run by DFAT, and the AICC Focus Country Program has evolved in to the *Australia Now* program, managed by DFAT Canberra and Posts, identifying important cultural and economic partners and raising Australia's profile through collaboration and exchange in these countries.

major cities as the most important or future influencers for the Australian public diplomacy message.

A good arts producer first has to understand their audience. I spent my first few months in India observing the cultural landscape around me, taking in as much cultural activity as I could alongside the audience we hoped to engage. I observed that the really dynamic events were not taking place at the government-run venues or festivals, but instead were run by private sector operators in commercial spaces. Sectors such as contemporary music, fashion, film, and gourmet food/lifestyle culture were booming. English language comedy was just beginning to become popular. The “music-festival style” experience for young people (one that we are familiar with in the West) had just arrived, thanks to a group of new, young cultural operators. There was also an incredibly dynamic audience for the range of Indian classical forms from a broad cross section of society—in contrast to Australia where Western classical forms are enjoyed by an elite (and aging) part of the population. Of course, there was Bollywood. Far more than just a film industry, Bollywood enjoyed cultural saturation in a way I had never seen.

I also spent time familiarizing myself with our “competitors” in the cultural diplomacy space, our fellow foreign missions and their extensive programs of activities. Delhi is a highly saturated market with foreign governments bringing product to the city regularly, mostly presented to an audience of well-connected Indians and fellow expats. Because of India’s complex operating environment, many governments were choosing to partner with government-run festivals and venues by inserting their artists into an Indian host program. To my eye, while this approach provided an opportunity for the artists and festivals, in most cases, it diminished the public diplomacy reach with foreign artists becoming absorbed in the larger narrative of the host event. Public diplomacy exposure was limited to a logo in the program and a reception on opening night.

I observed that countries with their own public diplomacy agency, such as British Council, Goethe Institute, and Alliance Française all of which have a strong presence in Delhi, were able to operate more sophisticated long-term diplomacy strategies, which were often co-designed with local cultural partners. A number of the larger foreign missions also had their own cultural venue hosted within their mission compounds so were able to distinctly brand their cultural diplomacy work, although my observation was that their audiences were neither large nor diverse.

### **Making It Happen**

Unlike its competitors, Australia was unable to draw on its own dedicated cultural diplomacy agency, venue, or a substantial set of established relationships in the Indian cultural sphere. We had the opportunity to break new ground, which for me meant avoiding the “familiar” network of venues and government partners in favor of partnerships with the more effective emerging



players in the cultural landscape. We also made a conscious effort to build a strong “festival brand” that would give Australian content a definable personality even when delivered by other players. Taking inspiration from the achievements of the bilateral agencies, we kept the long term in mind, stimulating partnerships between like-minded institutions in India and Australia. Essentially, we were applying the rules of good arts production to cultural diplomacy. The following sections deal with the key approaches and programming elements employed for Oz Fest India.

### **Partnerships with Nonstate Actors**

As part of this strategy to reach our target demographic and distinguish ourselves in the cultural market, we embarked on a strategy of engaging with new local partners in the independent, private, and commercial spheres. On the whole, such operators had not engaged substantially with foreign governments in the past. They were eager to bring more foreign content to their audiences and collaborate on presenting artists that would suit their target audiences’ preferences.

An example of this approach was Oz Fest’s partnership with local contemporary music promoter Only Much Louder (OML). Founded by entrepreneur Vijay Nair in 2002, OML was growing rapidly to become India’s leading cultural tastemaker for the young middle class Indian audience. OML was keen to work with Oz Fest with an eye to develop longer term relationships with the Australian music scene. This, they hoped, would increase India’s reputation as a touring destination, and be beneficial for Indian artists they represented who were seeking exposure outside India. Therefore, we brokered a partnership between OML and the peak contemporary music industry body, Sounds Australia, also interested in exploring India as a new market for Australian contemporary music. Sounds Australia’s partnership with OML led to Australian bands being placed within OML’s branded music festival, the “Bacardi NH7 Weekender,” a format instantly recognizable to young India. With a trusted alliance and a readymade audience, young, alternative Australian bands—plucked straight from the touring circuit back home—were received with great enthusiasm by the audience of young Indian tastemakers.

To avoid the individual acts being swallowed by the festival program, the bands were framed within a subbranded property, the Aussie BBQ. This was a standalone brand that packaged the Australian acts together as a showcase of Australian music inviting audiences to experience a “taste” of Aussie music from a range of genres. OML and Sounds Australia curated the program together to ensure the bands chosen would best suit Indian tastes. A delegation of Australian music industry professionals accompanied the bands and attended India’s largest music market, Nokia Music Connects, which linked the Aussie BBQ further to the Indian music industry.

The inclusion of the Aussie BBQ as part of NH7 provided the Australian music acts with huge exposure to influential young Indian audiences. It also enabled Oz Fest to build larger public diplomacy messaging around the initiative, utilizing the Aussie BBQ concept in media engagements and side events to reinforce the message of Australia as a young, energetic population excited to engage with young Indians in a medium they could relate to. According to OML's Nair,<sup>4</sup>

There is no perception of Australian artists in India. India is a market where bands aren't really known as Australian over say American or British. They are just foreign. So even if we know an Australian band, we probably won't know they are Australian. Making a strongly branded program actually gave it an Australian character. It worked.

The partnership was so successful that OML and Sounds Australia continued the Aussie BBQ in India for two subsequent years independent of Oz Fest.

### **Authentic Voices**

One of the great challenges to government-led public diplomacy is authenticity of voice. If I reflect on my own experience as a globally aware citizen of a healthy democracy, I receive most direct government messaging with a pretty hefty sprinkling of cynicism. So why would we expect people, especially young people, in other parts of the world to respond any differently? This is an issue familiar to any arts producer particularly when dealing with young audiences, they will sniff out bland or inauthentic messaging pretty quickly.

In the context of Oz Fest, the search for a more authentic dialog with Indian audiences led us to the somewhat risky choice of programming the Melbourne International Comedy Festival Roadshow (*MICF Roadshow*)—a showcase of Australian comedians curated by MICF. Although risky, the choice was not naïve. As Susan Provem, Director of the MICF notes (quoted in Ben-Tovim 2013), “Comedy is a really good way of discussing the social and political issues of the day. Often it can sound superficial but it’s a human way of looking at much larger issues. It’s one of the things that comedy does extremely well.” While comedy has a strong tradition in India’s regional languages, English language comedy is at a nascent stage as a popular art form in India, with English-speaking Indian comics presenting small shows to young, urban audiences within the nightclub scene of major cities.

*MICF Roadshow* was one of the first international touring comedy shows in the Indian market, and certainly seemed a first for a government-branded public diplomacy initiative in India. Although diplomatic staff briefed MICF on

<sup>4</sup> Skype interview by the author with Nair for an internal DFAT commissioned debrief document, conducted in May 2013.



the bilateral and cultural sensitivities, it was acknowledged that good comedians rely on treading a fine line between the acceptable and the risqué, so there was an inherent risk in presenting stand-up comedy, especially in the charged environment of the Indian-Australian bilateral relationship. Much to our relief, the immediacy and contemporary relevance of stand-up comedy provided the perfect platform for sharing a contemporary, honest view of Australia. The Australian comedians pushed aside political correctness in favor of an authentic and up-front approach—sharing stories of Australia’s race, political, and class relations along with hilarious observations of universal experiences of sex, birth, and family. This “warts and all” approach brought an honesty and authenticity to the cultural exchange, humanizing the Australian experience for an Indian audience. The response from both audience and media was overwhelmingly positive. The MICF tour was one of the top six performing elements in the program from a media coverage point of view and journalists were intrigued by these witty, upfront Australians and their openness to speak about the politically sensitive issues of the time with humor and honesty. Audiences responded in the best way possible—with laughter.

Alongside the professional comedy showcase, MICF ran *Raw Comedy*, a competition for emerging local stand-up comedians with the winner, a female comedian whose material dealt frankly with the challenges of being a women in contemporary India, being awarded a trip to Melbourne to perform in the following year’s festival. This generated strong interest in the media and significant goodwill among participants and audiences who appreciated Australia’s interest in supporting local voices.

It is important to note, however, that *MICF Roadshow* was well received because we spent a lot of time ensuring the comedians would be presented to the right audience—a culturally savvy, well-educated demographic that would find the content familiar. Had we presented the comedians to a less globally engaged audience we may well have drawn a very different response—one of misunderstanding or, worse, offense. In the arts, and it seems also cultural diplomacy, context is everything. The public diplomacy benefits of this program continue today with MICF returning twice to undertake its *Raw Comedy* competition and Indian comedians being invited to perform at the MICF in Melbourne and share their own first-hand views of life in contemporary India.

### Gastro-Diplomacy

*Masterchef Australia* began airing on StarWorld in 2010 and became the highest rating lifestyle show on Indian satellite television (D’Mello 2013). Riding the surging interest in gourmet food culture and lifestyle television in India, it became a phenomenal hit and made the chefs (and contestants) major celebrities in India. From an Australian government perspective, it could not have been scripted better. *Masterchef Australia* was the perfect showcase of Australian values. Contestants were dazzlingly multicultural and our hybrid

cuisine showed a long history of racial integration. The down-to-earth personalities of the contestants and chefs showed our egalitarian nature. The show's many locations revealed that Australia was more than a beach nation, offering sophisticated cities and diverse landscapes. There was not a cricket bat in sight.

Celebrity chefs are increasingly engaged as actors in public diplomacy (Forman and Sonenshine 2014), and food offers a rich platform for sharing the character and traditions of a country. I observed multiple foreign countries employing national food showcases and guest chef visits as part of their public diplomacy activity while I was in India, and the *Masterchef* visit was noted as part of a rising trend by the *Times of India*, with journalist Reshmi Dasguptal (2012) commenting that "food diplomacy [is] becoming the new masala to spice up international relations."

AHC New Delhi recognized *Masterchef Australia* as a public diplomacy gift (Bearup 2016), and sought to leverage its appeal wherever possible to amplify the impact of Oz Fest. In collaboration with *Masterchef Australia*, celebrity chefs Gary Colombaris and George Mehigan were appointed as Oz Fest Ambassadors, and in this capacity, they visited India during Oz Fest with a program of cooking workshops, VIP events, visits to public sites, and extensive media engagements. Oz Fest aligned their visit with the busy opening weeks of the festival, amplifying the media coverage for the event and lending profile and credibility to the rest of the program.

### Expressing Cultural Uniqueness

Part of Australia's challenge in the cultural diplomacy market is our struggle to find easily identifiable contemporary symbols of our cultural uniqueness (Varghese 2013). Our major ballet, orchestra, and dance companies are of fine quality, but for an audience unfamiliar with the forms, it is difficult to discern them as Australian as opposed to just "Western." My experience is that most Australian artists would struggle to define the "Australian" characteristics in their work, and the arts sector would generally cringe at the jingoistic connotations of "Aussie culture." The significant exception to this is of course Australia's powerfully distinctive Indigenous culture. Oz Fest identified contemporary Indigenous artists as an essential element of the program, not only because it afforded us a unique cultural offering but also because it enabled a discussion of the importance of Aboriginal Australia in a modern, multicultural Australia.

Oz Fest opened with a spectacular concert around a fifteenth-century Mughal tomb, presenting virtuoso didgeridoo player Mark Atkins and contemporary Indigenous singer Gurrumul Yunupingu alongside Indian sitarist Anoushka Shankar. The concert was presented in front of a digital canvas, a three-dimensional projection that wrapped the monument and covered it with elegant contemporary interpretations of Indian and Indigenous iconography. Australia's Indigenous cricket team was in attendance, and Prime Minister

Julia Gillard presented Indian government representatives with cricket stumps painted by contemporary Indigenous artists. Oz Fest consciously messaged this opening event as a statement of unity with India—two countries deeply respectful of their ancient pasts, looking forward with a contemporary outlook. The concert was broadcast on *Doordarshan*, India’s state television channel, conveying this message into the homes of millions of Indians.

Oz Fest’s opening night concert was a key public event for then-Australian Prime Minister Gillard, whose visit included the announcement of Australia’s intention to allow uranium sales to India. While the uranium sales decision was entirely outside of the scope of our cultural diplomacy initiative, the announcement was complemented by the Oz Fest narrative of mutual respect and exchange and was an example of cultural diplomacy providing an amplifying platform for larger diplomatic actions. Contemporary Australian Indigenous artists were highly represented across the festival, and made a strong impression especially for many Indians who still referenced the White Australia Policy and had little knowledge of non-Anglo-Saxon Australians. The narrative of Australia’s long history resonated with Indian media and audiences responded warmly to the artists and the depth of cultural tradition they represented.

### **Respect Is a Two-Way Street**

While the projection of culture overseas is valuable, cultural exchange has been noted by bilateral agencies such as the British Council as an important part of modern cultural diplomacy (British Council 2013).<sup>5</sup> Oz Fest sought to build collaboration and reciprocity in the design of key projects to reinforce the message that Australia respected Indian culture and embraced the concept of two-way exchange and shared cultural experience. This felt particularly important in the context of the student safety issue and the subsequent perception of Australia as a culture that disrespected Indians.

An example of this approach was the development of the India/Australia collaboration *Fearless Nadia*. This was an Oz Fest commission that saw a live score created to Indian cinema classic, *Diamond Queen*, featuring the well-loved Indian film character Fearless Nadia. The basis for the collaboration grew from the discovery that Fearless Nadia was portrayed on screen by Mary Ann Evans, an Australian actress who made her career in Indian cinema during the first half of the twentieth century. Australian percussionist Ben Walsh created the music score for a mixed orchestra of Indian and Australian musicians, which was performed live along with the film in the glorious Liberty Cinema, a classic single screen Bollywood cinema in Bombay.

<sup>5</sup> The British Council (2013, 4) report notes that governments should, “Create conditions for broad and deep cultural exchange to flourish—because peer-to-peer exchange is more likely to generate trust” and to “pay as much attention to inward-facing as they do to outward-facing cultural relations—because that will help develop a culturally literate and globally aware population.”

Indian media loved the fact that their beloved Fearless Nadia was a girl from Perth who had made India her home. Her part in the revolutionizing of roles on screen for women, and her identity—as a feminist and pro-independence advocate—provided an indirect reinforcement of Australian values. The opening performance was dedicated to the seventieth anniversary of Indian cinema and a special award—created to lure one of the Gods of Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan, to attend the event—drew exceptional media coverage. The show was an artistic success and therefore able to further fulfill the reciprocal promise, with the Australian-Indian collaboration later traveling to Adelaide’s Oz Asia Festival and British’s Southbank Centre.

Oz Fest sought to involve Indian artists in many other collaborative projects from the Rajasthan Folk Festival to a performance of Australia’s giant Snuff Puppets at Bombay’s Dharavi slum, to visual arts collaborations within the first Kochi Muziris Biennale. The long tail of these initiatives is found in the ongoing engagement between Indian and Australian artists, which continues to reinforce a respectful two-way dialog between Australian and Indian culture.

### Challenges

A great plan is only as good as its delivery, and putting things on in India is hard. In fact, one of the most common wisdoms about India is “everything is possible, but nothing is easy.” This perfectly encapsulates my experience. The challenges we faced delivering Oz Fest were magnified by the complexity and acknowledged corruption of India’s operating environment and the labyrinthine systems of event permits, licenses, and taxation requirements (see Ernst and Young India n.d.; Singh 2015).<sup>6</sup> A strong team of local production partners and staff were engaged to assist us in navigating this opaque landscape. Even with these resources, however, a number of our large-scale plans were abandoned when the logistical complexity became overwhelming.

The other crucial element in achieving the scope and scale of Oz Fest was the holistic embrace of the program by diplomatic staff. AHC New Delhi’s most senior diplomats made themselves available as part of the project team providing valuable strategy, leveraging relationships, and intervening when required to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. AHC New Delhi’s public affairs counselor Kathryn Deyell and I co-curated Oz Fest, which enabled us to balance cultural and diplomatic objectives while ensuring the program was artistically achievable and fully integrated with AHC New Delhi’s objectives. As we moved from planning to delivery, I found myself drawing on all my years of

<sup>6</sup> Vijay Nair, OML (quoted in Singh 2015) notes: “Corruption is rampant everywhere but in Delhi it is taken to a completely different level. The kind of money we are required to spend towards feeding state officials, licensing officers, police etc. is extremely demotivating.”

producing experience to troubleshoot daily challenges and ensure the program was delivered with the international production standards demanded by the Australian government and participating artists. The technical expertise that arts professionals can offer to the field of cultural diplomacy is critical, and is rarely found among diplomats due to the lack of cultural specialists that operate within the diplomatic system.

### **The Challenge of Measuring Success**

In all, Oz Fest amounted to four months, 159 events, 18 cities, and 300,000 in-person audience participants—amplified by many millions in television audience due to the broadcast of the opening night concert on state television channel *Doordarshan* which reaches 90.7 percent of the Indian population. The program involved more than 300 artists, speakers, chefs, and sportspeople and 200 collaborating Indian and Australian organizations. While these were pleasing statistics for DFAT compared to internal Key Performance Indicator targets, one of the great challenges with public and cultural diplomacy is measuring success in a meaningful way. For Oz Fest, the only external data gathering undertaken was an analysis of media engagement. During the Oz Fest activity period, there were a total of 781 media clips about the event, comprising 562 features and 219 event listings, which were mainly artist centric throughout the festival. Oz Fest generated an equivalent advertising value of AUD\$3.76 million and there was no negative media coverage.<sup>7</sup>

This level of media coverage was pleasing. However, it is difficult to compare the Oz Fest experience against similar programs undertaken either by the Australian government or other foreign governments. There is no publically available data on these alternative programs, making comparison difficult. Twenty-four government, business, institutional, and production partners were involved in Oz Fest, contributing AUD\$2.1 million in financial and in-kind contributions. An aligned Oz Fest Business Program was implemented jointly with Austrade, and Oz Fest hosted special dinners and events for high-level Oz Fest partners, which attracted around 1,000 Australian and Indian guests from business, government, academia, and the arts and cultural community. Again, however, a comparative analysis of these activities is impossible due to the lack of information available on similar programs.

From my perspective as an arts practitioner, I was also interested in the experience of the artists and arts sector partners. A positive experience for participants should result in continuing cultural engagement between Indian and Australian organizations outside of a government-sponsored program. Although not formally tracked, Oz Fest stimulated a number of collaborations between cultural players that have been maintained by the organizations

<sup>7</sup> Statistics were gathered at AHC New Delhi and acknowledged via DFAT internal cable system.

themselves. This included the relationship between Sounds Australia and OML, the ongoing engagement by MICF with the Indian comedy scene, and invitations for Australian artists from flagship Indian events such as the Kochi Muziris Biennale, Jaipur Literature Festival, and Rajasthan International Folk Festival.

Following Oz Fest's completion, DFAT adopted the delivery model trialed for Oz Fest and continued the practice of embedding a cultural producer in Australian government missions overseas to deliver major cultural diplomacy initiatives. In the year immediately following Oz Fest India, DFAT intended to deliver Oz Fest Indonesia. However, planning was abruptly halted after Australian intelligence activities targeting Indonesian officials and their families were made public (Riordan 2014). While the reluctance to progress with a large-scale cultural diplomacy initiative within this political context was understandable from a risk-aversion and security point of view, the opportunity to build on the immediate learnings from Oz Fest India was missed. I feel that Australia also missed the opportunity to demonstrate that genuine people-to-people understanding is even more valuable when the traditional tools of political diplomacy are challenged. DFAT has continued to refine the Oz Fest model since 2014 with cultural operators engaged for large-scale programs in Turkey and Brazil.

### Conclusion

The 2009 student safety crisis showed that perception can be a major player in the relations between nations. Yet the shaping of perception is an area I would argue is paid little serious attention within the broader diplomatic landscape. This article has discussed two examples of shaping the perception of Australia in India—the public diplomacy surprise of *Masterchef Australia* and the government-designed cultural diplomacy initiative of Oz Fest. Oz Fest demonstrated that the “new frontiers” of cultural diplomacy such as comedy, food, and contemporary music can be particularly effective when trying to connect Australian values with young audiences. Contemporary voices, delivered in partnership with nonstate actors, can be powerful and effective. Cultural professionals can act as “creative disruptors,” utilizing the skills of our industry to co-design initiatives within a government context with reach and legacy. *Masterchef Australia* showed that a country's values can be genuinely expressed by its citizens through the medium of culture—in this case, a fabulously popular reality TV cooking program that had India hooked. However, the greater question of how to quantify cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy's benefit, and thus advocate for its importance as part of the broader role of government, remains elusive.

Australian Prime Minister Turnbull's visit to India in April 2017 was a time for reflection on the state of the India/Australia relationship. As James Bennett (2017) reported,



Yesterday Jaideep Mazumdar, the Indian External Affairs Ministry bureaucrat responsible for Australia, said he was satisfied with the way Australia has responded [to the student violence incidents]. ‘The Australian Government has been extremely proactive with us when we have taken it up with them,’ Mr Mazumdar said, ‘So it is not an issue of concern for us at the moment.’ The statement will be music to the ears of Australia’s universities and diplomats, who have worked for years to repair the reputational damage caused by a spate of muggings and violent attacks on sub-continental students studying in Australia.

It seemed the perception of Australia had shifted in Australia’s favor since the low point of 2009-10. However, the positive visit was almost immediately overshadowed by India’s negative response to the announcement upon his return that Australia would be changing the 457 visa regulations. Will Australia and India’s relationship be more robust in 2017? How can a government insulate a relationship against the inevitable ups and downs of political decision making?

Varghese (2013) talked of the importance of a “rounded and modern” relationship so that the inevitable short, sharp shocks inflicted by events outside of a government’s control do not shatter the relationship, but instead make a lighter dent that can be repaired. Ultimately it is in this quest for robustness that I feel cultural and public diplomacy has much to offer, with its capacity to provide citizens with a genuine understanding of the contemporary world we occupy and the core values of a society as expressed through its culture and citizens.

### About the Author

**Kate Ben-Tovim** is a curator and producer based in Melbourne. Kate is associate director of Arts Centre Melbourne’s Asia TOPA and creative director of *Turning World*, a boutique cultural agency focusing on artist-led Asian engagement. In her arts career spanning almost 20 years, Kate has worked extensively with artists, cultural institutions, and governments in Indonesia, India, China, and PNG along with Australia’s leading performing arts institutions. Kate was awarded a 2013 Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship in recognition of her work as a thought-leader and is an Asialink Leaders Program Alumnus. She regularly presents on industry panels in Australia and overseas.

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