Chapter 6

Global Festivals in Canada to Promote Multicultural Society

The Canadian government has been trying to incorporate and implement multicultural policies in various ways. Managing immigrants and developing policies to include or exclude them as Canadian citizens and what status to accord them in the processes of the State has been a matter of discussion and debate. This chapter will discuss how the Canadian government through multicultural global festivals, has tried to address the problems of multiculturalism that emanate in the course of interaction of immigrants in Canada. The settlement of people from several nationalities has engulfed Canada with issues of dealing with ethnicities, race and cultures. The country has been able to negotiate with these differences not by attempting to homogenize them but by letting them grow and sustain peacefully, in the process enriching the cultural mosaic of Canada. It is this aspect of the society which is also an accepted state policy that has elevated the status of Canada into an exemplary model. Nonetheless, there have been intense dialogues regarding the policy and its implementation.

Himani Bannerji in her incisive work *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* delves deeply into the issue of immigrants in Canada making cognitive insights on how the Canadian Multicultural Policy is beset with inherent flaws. She identifies the categories and names designated to identify the South Asians like “visible minorities…ESL speakers” (65). These terms according to Bannerji “are categories for organizing the state apparatus, its regulations and policy functions, and
for enabling the ideological organization of “relations of ruling” (qtd in Bannerjee 66). So through “this ideological tool of multiculturalism, Canada manages its crisis in legitimation and citizenship” (Bannerji 74). So the entire framework of multiculturalism is perceived as a tool with which the government administrates the ‘immigrants’. People who shift into Canada are treated as ‘immigrants’ and not provided the status of citizens disabling them from having their say. Bannerji states:

One might say, then, remembering Althusser, that they are appellations for interpellation. These names are codes for political subjectivities and ideological/pedagogical possibilities, and they have embedded in them both immediate and long-term political effects. They help to construct "Canada" and to place us in certain roles and niches of the nation; and those who are not "Canadians" cannot directly project "Canada." … it creates feelings of belonging and alienation, not only produces psychological and cultural problems regarding power, but is also integral to the structure of the Canadian polity itself. (66)

The dissatisfaction regarding the treatment of ‘immigrants’ giving them a namesake status for working in Canada without completely allowing them to assimilate into the Canadian society is apparent. As a contrast, in India there is the existence of numerous communities and people from a variety of ethnic origins that made India their residence through history and time. The various peoples who migrated to India through historical invasions and other reasons have become a part of India enjoying privileges and rights that are conferred on all the citizens regardless of their religion, ethnic origin or linguistic
differences. In the Indian society, all this seems natural. In Canada, however, the influx and acceptance of ‘people of colour’ is still a matter of debate. Bannerjee is right when she says that the lack of Canadian identity while staying in Canada though contributing to it economically, intensifies nostalgia and rootlessness. The desire to go back home someday becomes a perpetual reality. ‘Home’ in such a context acts as a magnet. The more the immigrant tries to adapt to the adopted land, the more the pull generated by the original country. Citizenship matters. It serves not merely as identity but also as a creative force and energy because national identity bestows confidence to live with dignity and work with pride. Certainly, this is a sensitive issue. There is no harm in political discussions on the matter but then their stand has to be clear and not wavering. Vagueness in such matters stimulates suspicions about intent. The acceptance of multiculturalism as a policy therefore is plagued by challenges of implementation. The policy can in a certain sense be seen as an experiment since multiculturalism in Canada is not accidental unlike India where people from various regions migrated due to invasions or other causes. In Canada, the state policy has been a conscious, waking reality and intentional decision for economic and demographic reasons. Naturally, an imposition of such a policy needs a framework to be able to work.

While all the arguments pertaining to the Canadian multicultural policy are true, it is interesting to take into consideration some of the actions of the Canadian society and government to make space for the involvement and understanding of South Asian particularly the Indian culture. They may seem perfunctory and mechanical in their face value but they deserve scrutiny to fathom if they have brought about even a minutest shift
in drawing the two nations together culturally. The focus here is the larger question of bilateral association between the two countries. Since, the circumstances that people exist in and experience are crucial in developing relations between nations; arguments related to the multicultural policy in Canada have been analyzed in this chapter. In Canada since the multicultural policy is state-initiated it becomes interesting to observe how and whether it has been implemented successfully taking into account the fact that a large number of Indian population have made Canada their home. Also the reality that the Indian diaspora in Canada can be tapped as a resource to serve as bridges between the two nations, is undeniably true. There may not have been complete assimilation but there is no outright rejection either. Even if the implementation is purely an act of diplomacy and purely maintenance of a ‘face’ of multiculturalism, the fact that there have been activities in this direction cannot be obviated or lost sight of.

According to a research study by Karen Bird, Canada has “the world’s highest per capita rate of naturalizations: about 6, 700 new citizenships per million people each year. In a given year, this means the admission of approximately 200, 000 to 250, 000 new Canadians…. Currently, 18 percent of the total population of Canada is foreign-born…” (449). These statistics reveal the huge cultural variations in Canada. It is obviously not possible for new immigrants to give up their cultural affinities and embrace the Canadian culture all of a sudden. Nostalgia coupled with adapting to a brand new environment creates circumstances in which the immigrant finds herself juggling between memories of the past and realities of the present. Culture becomes a matter of confrontation. This sentiment is particularly predominant among the first generation immigrants. The
subsequent generations become hybridized and imbibes aspects of other cultures that jostle in the contemporary society.

The Folk Arts Council in Winnipeg, for instance, has 101 member organizations and organizes Folklorama every year making Winnipeg a United Nations global village (Parameshwaran 56). Festivals, carnivals and celebrations are emblematic of culture and identity. In the context of Canada, multicultural encounters transpire invariably during global festivals that promote interethnic activity. Such events could originate at ‘home’ as in, in the country an individual resides or can be borrowed from other cultures. Multicultural representations emerge out of longstanding cultural experiences of a nation. They may also have a historical background and hence are connected with the sentiments of the people.

When we examine the global/community festivals in Canada, we find that they are an amalgamation of several ethnic identities. Whenever there is a confluence of various cultures and communities, it is likely to contribute to the existing tradition. Nevertheless, there are strong arguments that debunk the conducting of such festivals as synthetic, too artificial, culturally fake and sterile, perpetuating stereotypes of ethnicities and trivializing them, and serving no purpose. One of the accusations leveled against such festivals is that they do not promote integration or contribute anything to the practice of multiculturalism. It is true that multicultural festivals, by taking a few select examples from various countries, attempt to analyze the complex phenomena of integration of multicultural identities.
Multicultural/global events and pavilions illustrate how Canada endeavours to negotiate the issue of multiethnic identities. This addresses two concerns. One is that there is appreciation for the other cultural identities as represented and defined by multiculturalism. Second, it enables the smaller ethnic groups to maintain their identity as represented by cultural pluralism. The celebrations thereby form a part of the multicultural discourse. How these festivals have been advertised on the internet also need to be considered since the worldwide web is accessed by the masses frequently to seek information and so are exposed to the multicultural dialogue. So, the multicultural policy of Canada has also created a space on the internet to allow dissemination and promotion of multicultural global festivals.

However, the primary question is what might have caused the genesis of such festivals. The migration of people to Canada has created the issue of plurivocal voices and ethnicities. The cause of migration is first and foremost a result of the availability and access to new markets. Free trade and bilateral relations at the political level result in the creation of a society with new people. The immigrant population obviously cannot give up its roots; and takes its time to get accustomed to the new environment and people. At the same time mere national affiliation is not adequate. This calls for inventiveness in terms of charting out the process of assimilation. Hence, instead of criticizing the negatives and downsides of such events, perhaps there is a need for the essential understanding that the aim of multicultural festivals is showcasing the cultures of its Canadian society’s new ethnic identities. It is not practically possible to homogenize the multietnic cultures and in the same vein, it is again difficult to imagine the immigrants to be able to maintain their
traditional cultures in all its wholesomeness. These two matters are contradictory. Of course, there are debates of ‘authenticity’ and ‘superficiality’ because the presenters of a pavilion could be the children of the original settlers. It is necessary to understand that over a period of time, succeeding generations of the immigrant population undergo changes in their beliefs and attitudes on account of the influences of the nation to which they migrate. To borrow a term from Homi Bhabha, there could be what is called “hybridization” of cultures. The admixture is a natural process since it is impossible to maintain purity and exclusiveness in terms of traditions. Bhabha states:

The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past….Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de sie`cle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (1-2)

The idea is extremely unnerving because the positing of the individual neither in the beginning, nor the middle nor the end is not only perplexing but also a difficult predicament to be resolved. Seeking solutions to such intriguing issues is a hugely arduous undertaking but a matter that needs to be urgently resolved in an amicable and mature approach. The idea of this mixing up of cultures is very much a debate relating to globalization as an international phenomenon and one that has had tremendous impact on almost all nations of the world. While globalization has its economic and business benefits for countries to accrue, it also raises complicated questions of identity and culture when people interact and their identities intermix. In fact, multiculturalism is a concomitant of
globalization and invariably a straightaway consequence of coming together of new cultures. This process becomes much more intricate when a society experiences transformation in terms of multiethnic identities—the more of them the greater the challenge. Perhaps one of the most consequential facets in any country with pluralistic societies is the challenge of comfort at the cultural level. It is an imperative because eventually there is people to people interaction. The ethnic variations in Canada, the traditional artifacts of the country and the culture dynamics interplay and come through festivals. The association of culture with technology is related to the process of disseminating and executing plans and helping people discern the purpose of holding a gala event that is also designed at building cultural symphony.

According to the research done by Bergemann Derk (Yale University) and Alessandro Bonatti (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), “targeting improves the quality of the match between the consumer and the advertisement message” (418 Derk and Bonatti). It is easy to aim at and influence large number of people thus facilitating participation and promotion. The organizers of the Global Fest in Alberta endorse that:

GlobalFest is a not-for-profit society dedicated to celebrating and showcasing Calgary's cultural diversity and artistic excellence within our communities locally and across the globe. We are committed to producing an inclusive, world-class, multi-faceted arts and cultural festival that will enhance Alberta's reputation as a truly international destination. (http://www.globalfest.ca/)

The ‘global all-inclusive’ component is evident through the bringing together of the citizens and the visitors to the nation and also the cultural diversity that the people bring.
The fact that it is a non-profit event enhances its credibility in its aspiration of increasing cultural appreciation. It is extremely essential to understand why such programs are organized. ‘Awareness’ and sensitizing public is an observable agenda of the policy because the notion of multicultural nationhood creates a new form of identity that is healthy for all ethnic groups and enables greater adjustment and respect for one another. Collision of cultures is possible if they seem alien, strange and unnecessary. In other words, they have to seem familiar, interesting and important. Respect and acceptance of new cultures can assuage lingering doubts and suspicion. In the book *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Mukerjea. Et al, state:

> Cultural and intellectual creativity in almost all societies has been fostered by the interaction and creative relationship of different ethnic groups…. Government aid to multicultural centres, to specific projects of ethnic groups, and to the displays of the performing and visual arts as well the programs already mentioned, will promote cultural exchange. (Mukerjea 556)

The statement is pertinent in the wake of the idea of cultural exchange and more importantly “creativity” (Mukerjea 556). With the emphasis on “creative relationship” (Mukerjea 556), prominence is given to the artistic, inventive and resourceful character of the events. The amount of information and impact that fests can have, no discussion can have on people in general. The impact of visuals of culture is that potent and long lasting. This is a fact and it needs to be admitted that fests are mediums of transmission. If they seem too fake and contrived, perhaps there could be efforts to improvise the content and lend authenticity to the events but completely discrediting them as futile is neither realistic
nor desirable and what needs to be considered is that people do visit the programs and in large numbers. This actuality cannot be denied but what can be changed are the components/methods of presentation.

The Calgary Global Fest showcases several countries of the world. A pavilion devoted exclusively to portray specific countries individually reinforces conviction in the efficacy of carrying out events in tune with the multicultural policy. Political contact, economic and business negotiations can operate efficiently only when the cultural dimensions tally creating space for dialogue. The Canadian strategy of organizing festivals in this context is commendable, thoughtful and exemplary in terms of dealing and managing a multi-ethnic society. The acknowledging of the fact that multiculturalism is a lived reality and experience and that it is an essential aspect of the Canadian society is remarkable. Paul Robert Magocsi in the Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples states, “Such a characterization makes eminent sense, considering the demographic reality of Canada and its wide array of peoples representing many different ethnocultural traditions” (vii). The demography of Canada has often been a subject of analysis and research. According to David Bercuson and David Carment:

In recent years more than 50 percent of new immigrants to Canada have come from Asia, mostly from China and India, making successful relations with Asia-Pacific key to Canada’s foreign-policy objectives. As the world population increases from 6.5 billion to 9.1 billion, an increase in Canadian immigration will become necessary to sustain our public institutions. (Bercuson and Carment 7).
The thin population of Canada has drawn attention and has been a subject of research among the academic circles. In the economic context, this is seen as critical because to harness resources or to churn in greater revenue, the basic requirement is the existence of people and the fact that immigrants fill this gap in Canada is most decidedly true. The apprehension is justifiable. Manpower is absolutely essential to drive a nation to achieve economic success. The fact that Canada is a favourite destination of immigrants indicates its success in attracting new population. The fact that there are efforts to genuinely assist the migrants to interact in the new society makes the process of migrating to Canada easy to decide. Therefore, the challenges of maintaining order and harmony in a multilayered ethnic society is inevitable. According to the Quebec commission report, integration of the immigrants should be facilitated by helping them:

…adopt common orientations, ensure participation by citizens in public debate, create the feeling of solidarity required for an egalitarian society to function smoothly, mobilize the population in the event of a crisis, and take advantage of the enrichment that stems from ethnocultural diversity. (Bouchard and Taylor 19)

Here, there is emphasis on ‘debate’ as a means to unearth dormant differences. Persuading masses of people to accept individuals of different origins and assisting new immigrants to get absorbed into the new location demands careful planning because they form a part of multicultural nationhood. One of the possible methods that is indeed interesting yet curious is the organization of global festivals. At the outset, this is in tune with the worldwide trend of globalization that involves tremendous dealings between nations. This international phenomenon engages people extensively and the consequence
and need for intercultural understanding is palpable. It is critical to ensure that there is no ‘cultural collide’. Prior to immigration, people attempt to gather information, cultural notions and make an effort to get a feel of geo-politico-economic realities. Nevertheless, they are rudimentary. Deeper understanding of what constitutes a nation is indispensable. Besides the cultural implications, the manner in which it has been promoted on the internet is also a major issue since technology is an inextricable part of communication today.

Another Global Fest is the one organized in Surrey, British Columbia titled and promoted as the “Surrey Fusion Festival”. As the name suggests, it is a conglomeration of several national cultures. What the pavilions from various parts of the world do is cultural representation. The pavilion on India for instance said “The biggest pavilion on site is brought to you by the Ethnicity Events and Marketing Group” (http://www.surrey.ca/fusionfestival/7703.aspx); which had traditional Indian jewellery and art for sale besides a pavilion that sought to teach how to tie a turban or wear a saree, the traditional clothing of India. Activities/objects from India, China, Indonesia, Italy and Canada itself were a part of the aforementioned festival. Artifacts/Clothes/Other cultural objects might seem commonplace but they go a long way in helping realize that dress codes indeed are indispensable when determining acceptance of varied cultures. Through vicarious experiences of these kinds, new identities get a feel of the ‘other’ cultures.

It is easier to accept new cultures through experiencing components of those communities. Associated with dress are beliefs and attitudes. Vivid experiences and familiarization with ‘different’ beliefs go beyond amusement. The implications are subtle but far reaching. They form a part of memory and reliving those experiences render the
agenda of the multicultural policy easier to achieve. The Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Festival has an “International Marketplace” (http://kwmc.on.ca/html/festival.html) and showcases several countries including Indian arts and crafts. The Multicultural Festival in Halifax (http://www.multifest.ca/THE_FESTIVAL.html) is another global festival in tune with the objective of multiculturalism. It is not sufficient to merely know what might possibly be components of different cultures. Representation of culture through tangible, visible cultural artifacts makes culture not only curious but also digestible. Assimilating groups of people cannot happen in abstraction but through concrete ideas and items that illustrate the images of new ethnicities. Protecting new cultures so that they don’t decay in course of time can in fact, enrich an existing society.

Festivals of this kind are effectual in terms of educating people in multiculturalism and reflect the attunement with the cultural policy of the state. The concern is genuine. Of course, how to render this noble intention successful and see that it goes beyond fun and frolic is an issue of critical contention but then there has to be a beginning somewhere and global fests offer that first platform for disseminating and introducing multicultural beliefs. Anna Kirova in her research on multicultural education states:

These goals are to be achieved using a number of strategies…providing information about other cultures, which follows the criteria of teaching about similarities, institutionalizing in-school cultural celebrations as well as those of the Anglo-Celtic majority; and acquainting all students with their own and other cultures through the exchange of literature, art, dance, food, clothing, folk rhymes, religion, and so forth (105 Kirova).
Anna Kirova discusses how festivals on culture in school familiarize students with multiculturalism in practice. Furthermore, this understanding is not just of other cultures but one’s own too. This is significant because during childhood, it is rather easy to take in the idea of diversity. The thought of having a festival is striking for children and the prospect of meeting new people creates an ideal ambience for receiving new voices and experiences. Kirova suggests that cultural days or celebrations in multiculturalism are “represented in the “piñata curriculum or the snowshoe curriculum”” (Hoffman qtd in Kirova 107), suggesting the perfunctory nature of such events. The suggestion is that there is an element of fakeness associated with global festivals because they lack authenticity. This is true but partially.

Reflective understanding of an issue as complex as diversity in cultures cannot be realized overnight and when it comes to children/students, there needs to be a commencement. What better vehicle than a grand cultural event? Of course, the intercultural aspects need greater emphasis and that cannot happen only through large public events. Bouchard and Taylor in their report mention “The need for broader training of all government agents in public institutions, starting with the schools, because of the role they play in socialization…”(Bouchard and Taylor 22). Childhood is a pliable age and learning to appreciate multiculturalism at this point is an effective long term strategy.

Canadian journalist, Neil Bissoondath who was one of the first to criticize multiculturalism states “the Canadians encounter each other’s multicultural mosaic tiles mainly at festivals, which are reduced to “the simplest theatre” at the level of “a folkloric Disneyland”” (Bissoondath qtd in Maver 20; Dorin et al 84). The entertainment element in
the community festivals seen as “Culture Disneyfied” (qtd in Bramdat 4) is a popular analogy and has been alluded to by several critics. The emphasis of all this criticism is essentially the seeming superficiality and trivializing of multiculturalism. The argument is strong and has merit in suggesting the delight that the events offer and which do not necessarily help deal with the politics of multiculturalism and the intricacies associated with integrating the immigrant culture with the mainstream of the Canadian society. Displacement of the immigrants is a serious concern and merely confining it to cultural representations is offensive. It is devastating and preposterous if multiculturalism cannot be carried forward as a serious means of integrating people. Pavilions can only ‘show’ a different culture and cannot underpin and envisage the aims of the multicultural policy. Concreteness in terms of implementation is essential. The reduction of multicultural festivals to the status of a ‘show’ meant for amusement is also suggested in terms like “boutique multiculturalism” (378) that Stanley Fish defines as “the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals” (378). The superficiality of the events is underlined and while celebrations alone cannot successfully and completely carry out the intent of the multicultural policy or result in the empowerment of the multiethnic communities, it can be perceived as a preliminary space to represent multiplicity.

A common space with visuals of multiculturalism can stimulate the construction of identities within the framework of a nation. Commingling of diverse cultures and ethnicities need a common terrain for interface. Of course, the danger of stopping only at festivals has serious implications.
There has to be some beginning, some enactment, some expression and representation somewhere. Cosmetic though it may appear to critics and skeptics of the multicultural nature of Canada—to completely deflate multicultural festivals would be anachronistic. The fact that such events have entertainment value is undeniable but to criticize them as completely ornamental with no value other than enchantment elicits debates questioning the very organization of such festivals. A few issues that can be considered in this respect are: who organizes them, who attend the festivals, why do they attend, how many participate and what might happen, perhaps, if the events are completely forbidden? The last question is of course farfetched but it is indispensable to understand that multicultural festivals are attended by a huge number of people. For example, the Calgary multicultural festival was attended by 100,000 people in the first year of its commencement in 2003 (http://www.globalfest.ca/). This is not a small number by any means. Global Fests and cultural festivals can be considered a platform for intergroup harmony in a pluralistic society. The interaction value of such congregations is invaluable since they bring different people face to face.

In this context, it would be necessary to discuss the idea of “the two-way street” (Dib et al 164) which suggests that while Canada makes efforts to assimilate the immigrants through celebrations and through state policies on multiculturalism, it becomes a responsibility of the immigrants too to embrace Canada. This approach is very critical because it emphasizes and in a certain sense imposes equal responsibility on both the cultures—the dominant and the immigrant. Learning and understanding become obligatory to different ethnic communities rather automatically and this certainly is the crux of the
multicultural policy. However, a common ground to interact needs to be determined for this idea to be realized. Perhaps, global festivals can provide that avenue to ‘see’ each other and help each other to understand the components of respective societies and identities.

Paul Bramadat makes a thorough analysis of the Winnipeg’s Folklorama and Toronto’s Caravan. He discusses the commercialization of the cultural pavilions which are presented sans politics because the emphasis is primarily on enjoyment. For instance, the Africa or India pavilions do not portray their social or political challenges. Bramadat rightly observes “Such abstract, depoliticized images are partly a function of more or less intentional efforts to reduce potentially inflammatory material in the pavilions” (6 Bramadat). For these reasons, global fests are seen as unnatural and tailored specifically for public consumption and gratify their thirst for delight. Obviously, the aim of the multicultural festivals is not to stir up controversies or create a space for contention. The whole intention is to create an ambience of harmony and integration. Portraying the problems can become part of yet another area of politics where a pavilion might be accused of glossing over inadequacies and highlighting stereotypes.

Another point that needs examination is the fact that it is beyond the scope of any pavilion to include everything that constitutes a nation. For instance, to expect an India pavilion to include each and every aspect of the Indian society/tradition/culture would be preposterous simply because it is beyond the scale and scope of a pavilion to encapsulate it in its entirety. In that sense, it can be quite stereotypical in its content. What it can have at the most are representations or representative images to indicate a whole, and stimulate
interest to learn more from other sources. This would be reasonable expectation. After all, the pavilions or festivals can only provide ‘glimpses’ not intense training in multiculturalism.

The question of genuineness of cultural representation is a major debate in the organization of global festivals. If the pavilions are hosted by first generation immigrants perhaps, there could be greater authenticity. However, with the subsequent generations, there is the inevitable dilution of authenticity and so it would be unreasonable expectation to imagine real original culture to come through. Over time their notions of culture would undergo fusion. Imagination would definitely be a part of their understanding of their own traditional culture. So, the end result is a representation of culture that has effects of imagination, new perceptions clubbed with partially true components of respective countries.

The argument that global fests are basically and decidedly meant for amusement is true and reasonable. This is how it is advertised even on the internet urging people to participate in such events. It may not be feasible to expect a large number of people to take up training in multiculturalism but it is definitely possible to kindle and motivate them through ‘fun’, to get them to understand the purport of having such global fests. At least the visitors would realize that there are immigrants who have voice in Canada. They may be considered minority but they are asserting their identities through visuals and images representing their ethnicities. It wouldn’t be wrong to state that considering the popularity and frequency with which global fests are organized, they are multicultural institutes
because people take the images with them and there would consistent contemplation on the visuals and this is precisely what makes the vision of the multicultural policy successful.
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