

The Ford Foundation and Post-Independence Indian Theatre

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Abstract

With the research stipend from the Rockefeller Archive Center, initially, my intended research was to focus on theatre in Palestine. While Palestinian theatre is a worthwhile subject, I found that the Rockefeller Archive Center had a greater volume of archived records pertaining to theatre in India. As a result, I embarked on research with a concentration on the work of philanthropic organizations and their role in the India's cultural development in the latter half of the twentieth century. Thus, I reconstructed a narrative of the history of the Indian theatre.

The Ford Foundation and Post-Independence Indian Theatre

Fresh after the resolution of the Second World War, India in the 1950s was viewed as a potentially problematic setting for cultural development work due to the growing sentiment that the country posed a significant threat to US global hegemony.¹ While India held great potential for economic development and evolution, and while the Ford Foundation (FF) was able to do community development work there, the FF remained hesitant to work in the cultural sector in India during this Cold War period. Charles Fahs, who was the Director of the Humanities division at the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), commented in his diary that the difficulties of communist infiltration made a large number of writers and dramatists ineligible for support. This, according to Fahs, was what made the development of cultural relations with India problematic.² In particular, Kathleen McCarthy, who wrote on the international cultural activities of the Ford Foundation from the fifties to the early eighties, described India as notably susceptible to communist influence because of its newly democratic nature in post-war Asia. McCarthy observed that India was inundated by communist authors and publishers whose books were widely distributed in the early fifties.³ One of the Ford Foundation's initiatives, the Intercultural Publications, Inc., as McCarthy notes, recognized "the threat of Communist domination in India."⁴

However, the Ford Foundation also acknowledged the strategic importance of cultural investment in India in terms of demonstrating the United States' transformative development by presenting the "point of view of the Free World to India."⁵ The building of networks of foreign experts and institutions laden with resources and receptive to the American cause characterized the FF's ambitions to imperceptibly manufacture an economy that aligned with American values. Thus, India became the "guinea pig" for the Ford Foundation's experiment to focus attention on culture in developing countries.⁶ The Ford Foundation operated on the fundamental belief "that one should ... help preserve and emphasize indigenous values."⁷ Its headquarters in New Delhi began to serve as

the prime location for organizing cultural programmes in India and establishing precedents for international development and networks globally.

In an effort to entrench itself in existing political and cultural structures in place in India and its communities, the Ford Foundation replicated the policies of the state. In 1963, Artur Isenberg, a senior consultant for the Ford Foundation, wrote in his *Case for Foreign Support of Selected Cultural Projects in India* about the need in India for “friendly foreign interest and a helping hand.”⁸ He described sectors with a dire deficiency of foreign exchange as “jeopardiz[ing] the conservation of the country’s incredibly vast treasury of works of art and other manifestations of its cultural heritage.”⁹ During the sixties, the Ford Foundation wished to secure its delicate position in India, among other postcolonial states. It emphasised the promotion of foreign development concepts “insofar as possible within the developing society’s cultural framework...”¹⁰ While forging close bonds with India’s officials and experts, the FF mimicked its administrative and developmental models as well as its standards in cultural and academic areas. The work that the Ford Foundation proposed for India’s cultural sector included the physical protection and film documentation of folk and tribal performance entertainments and festivals that were at risk of extinction in the face of rapidly advancing mass entertainment.¹¹ These recommendations fell under two umbrellas of “Preservation of India’s Cultural Heritage” and the “Encouragement of Cultural Development in India.”¹² These proposals coincided with India’s state policies of cultural development and heritage conservation.

Throughout this period, the Ford Foundation grew to be a powerful presence in India. However, the death of Nehru in 1964 appears to have posed a threat to the FF’s firmly fortified position on the political stage of India. With the Nehruvian dream in tatters, the Ford Foundation office in New Delhi was faced with more hardship and political opposition. The Ford Foundation, as well as American involvement in the form of donations towards Indian matters and intervention of internal affairs, fell under immense scrutiny. “[It] created the perception in India that an interconnected nexus of foreign advisers deployed expertise and funding assistance to bend India to their will.”¹³ After the far-left communist Naxalbari movement of 1967, Artur Isenberg predicted and commented on India’s future

development in the 1970s in his *Trends in Indian Culture in the 1970's*.¹⁴ He found “indications of growing governmental sensitivity concerning foreign aid in the cultural sphere” in the recent past,¹⁵ foreseeing a “populist trend” that would bring about the “growing politicalization of India’s cultural life” which would more readily react to “domestic and – even more so – foreign sources of support.”¹⁶ Isenberg called upon foreign organizations to be more cognizant of their outreach and assistance, stating that “the proper role of a foreign organization in the cultural life of another nation must be marginal and carefully defined, avoiding even the appearance of any desire to make over the cultural life of India over in its own national image.”¹⁷ Despite Isenberg’s emphasis, a few years later, Douglas Ensminger, the Ford Foundation’s representative in India, wrote that India began to consider “foreign assistance to cultural programs as being politically dangerous” as it had a “motive [to win] minds to Western thought.”¹⁸ This marked the Ford Foundation’s apprehension that it would be perceived as an agency trying to spawn American propaganda in India during the Cold War. That fear was not without cause or unjustified. Besides “a premium on careful, tactful negotiations and more protracted dialogues than in the past” placed by the Indian government under the new Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri,¹⁹ Isenberg further noted a delayed approval and clearance for the Ford Foundation’s cultural programme in New Delhi. This was on top of the government’s stipulation of a ceiling of \$20,000 although requests for assistance by both the FF and the Indian government ran over the order of \$500,000 for this cultural programme.²⁰ This cap on the spending for the Ford Foundation demonstrated that the government in India was, as Ensminger observed, all too wary of the effects of foreign capital on local affairs.

In subsequent years, the Ford Foundation directed its efforts towards cultivating a web of bridge-builders who went back and forth between various arts constituencies and networks that were sustained by regional, national, and international assistance. In the 1980s, the FF began moving “out of the Delhi and English-based national level institutions to regional cultural centers and institutions steeped in particular facets of the larger whole.”²¹ This was to benefit from the “most authentic classical scholars of a tradition” and truly collaborate with folk artists on site.²² It marked a shift in FF strategy after the change in India’s political climate in the 1970s. The Ford Foundation was now able to work

without budgetary confines and stipulations; it focused on a multilevel strategy wherein different regional centres would be established and a central servicing and linkage point would be set up.²³ This involved supporting institutions that would work in the preservation and promotion of region-wide folk performance as well as creating a supportive infrastructure that benefitted all organizations in folk performing arts.²⁴ This funding demonstrated the Ford Foundation's role in establishing knowledge networks across multiple social and political planes. Acknowledging the bureaucracy of Indian institutions posed limitations on the Ford Foundation's flexibility in fostering artistic creativity, it was emboldened to divorce itself from replicating India's state programs that emphasized that "culture had an important role to play in national development" and began exploring other avenues for funding.²⁵ Moving on from the promotion and preservation of folk performance art forms and with a mind for "sustaining a new cultural creativity", the FF gradually expanded its reach to directly support contemporary artists who are "looking to folk music and drama for material to create new indigenous styles of performance based on an integration of folk and modern forms."²⁶ The Ford Foundation's programs were integral in shaping workshops that evolved to increase opportunities for productive intersections between grantees and performing artists.

In 1991, in the years after the end of the Cold War, as India became incorporated into the global economy, so, too, was there a change in the role of culture in the world at large. As described in Mary Zurbuchen's 1994 *Review of the Ford Foundation's Cultural Grantmaking in Asia*, cultural needs were challenged by renewed nationalist or sub-nationalist identities, ethnic allegiances, and intergroup violence, within the new context of increasing conflicts "involving ethnicity, language, religion, group history, and links to the environment."²⁷ A growing resistance to cultural preservation was also described, because it focused more on traditional culture than on "modern experiments or socially relevant artistic expressions."²⁸ The Ford Foundation accordingly refocused its work to support activities that contributed to cultural vitality and diversity of voice.²⁹ The FF established, in line with its new commitment to expressing diverse identities "as valuable elements of society and nationhood,"³⁰ a theatre laboratory program bridging together groups of local artists and other technical experts was set up to

survey local performance conditions, supporting “the development of an indigenous theatre network around the country.”³¹ In 1993, the India Foundation for the Arts, a private, professional arts philanthropic organisation was established with the help of the Ford Foundation.

The Indian Foundation for the Arts began to move away from supporting “national theatre” towards the creation of a transnational space geared towards those who are “off-beat, alternative, serious, sustained, activist, experimental, confrontational, small, semi-rural or rural, marginalized for one reason or another.”³² This was a departure from the support to the Theatre of Roots, inspired by Indian traditions, in earlier decades.

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⁴ McCarthy, p. 102.

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