

# Te Papa and New Zealand's Indian communities – a case study about exhibition development

Stephanie Gibson

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, PO Box 467, Wellington, New Zealand (sgibson@tepapa.govt.nz)

**ABSTRACT:** The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) has a mandate to represent the diverse cultures of New Zealand. Different migrant communities are profiled in the Museum's Community Gallery every two years. The exhibition development process relies heavily on the relationship between the Museum's exhibition team and a voluntary Community Advisory Group. The third community exhibition to be held in the Community Gallery is about the Indian communities in New Zealand, called *AAINAA – Reflections through Indian Weddings*. Issues regarding this project are explored as a case study on the relationship between museums and communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Museum, New Zealand, Te Papa, Community Advisory Group, AAINAA, Indian, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, migrant community, exhibition.

## Introduction

The publication of community histories in connection with museum exhibitions has increased significantly over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> The actual process of developing community exhibitions has also been explored in recent museological literature, but little has been written about the New Zealand experience.<sup>2</sup> This paper offers a case study on a common, but relatively undocumented experience: the relationship between an exhibition team and its community advisers, and how they develop a community exhibition within a particular conceptual framework.<sup>3</sup> The case study is *AAINAA – Reflections through Indian weddings*, the community exhibition currently on display at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa).<sup>4</sup>

A key question addressed by this paper is whether Te Papa's exhibition process meets the needs of its communities as required by its mandating Act of Parliament and by its own corporate principles, which express the Museum's philosophy and guide its practice.

## Te Papa – the framework

Under the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 1992, the mission of the Museum is to act as a forum for the nation to tell the stories of all New Zealanders. A Board controls and maintains the Museum. One of the key functions of the Board is to enable communities to contribute to the Museum. According to section 8 of the Act, 'the Board shall:

- (a) Have regard to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people of New Zealand, and the contributions they have made and continue to make to New Zealand's cultural life and the fabric of New Zealand society;
- (b) Endeavour to ensure both that the Museum expresses and recognises the mana and significance of Maori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand's identity.<sup>5</sup>

Te Papa's founding concept was developed through an extensive consultative process, emphasising 'narratives of culture and place', the idea of forum, the bicultural partnership between Maori and Pakeha (which includes a wide range of ethnic groups), and diverse audiences. This concept is reinforced by Te Papa's corporate principles, which also emphasise biculturalism and the Museum as a waharoa – an entryway for exploration of cultural identity. These ideas are expressed within the conceptual framework of Tangata Whenua (those who belong to the land by right of first discovery) and Tangata Tiriti (those who belong to the land by right of the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840) (Te Papa Annual Report 2001: 1). The building itself reflects this bicultural framework: Tangata Whenua exhibits are located on one side of the building and Tangata Tiriti exhibits on the other. Linking the two is a display on the Treaty.

Within the Tangata Tiriti precinct sits a major long-term exhibition called *Passports*, which tells the story of migration to New Zealand over the last 200 years. Here the stories of different ethnic groups find expression on the exhibition floor. But the space is limited, and the narrative of *Passports* relies on examples of individuals or single family's lives. But within *Passports* is a short-term exhibition space called the Community Gallery where Te Papa profiles a different migrant community every two years. This space allows for an ongoing programme of highlighting the contributions of a diverse range of cultures in addition to that offered within the overview of *Passports*. The Community Gallery is a permanent and integral part of the exhibition programme.

The intent of the Community Gallery is to provide a national platform for communities to tell their own stories and present their treasured objects in partnership with Te Papa. During the development of the Te Papa concept, the Community Gallery was seen as a way of 'enlisting the energies of minority ethnic groups who would not otherwise be represented in the museum'.<sup>5</sup> The Community Gallery helps Te Papa keep in touch with various communities and build ongoing relationships. So far, three different communities have been profiled – Chinese, Dutch, and Indian.<sup>6</sup> Mirroring this commitment to migrant communities, Te Papa profiles a different iwi (Maori tribe) every two years within the Tangata Whenua precinct.

## Definition of community

Much has been written about the definition of community in relation to museums.<sup>7</sup> Ethnicity, location, origin, belief,

sexuality, profession, and interest are all ways of creating communities.

Definitions of community at Te Papa have been based on iwi and migrant ethnicity. These particular concepts of community may vary in upcoming years to allow for broader interpretation (for example, the gay and lesbian communities), as the Museum is aware that community identities are complex, constantly changing, and overlapping. Individual identities are also complex and people may belong to more than one community. As Christine Mullen Kreamer notes, 'museums must learn to understand the nature and flexibility of individual and group identities, as well as the permeability of borders and boundaries' (in Karp *et al.* 1992: 380). In addition, it must be remembered that professional groups within the museum are also communities and are each other's audiences for ideas and support (Perin in Karp *et al.* 1992: 187). Ideas and attitudes about a external community may be generated that relate more to the interior culture of the museum than to the community itself.

## Community stories in national museums

It is now widely accepted that communities should have some say in how they are portrayed in museums. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics for Museums states that:

A museum is an institution in the service of society and of its development.... The museum has an important duty to develop its educational role and attract wider audiences from all levels of the community, locality, or group it serves. It should offer opportunities for such people to become involved in the museum and to support its goals and activities. Interaction with the constituent community is an integral part of realising the educational role of the museum and specialist staff are likely to be required for this purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Like other recently developed national museums around the world, such as the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of Australia, Te Papa has committed permanent exhibition space to telling community stories to allow for multiple histories and points of view. Museums have accepted that communities may be best equipped to tell their own stories and should be involved in any exhibitions about themselves.

Community exhibitions in national museums have a civic function, enabling visitors to learn about the culture of a particular community and its contribution to the nation (Bennett 1997: 20). Tony Bennett notes that bicultural and multicultural museums, which are committed to telling the stories of all their communities, may be more aptly described as 'sanctuaries of *examples*' where no one way of life is ideal, but where diversity, tolerance, and understanding are celebrated (Bennett 1997: 21).

But where national museums tend to focus on ideas of national identity, regional and local museums tend to explore the experiences of their local populations. There are advantages to this approach in that they may be more flexible in their response to local conditions. They may have a smaller geographical area to represent and can be more focused on displaying 'contributory history', or contributions made by ordinary people to national development (Fitzgerald 2001: 59). Above all, a local museum may be able to hand over more control to the community in the development of the exhibition than is possible in a larger national museum. For example, a local museum may have fewer stakeholders (less staff, fewer community representatives), shorter and simpler exhibition development processes, less capital investment, and shorter display periods. In contrast, Te Papa's community exhibitions take about 18 months to develop, are on display for two years, and require greater resources and capital investment. The implications and dangers of handing complete control over to a community are, therefore, all the greater.

Local museums in New Zealand have also demonstrated a new commitment to the importance of the community over the last 15 years. For example, Te Manawa in Palmerston North has run a community exhibition programme called 'Origins' since 1998. Based on the estimate that at least 50 different ethnic groups reside in the Manawatu region, the museum made a commitment to involve as many groups as possible in its exhibition programme. Even some of the smallest community groups, such as the Chileans, have been profiled. The exhibitions take about four to six months to develop and are on display for about six months. Their budgets and resources are comparatively small. The exhibitions are co-curated in the sense that museum staff offer professional advice and technical expertise, and the communities provide ideas and cultural knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Local museums such as the Petone Settlers Museum in Wellington have also successfully used a community ac-

cess model in which the power base shifts from the museum to the community. Petone Settlers Museum either initiates or responds to community approaches by inviting groups into the museum and working in partnership with them to create exhibitions, publications, and public programmes (including annual festivals). In past exhibitions, community representatives met independently of museum staff to discuss content, and were facilitated by a researcher chosen by the community and contracted by the museum. Museum staff only provided advice and technical support (Mealing and Sawicka 1997: 58–61).

## The Indian communities in New Zealand

This paper examines Te Papa's model, which has been developed since opening in 1998, as applied in the case of the Indian community in New Zealand. *AAINAA – Reflections through Indian weddings* is the third exhibition in the Community Gallery, and tells the stories of Indians in New Zealand through an examination of the rituals of marriage. Te Papa had already established a relationship with the Hindu community through the development of *Passports*, and the Indian community as a whole was eager to be represented by the Museum. From Te Papa's perspective, their stories provided many facets and issues to explore.

The Indian community is distinctive, has a high profile within New Zealand life, and has contributed greatly to the fabric of New Zealand society. It is not possible, however, to see it as a single entity. It is incredibly diverse – from third-generation New Zealanders to recent immigrants with different religious backgrounds – and it was immediately clear that Te Papa would need to work closely with representatives in order to understand the complexities of caste, religious, and regional differences.

The first Indians arrived in New Zealand during the late 1800s. Most came from the regions of Punjab and Gujarat, following indentured labour to Fiji and on to New Zealand, or knew of this country through British army links. They were mainly male, single, and tended not to settle. But after 1900, the number of Indians coming permanently to New Zealand increased. In 1920, amid a climate of growing prejudice against Indians and other Asian migrants, the New Zealand government introduced a permit system that greatly restricted the number of Indians who could come here. As a result, the number of new migrants from

India dropped. However, of those who did make it here, a greater proportion were women and children. By 1945, families (mostly of shopkeepers and fruiterers) had become established, and second-generation New Zealand Indians were becoming increasingly important in the demographic make-up of the community. By 1981, about 45% of the total New Zealand Indian population had been born here (Statistics New Zealand 1981).

The 1987 military coup in Fiji changed this, causing a large number of Fijian Indians to migrate to New Zealand over the next decade. By 2001, there were over 62,000 Indians living in New Zealand. Of these, roughly 30% had been born in India, 30% in New Zealand, and 30% in Fiji. The remainder (less than 10%) came from east Africa and elsewhere (Statistics New Zealand 1981, 1995, 1996, 2001).

In addition to this range of origins within the single description of 'Indian' was the additional complication of religious diversity. The main Indian communities in New Zealand come from the three largest religious groups who have migrated throughout the world – Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh. The Hindu community is the largest, followed by the much smaller Muslim and Sikh groups. They all have strong community associations, which are often centred around their places of worship (ie, the Hindu temple, the Muslim mosque, and the Sikh *Gurdwara* or temple). A significant Indian Christian community is also present in New Zealand but is not dealt with in *AAINAA*. The exhibition team and Community Advisory Group felt that the Christian wedding was a well-known ritual throughout New Zealand society and did not require discussion in a space devoted to diversity. In retrospect, however, Indian Christian weddings would have provided opportunities to explore points of difference and would have been more inclusive.

### Community consultation process

The first issue in the development of *AAINAA – Reflections through Indian weddings* was establishing a relationship with the different groups identified as constituting the 'Indian community'. This process followed a model already established by the previous community exhibitions. About 18 months before the exhibition was due to open, Te Papa invited the Wellington Indian Association to nominate six people to meet with Te Papa staff to discuss the exhibition project and issues affecting the lives of Indian people in New Zealand. The Indian Association was asked to nominate local people from diverse backgrounds based on the follow-

ing criteria: age, gender, religious affiliation, and length of residence. The Association is mainly Hindu and, therefore, this meeting was not inclusive of other Indian groups.

The purpose of this initial meeting was to ascertain levels of community interest and to seek nominations for a larger group to attend a one-day brainstorming session at Te Papa called 'Blue Skies', where any idea for an exhibition could be suggested. The Blue Skies process was also used for the Dutch community project. This session was a once-only chance to involve as many people as possible from around New Zealand in direct dialogue with Te Papa staff.<sup>10</sup>

To ensure that the process was as inclusive as possible, Te Papa attempted to include representatives from different religious groups. Over 30 people participated in the Blue Skies session, which was facilitated by a New Zealand Indian academic and Hindu, Dr Sashi Meanger.<sup>11</sup> They came from a variety of backgrounds and included individuals who were not members of the established organisations. However, not all groups had responded to the Museum's early overtures, and this caused consultation issues later in the project, particularly with the Indian Muslim community.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of Blue Skies was for the Indian communities to guide Te Papa in terms of the stories and issues that should be covered by the exhibition. The goal for this session was to answer the following questions: who was the Indian community, what stories were to be told in the exhibition, how was the story to be told, and who was to be included in the working group?

As in the case of the previous community exhibitions, Te Papa developed ideas to assist the discussion and decision-making processes. Owing to a desire to change the chronological format of the preceding community exhibitions, Te Papa's Concept Leader of History tabled an exhibition concept based around marriage. Marriage has always played an important part in the lives of New Zealand's Indian communities and was seen as providing a rich unifying theme for an exhibition. Through the wedding ritual, Te Papa would be able to look at cultural and religious practices, personal experiences, and wider stories of community life. It was argued that most visitors would understand the concept of marriage regardless of cultural background, but that there would be many opportunities for cross-cultural surprise and engagement in showing how marriage rituals are played out in Indian society in terms of different belief systems, aesthetics, and symbolism. In addition, the design for such a theme would be visually interesting and attractive

to visitors and might be more evocative than an orthodox representation of migrant history.

Nonetheless, other story prompts were given to the Blue Skies participants: the impact of leaving home, problems and experiences in a new society, Indian contributions to society, important events and personalities, generational change, connections with the old society, and distinctiveness of the New Zealand Indian communities. The participants were asked to keep in mind what objects could tell the stories, the limited space of the exhibition, the exhibition's target audience, what associated events could be linked in, and whether they wanted their exhibition to be similar to other exhibitions in Te Papa or whether they wanted to do something different.

By the end of the Blue Skies session, Te Papa staff had gained community support to focus the exhibition on the wedding as a pivotal event, and that within this topic, notions such as generational change and cultural difference (both within Indian communities and with the host community) could be explored.

## Community Advisory Group

For its community exhibitions, Te Papa calls upon volunteers to form a Community Advisory Group to provide cultural knowledge and expertise to the exhibition project. This recognises the right of the community to tell its own stories as described in section 8(b) of the Act: 'that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum'.

Te Papa asked the Blue Skies participants to put their names forward for the creation of the Community Advisory Group, which would assist the exhibition team. Several people submitted their curriculum vitae for consideration. Te Papa confirmed the involvement of five volunteers who represented a range of backgrounds: a women's support lawyer, a past president of the New Zealand Indian Central Association, a post-World War Two migrant and elder,<sup>13</sup> an academic and Hindu priest, and a teacher (four women and one man, all over 35 years of age).<sup>14</sup> They were all very experienced in community work and event planning. The elder had been involved with the wider Tangata Tiriti exhibition at Te Papa (*Passports*), making her the most experienced in terms of how Te Papa worked. The group was completely Hindu because they were the only ones who submitted their names. They were also all from Wellington for practi-

cal reasons: it was cheaper and easier for Te Papa to host a local committee.

The Community Advisory Group was, however, essentially a self-selected Hindu group. In hindsight, a more inclusive group (including Sikh and Muslim representatives) would have made the exhibition process easier in terms of consultation. To some degree, the Community Advisory Group could access these other community networks, but on the whole Te Papa needed to talk to the other communities separately to ensure full consultation. Furthermore, five individuals could neither represent the complexity of the Indian communities nor speak on behalf of everyone. Many voices in the community can be lost when authority is delegated to representatives (and the same can be said for museum professionals, who are usually drawn from middle-class university graduates). Only constant dialogue with a wide range of people can achieve a pluralistic result (as noted by Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 145). Therefore, the exhibition team kept the channels of communication open with people in the community beyond the Community Advisory Group.

The Community Advisory Group decided to meet at Te Papa every two to three weeks in the evenings. This was the major, sustained point of contact for dialogue between Te Papa and the Indian communities. Key members of the exhibition team were always present, and other staff members attended for relevant agenda items (for example, interpretation, text review, education, and public events).

Both staff and committee members were committed to the project beyond normal working hours. Working on community projects requires all involved to be personally committed and flexible. Community members gave freely of their time as well as patience and trust in unlocking cultural doors. They had to be prepared to meet in the evenings after their work days were finished, and staff had to be prepared to travel to meet community members in their own environment.

The role of the Community Advisory Group was to focus on the content and interpretation of the exhibition: in particular, to help give expression to the exhibition concept, provide guidance, establish networks and provide access into the community, verify information, test ideas and give feedback, and support the exhibition team. The Community Advisory Group was invited to comment on the main themes of the exhibition, the design concept, the name and tagline of the exhibition, the audiovisuals based

on community interviews, the content of the object labels, the content of *Te Papa Onscreen* (Te Papa's in-house information database), and the opening event. Individual committee members also made their own contributions to the exhibition project. For example, one translated English text into Hindi script and organised the purchase of necessary props, two members organised groups of young people for interviews, and one organised community groups to make the garlands for the exhibition canopy.

Nick Merriman and Nima Poovaya-Smith note that:

It is essential that the museum approach the partnership with a local community with a degree of humility and a willingness to listen and learn. If it truly wishes to work in partnership with local people and build a long-term relationship, the museum must be prepared to recognise that cultural authority is no longer the sole prerogative of museums, but will need to be shared more widely (in Kavanagh 1996: 180).

The reality of working with a museum is, however, that communities must operate within the museum's formal infrastructure (for example, resources, timeframes, and budgets) as the museum is ultimately financially accountable. The success of the process depends on constant dialogue with community members to ensure that they are aware of any constraints. There were times during the exhibition project when information flows were held up and misunderstandings developed. This was partly because the Community Advisory Group members worked part-time on the project whereas the exhibition team worked full-time. Consequently, they were not always kept up to speed with developments, which often stemmed from wider issues affecting museum policy.

Although, expertise lay with Te Papa in key areas (for example, design), staff were mindful that community members may have very little idea about what a museum exhibition process actually entails. Visualising an exhibition space, plans, and elevations can be confusing for non-museum professionals. It was crucial that the exhibition team regularly presented updates of the design concept and interpretative framework at the fortnightly meetings to ensure that the Community Advisory Group was fully involved. Ultimately, however, museum policy with regard to design and text style prevailed.

The Community Advisory Group's involvement was significant, but ultimate authority and responsibility

remained with the Museum (as noted by Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 141). Many of the Group's recommendations were followed. If not, dialogue between the members and the exhibition team ensured on the whole that understandings were reached. In the end, however, responsibility for final design and interpretative decisions lay with the staff. Nonetheless, such decisions came from greater awareness generated by the relationship with the Community Advisory Group (as noted by Peirson Jones in Karp *et al.* 1992: 224–225).

## Understanding the communities

The Community Advisory Group identified that the primary goal of *AAINAA – Reflections through Indian weddings* was to 'demonstrate how Indian descendants maintain their culture and heritage in New Zealand' and the 'contribution of the Indian community to the wider New Zealand community through the presentation of positive examples'. The secondary goal of the exhibition was to 'bring together the history and culture of the Indian community as a future resource, accessible to the public' (Te Papa Minutes 2001).

A number of steps were taken to realise these goals. Key research areas for the exhibition were the meaning of the wedding in different Indian cultures, generational differences within New Zealand about marriage, and the impact of class, caste, region, and religion on marriage.

The primary research material for the exhibition was gathered from interviews with a wide range of people from the Indian communities. To find potential interviewees, the exhibition team, Dr Sashi Meanger (as an external expert), and the Community Advisory Group developed a survey called a 'Marriage Questionnaire'. The survey was aimed at New Zealand Indians who were, or had been, married. The main aim of the survey was to obtain a range of accounts of marriage experiences from a cross-section of Indian people in New Zealand to show the significance of marriage, the main processes of marriage, how diverse traditions and rituals are maintained in New Zealand, how traditions reinforce pride in culture and identity, and how traditions are modified through contact with the host society.

The Community Advisory Group approved the survey before it was placed on Te Papa's website. Publicity was arranged through the community press, websites, radio, television, and the Indian Associations to reach as wide a range of community members as possible. About 500 survey forms were sent out through various channels. By the end of 2001, about 50 responses were returned to Te Papa and an

initial 21 were chosen for interviews. The exhibition team selected the interviewees according to age, geographical location, religion, and life experience to ensure that a wide range of views were represented in the exhibition. These people's voices would directly contribute to the exhibition in the form of audiovisuals.

On the whole the Community Advisory Group approved the selection, but some committee members had reservations about the range of age and geographical spread. They noted a lack of young people, a lack of Muslim involvement, and that the range did not adequately represent the current make-up of the Indian communities, in particular, that Fijian Indians were under-represented and that Gujarati Indians were over-represented.

## How did Te Papa take account of diversity?

The survey had largely dictated the exhibition team's choices of who would speak in the audiovisuals. Te Papa was obliged, however, to reflect greater diversity than had been elicited by its first approaches to the communities (ie, the Blue Skies session and the survey).

Museums are involved in defining the identities of communities by packaging them into concepts for exhibitions, but they need to understand that group identities emerge from personal identities and that homogeneity is almost impossible and should not be assumed (Karp in Karp *et al.* 1992: 21). The Indian communities in New Zealand are incredibly complex, covering several generations, regional differences, and different religions and castes. It was impossible to fully represent the communities' experiences, but the exhibition team found enough commonalities and shared practices to present an exhibition that could be appreciated by a wide range of Indian as well as non-Indian visitors. There are differences between a Sikh farmer and a Hindu doctor, but both participate in New Zealand society and history, and both have 'overlapping senses of identity' (Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 150).

The exhibition team's biggest concern was to translate the three main different religions into an exhibition concept. To represent the communities as fairly as possible, the exhibition team relied on the statistical breakdown of New Zealand Indians. The dominant community is Hindu (about 58%), followed by the much smaller Muslim (10%) and Sikh (7%) communities. The remaining percentages

include Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and others (Statistics New Zealand 1995).

The Community Advisory Group advised the exhibition team to 'go for the common features' and 'avoid specific religious symbols and rituals' (Te Papa Minutes 2001). This was possible throughout most of the exhibition, but to properly describe each of the three religion's wedding rituals, the exhibition team decided to rotate the display of each religion's ritual objects and wedding costumes separately on a recreated *mandap* (wedding stage) at the heart of the exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

## Who worked with the communities?

Depending on the nature of the community, Te Papa may contract the services of an external community adviser to help build relationships. This process acknowledges that cultural knowledge does not always lie with museum staff, and helps create a sense of trust between the museum and community.

To assist the *AAINAA* exhibition team, Te Papa contracted Dr Sashi Meanger, a New Zealand Indian academic and a Hindu, to assist with approaching the community and to carry out the interviews. He was chosen for his interview experience, good communication and Indian language skills, and respected position as an academic. He was not closely aligned with any particular community group, and so could move easily between them.

Such a person was crucial to the success of the survey and subsequent interviews. He had a deep understanding of the customs, beliefs, and values of the Indian communities, and was able to connect through language and elicit full responses. Sashi's understanding opened doors for Te Papa: interviewees quickly relaxed in his company, trusted him, and shared very personal stories about their lives. The exhibition team relied on his insider's knowledge of issues and sensitivities. Although he was more comfortable interviewing Hindu and Sikh people, Sashi was also able to interview some of the Muslim couples. When he was absent, interviewees' responses were less intimate.

The curators on the exhibition team were always present at the interview sessions, and were also the major point of personal contact with the interviewees. Other staff members dealt with crucial matters of organisation, but the curators were the recipients of knowledge and personal stories given by community members. They had the enormous responsibility of translating the information into a form that was truthful, sympathetic, and easily understood

by Te Papa's diverse audiences. Thus the curatorial role was not the traditional role of expert. The curators acted primarily as advocates for the communities and their stories. They used their professional research skills, but with the understanding that all interpretation would be approved by the Community Advisory Group and appropriate experts in the community.

As word of the project began to circulate, Te Papa also received many approaches and offers of assistance from community members beyond the Community Advisory Group. Te Papa's policy is to accept those offers that help advance a project but not to involve them in the conceptual development. People with expertise in particular fields became involved in the implementation of parts of the project. Two event organisers helped with opening events. A widely travelled and knowledgeable couple who had recently settled in New Zealand helped with purchasing props in India, advised on the musical instruments included in the exhibition, and helped with dressing the mannequins in wedding costumes and jewellery. Their assistance was crucial to the success of the exhibition in giving visual implementation to key aspects of the rituals associated with weddings.

## The interviews

*The human voice resonates with human emotion.*<sup>16</sup>

Oral history has become an important part of the visitor experience within museums, making the experience contemporary and accessible (Chew 2002: 32). Audiovisuals are an excellent medium to convey different experiences within the exhibition environment. They can convey emotions, personality, and different points of view quickly and effectively (as noted in Pierson Jones in Karp *et al.* 1992: 230). By giving prominence to people's voices within the exhibition, Te Papa provided direct communication with the visitor, leading to a much richer emotional experience. What it means to be Indian in New Zealand is seen through the minds of the interviewees and not through textual mediation. One person's experience does not represent how a whole community feels, but that experience is valid in its own right and can be woven in with other points of view (Chew 2002: 33).

The key voices and focus within *AAINAA* are the interviews. In all of its Community Gallery exhibitions, Te Papa has placed emphasis on telling people's stories in their own words. Community history is more powerful and pal-

pable when communicated through the voices of people who could be neighbours. In *AAINAA*, however, the interviews play a greater role than has been attempted in the past.

In total, the exhibition team recorded 26 interviews (22 couples, one widow, one woman without her husband present, and two groups of students). The interviewees' stories are told in 16 three-minute edited films on four monitors (four films per monitor). The monitors relate to the four broad themes explored in the exhibition, titled: 'Introductions', 'Preparations', 'Weddings', and 'Our World'. The topics range from practical wedding preparations to profound philosophical discussions. In addition to the audiovisuals, quotes were extracted from the interviews to include in the text panels to add a personal point of view to the labels about the objects on display. Consequently, the first person point of view appears in different media throughout the exhibition.

Most of the interviewees had already had the opportunity to clarify their thoughts through the original survey, but most were eager to share both their positive and negative experiences. A few people asked for certain stories to be removed later when they had the chance to review and approve the material, and special efforts were made to preserve the anonymity of one Muslim couple who feared repercussions from September 11. At the time of filming, however, only one couple asked for the camera to be turned off when they felt uncomfortable. All the interviewees appeared to enjoy the process and to find it rewarding. As museum professionals, it was a privilege to hear about people's lives and see their wedding photographs and treasured objects. Interviewing a wide range of people helped the exhibition team understand the dynamics of the Indian communities at a personal level.

Staff edited the film material in-house. The storyboarding, editing, and production were a huge task involving several people and many hours. Staff were particularly aware of the risk of imposing their concerns and perceptions on the actual selection. The key concerns were that all interviewees were represented and represented fairly, and that the information was compelling, and not just made up of soundbites. It was almost impossible to convey the complexity of people's lives when there were so many interviews to represent. However, the result is a rich and comprehensive resource for the visitor, and casual observations have been made by staff that visitors are staying at each monitor for longer than is usual. This is due to several factors: the monitors themselves are very attractive (housed in pink Indian-style cases with at-





Fig 1. Layout of the audiovisual monitors and the 'bum-rails'. Photograph by Michael Hall.

tractive graphics), the themes are intriguing (for example, 'Arranged Marriages'), and the bright pink 'bum-rail' is an inviting place to rest (Fig 1).

Visitor feedback has been encouraging. People are usually interested in hearing about other people's lives. In exit interviews conducted by Te Papa staff, most visitors have enjoyed watching the audiovisuals. Comments have included: 'Short and respectful and sensitive videos', 'Interactive videos – covered important things in life', 'The interviews were very real' (Visitor and Market Research Unit 2002 unpubl.).

## Missing voices

During the interview selection process, two major missing voices were identified – those of young people and Indian Muslims.

Out of the 21 surveys initially identified for interviews, there were fourteen Hindu couples, one Hindu widow, two Sikh couples, and four 'mixed marriages' (or couples from different religious or ethnic backgrounds). Only three of the couples were young, and only one person was Muslim. Te Papa needed to proactively address these imbalances.

The age range for most of the interviewees was from the late 30s to 60s. Three young Indian couples were in-

terviewed, but a wider youth point of view was needed in order to look at contemporary issues facing young people, to look at issues of generational change, and to appeal to Te Papa's school audience.

Two youth focus groups were organised by Community Advisory Group members and were held at Te Papa (a secondary school group of eight, and a tertiary education group of six). The groups were organised at short notice, and there was not enough time to apply the same survey methodology as before. Approached by the Community Advisory Group members themselves, the young people were from Hindu backgrounds and all from Wellington. That said, the focus groups were successful in terms of content, providing a pre-marriage youth point of view in the audiovisuals.

A youth point of view not represented by the exhibition is that of contemporary intermarriage. *AAINAA* includes two examples of an older generation, but not of intermarriage between young New Zealand Indians and non-Indian New Zealanders. In retrospect, such a couple would have given the opportunity to consider how diverse cultures in New Zealand are currently engaging and altering one another, thus breaking down the barriers between 'them' and 'us' and showing how communities within New Zealand are accommodating each other (Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 146).

The other crucial gap was the lack of a Muslim voice. There were two key reasons why so few Indian Muslims had responded to the survey: fear of public involvement after September 11, and residual distrust of Te Papa owing to a contentious exhibition held in 1998 called *Pictura Britannica*.

The news during the period of exhibition development was dominated by the aftermath of September 11, and by anti-immigration statements by a prominent New Zealand politician (Peters 2002). As *AAINAA* was taking place within a national museum, it could make a small but positive statement about harmony within cultural diversity. The Muslim community had, however, remained wary of Te Papa since *Pictura Britannica*. This exhibition featured an artwork by Tania Kovat called *Virgin in a Condom* in which a small plastic statuette of the Virgin Mary was sheathed in a condom. It was considered blasphemous by religious groups, in particular the Muslim and Catholic communities. Owing to issues surrounding the censorship of art, Te Papa did not remove the artwork from display.

Museums may find they have conflicting obligations to their various communities. Te Papa's mission to be a forum included representing divergent and controversial views. In this particular case, however, the art community's need for freedom of expression and the religious communities' need for respect were in conflict with each other. Consequently, there was much debate within the exhibition team and the Community Advisory Group over the best approach to take in order to repair the breach with the Muslim community. A sensitive approach was required, one which emphasised that *AAINAA* would celebrate New Zealand's Indian communities and be inclusive.

The Community Advisory Group suggested Muslim couples to contact for interviews, and the exhibition team approached the Islamic Centre in Wellington and the Federation of Islamic Associations for support. These approaches took a long time and, as the project deadline drew near, ran the risk of appearing tokenistic to the Muslim community. However, three couples eventually agreed to take part, and representatives of the Muslim organisations visited Te Papa and approved the exhibition concept and design.

## Celebration of Indian lives – what about the issues?

The aim of *AAINAA* is to celebrate New Zealand's Indian communities within a wider museum policy of multicultural representation. But celebrating a community can be seen as an easy option. Everyone loves festivals and good news stories. How did Te Papa acknowledge the issues within the communities?

Museums must be careful about which issues they choose to discuss, as the selection process itself can skew the representation of a culture. Ivan Karp believes that 'communities have the responsibility to see that exhibitions about themselves are more than celebratory' (Karp in Karp *et al.* 1992: 27), and there was much debate about whether to include some of the issues facing Indian people around the world, in particular racism, caste, and dowry. The celebratory nature of the wedding theme also precluded representing New Zealand Indians who had been divorced or who had chosen not to marry.

It was likely that Te Papa's audience would ask questions about these issues, particularly caste and dowry. The Community Advisory Group also expected the exhibition to address some of the serious issues in Indian life. The exhibition team decided to consider these issues in two main ways: in *Te Papa Onscreen* (an in-house database where visitors can access more information about exhibition topics) and within the audiovisuals. Consequently, one audiovisual is devoted to dowry. Experiences of caste are part of the audiovisual called 'Family and Community Views'. A particular experience of racism is described in the audiovisual 'Coming to New Zealand'. The stories are told in people's own voices and are not interpreted elsewhere in the exhibition. This is a subtle approach to dealing with issues of concern, and it requires a reasonably perceptive visitor to note them.

Steven Lavine points out that 'exhibitions that represent one group as different and exotic are common' (Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 141). *AAINAA* risks being perceived in this way. Even though the exhibition team intended the wedding to act as a vehicle for deeper understanding of the Indian communities, there was a risk that the arranged marriage system and the complex rituals of the ceremonies would present the Indian communities as being different and exotic. The design of the exhibition also contributes to this feeling of difference. It is intensely bright, colourful, and

completely surrounds the visitor, thereby setting the space apart from the rest of the museum.

However, the design is meant to engage the visitor and lead them through the exhibition to hear the real voices of New Zealand Indians. Te Papa's aim was for visitors to understand that Indians in New Zealand *are* New Zealanders but with a unique heritage. The interviews provide cross-cultural encounters 'to inform people about themselves, by setting their culture and history side by side with others' (Lavine in Karp *et al.* 1992: 142). Interviewees were in a variety of clothing, both traditional and western. They were pictured in New Zealand domestic settings, and they spoke with a variety of accents, including those of second and third-generation New Zealanders. They also directly voiced their feelings of what it was to be a New Zealander, like other New Zealanders – not only points of difference.

## Design and interpretation

The exhibition team never assumed expertise on Indian culture but were committed to improving knowledge and understanding. Only a few works of scholarship have been written on the Indian communities in New Zealand and much of it is about 20 years old.<sup>17</sup> The Museum's research thus largely relied on the interviews, advice from community members, and international sources. Research was carried out under the guidance of the Community Advisory Group, and all results were checked with the relevant members. Primary research material was also gathered from particular experts within the community, such as religious leaders.

From the beginning of the project, design was a key driver of the concept and helped shaped interpretation. The exhibition space was small and narrow with several restricting factors: angled walls divide the space into four main sections, with video and computer access down one side, and display cases down the other. The concept had to fit the infrastructure of this space.

As Ivan Karp notes, 'exhibitions portray their makers' sense of how the world is defined' (in Karp *et al.* 1992: 22). The designers were not Indian, and their identity as professionals within the museum community needed to be maintained. The Community Advisory Group dictated the overall tone of the design, and advised Te Papa to take a secular approach to imagery and decorations (for example, images of Hindu gods would be offensive to Muslims), and certain elements were given over directly to the community (for example, the garlands were made by community mem-

bers). Images and designs acceptable to all three religions were carefully researched and checked. But the final design was driven by the designers' skills and experience, and the constraints of the Museum (for example, budgets, labour, and timeframes).

One of Te Papa's major forms of engagement with its visitors is the use of language in text panels. Again decisions were made in tandem, as the Community Advisory Group and exhibition team decided that the text should be inclusive and reflect the multicultural commitment of Te Papa by including Te Reo Maori in the main introductory text panels, and Hindi and English in all the main labels as the national languages of India (even though many New Zealand Indians speak Gujarati, many also understand Hindi).

There are many similarities in marriage customs across the three main religions: Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. For example, all brides have their hands decorated in henna and are adorned in fine materials and gold jewellery. In the segment called 'Ceremonies' however, it was crucial for the design to be able to tell the stories of the three different religious groups. As the exhibition space is small and narrow, only one wedding can be displayed at a time. The design features a *mandap* (wedding stage) at the heart of the exhibition where up to four mannequins can be displayed. A wedding couple stand in the centre of the *mandap* flanked by mannequins dressed in engagement and reception saris (Fig 2). Such garments represent the majority of items kept by the interviewees; women's clothing being the dominant keepsakes. As Hindu Indians are statistically the dominant group, it was agreed that there should be two rotations of the stage devoted to Hindu costumes and ritual objects for the first year of the exhibition, followed by one six-month rotation of Sikh costumes, and a final six-month rotation of Muslim costumes. Four rotations allow the display of more objects relating to the interviewees and help keep the exhibition fresh throughout its two-year life.

The Hindu stage was designed in consultation with the Community Advisory Group and, in particular, one member who was experienced in performing Hindu rituals (Dr Pushpa Wood). She assisted in the purchase and layout of religious objects. Another committee member organised the making of garlands for the canopy. Two external experts from the community helped dress the mannequins and apply the face decorations and jewellery. At all stages of installation, the exhibition team consulted with and were helped by members of the community. They were the experts. How-



Fig 2. Canopy of the *mandap* (wedding stage) with a Hindu wedding couple flanked by a mannequin (on the right) dressed in a reception sari. Photograph by Michael Hall.

ever, they did have to fit within the design parameters. For example, Dr Wood had to reduce the number of religious objects in order to fit the *mandap*. The Hindu wedding is a complex and lengthy ritual involving fire, scent, and food substances. It was impossible for Te Papa to give it an actual physical presence.

### The opening event

Opening the exhibition was an integral part of building Te Papa's relationship with the Indian communities. The opening event for *AAINAA* was a separate project and took about four months and much debate to organise. The importance of such an event was keenly felt by the Community Advisory Group, as *AAINAA* was the first national exhibition, within a government-sponsored institution, about the Indian people. Everyone wanted an opening event that showcased community pride, identity, and harmony. It was an ideal chance to invite the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim leaders to open the exhibition together. This was not a religious ceremony: just a simple ribbon-cutting ceremony (as specifically advised by the Muslim community), but one that included everyone. The opening event was attended by about 400 guests and was a successful community event, featuring speeches, music, dance, and food. Many community events were planned for

the first weekend including classical and folk dancing, *rangoli* art demonstrations, a fashion show, and henna painting. Some of the opening events were televised, which provided an occasion for wider public awareness.

### Public programmes and ongoing relationships

A community exhibition is not a static display in a museum. It should be a living relationship between an institution and members of the public. The public programmes supporting *AAINAA* are an opportunity to sustain the relationship and add context to the exhibition.

Te Papa's relationship with the Community Advisory Group was developed solely to create the exhibition, but relationships are usually more complicated than those generated by immediate needs and they require maintenance throughout the project and beyond. Ian Wedde, Concept Leader Humanities at Te Papa, notes that 'critical to the performance life of an exhibition is the sustained ownership of it by its informed and articulate champions' (Wedde 2002 unpubl.). As *AAINAA* was created by an exhibition team that was disbanded after the exhibition opened, it has been difficult to maintain adequate community involvement. No

one single staff member is responsible as a 'caretaker' of the exhibition. During the exhibition development process, there was some discussion on the possibility of retaining a community adviser on staff, as happens with iwi exhibitions,<sup>18</sup> but owing to resourcing issues this idea was unable to be carried out. The challenge now is to find alternative and appropriate means to ensure a continuing role for the communities in the ongoing programme.

Te Papa and the Community Advisory Group did agree in principle to developing the relationship between the Museum and the community after the exhibition opened. Ideas included researching and publishing the interviews, and holding seminars on related social issues (such as the meaning of marriage, race relations, and bi- and multiculturalism). Some of these ideas will be implemented. Members of the exhibition team, the Community Advisory Group, and other community experts regularly give floortalks in the exhibition space. A successful education programme is in place for the duration of the exhibition. A series of three forums will be held during 2003, and an on-line education resource is currently being developed. Full implementation of all the ideas is, however, dependent on resources and commitment.

In terms of research material, staff are currently considering the long-term storage and protection of the interviews. Over 20 hours of recorded interviews were collected, whereas only one hour was used in the exhibition. The interviews were recorded on digital technology for the short-term purpose of the exhibition. However, the material is a rich resource for the communities, and Te Papa has a responsibility to care for the material and provide access. Staff are currently seeking long-term storage consent from the interviewees, including the right to reproduce in order to make archival copies and upgrade to another medium if necessary.

Te Papa also needs to look ahead to when the exhibition ends. Museums need to be careful to maintain relationships after an exhibition has been dismantled. Dispersal of the exhibition at the end of its life requires sensitivity and sympathy. As noted by Ian Wedde, 'relationships with lenders, communities, and project partners require constructive handling' (Wedde 2002 unpubl.). Collecting material culture for future generations, publishing articles on the exhibition and other associated research, and continuing festivals and public programmes can all be ways to maintain relationships. To date, Te Papa has not been strong in developing

such ongoing relationships, as staff resources are diverted to maintaining the ongoing exhibition programme. At the close of each exhibition, however, Te Papa retains a small long-term presence from each community within the larger *Passports* exhibition. The Chinese and Dutch communities are individually represented by small displays of objects and graphics within the larger stories of immigration. The Indian communities are also already represented by the story of one particular migrant in this permanent part of the exhibition. In addition to these displays, *Te Papa Onscreen* files remain on-line after the exhibition has closed. These are all reminders of the diversity of New Zealand.

## What next?

Te Papa's bicultural framework is partially successful in providing a space and consultative process to represent the communities of Tangata Tiriti.<sup>19</sup> The framework may not be comprehensive enough to deal with all the complexities, but it does allow for negotiation and inventive solutions. Between the framework and the actual reality (created by the sometimes conflicting imperatives of a national museum operating within budget constraints) lies good faith on the part of all participants involved in community exhibition projects. During the development of *AAINAA*, Te Papa could not always meet its ideals owing to the complexities of both the Indian communities and the institution itself. Both staff and community advisers needed to accept contingencies and do their best to mediate between the ideal and the reality.

For their part, visitors may find aspects of their identities and histories in Te Papa's community exhibitions, but they will not find everything. The hope is that Te Papa's exhibitions continue to present dynamic representations of identity and are helpful to New Zealanders and other visitors in understanding the complexities of this country. Museum staff have already begun planning the next community exhibition for 2004 based on the Italian community. The Italian Community Advisory Group will bring fresh ideas of how they wish their community to be portrayed, and Te Papa will endeavour to fulfil its obligations to bring their stories to a national and international audience.

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## Endnotes

- 1 For notable New Zealand examples, Petone Settlers Museum has published three community histories (Mealing (1991), Ducat, Mealing and Sawicka (1992), Elenio (1995)) and Hawkes Bay Cultural Trust has recently published a Chinese community history (Curham (2001)). All these publications relate to exhibitions of the same names.
- 2 For international examples: Smith in Kavanagh (1991); Karp *et al.* (1992); Cox and Singh in Hooper-Greenhill (1997). For New Zealand examples: Ducat, Mealing, Sawicka (1992); Brosnahan (1994); Cameron (1994); Mealing and Sawicka (1997).
- 3 This paper is written from my perspective as a history curator on the exhibition team. I hope that the Community Advisory Group's perspective may be published at a later date.
- 4 This exhibition runs from September 2002 to September 2004.
- 5 Email from Jock Phillips (previous Concept Leader History, Te Papa) to Bronwyn Labrum (Curator History, Te Papa), May 2000.
- 6 The selection process for each community exhibition relies on certain criteria, including the capacity and capability of the community to provide assistance and resources, and whether the community's story fits into Te Papa's overall research strategy.
- 7 In particular Karp *et al.* (1992).
- 8 Clause 2.7, Educational and Community Role of the Museum, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2001.
- 9 Email communication from Stuart McAdam, former Assistant Curator, Te Manawa, January 2003.
- 10 The Blue Skies session was only held once because of the expense of flying participants from around New Zealand.
- 11 See later discussion in 'Who worked with the communities?'
- 12 See later discussion in 'Missing Voices'.
- 13 'Elder' in this case meaning she was a person with *mana* (prestige) within the local Hindu community.
- 14 Community Advisory Group members were: Mr Ashwin Gulab, Mrs Ruxmaniben Kasanji, Mrs Kamil Lakshman, Mrs Karuna Ranchod, and Dr Pushpa Wood.
- 15 The *mandap* display is explained in greater detail in 'Design and Interpretation'.

- 16 Chew (2002: 34).
- 17 For example Tiwari (1980), Leckie (1981), Taher in Thomson and Trlin (1970).
- 18 Kaumatua and Kuia (elders) join Te Papa staff for the period of each iwi exhibition.
- 19 Those who belong to the land by right of the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840.

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