

Staging

Intercultural Publics

Digital platforms have globalized culture. Language barriers appear insignificant with the use of subtitles; content can be produced anywhere and consumed without the need to physically travel to a venue. The ubiquity of actors, the availability of audiences, and the accessibility of stages create an illusion of a global public. The globalizing force of new technology, however, often obfuscates its long-term effects and its exclusionary aspects. Rather than analyzing the relationship between publics and technology, this article explores publics through the practice of staging ideas, issues, and cultures to lay bare the selective nature of global integration. To this end, let me introduce the works of the early twentieth-century content creator Kedar Nath Das Gupta (1878–1942), who staged Indian culture to British and American audiences from roughly 1907 to 1942 to create an intercultural global public. As we will see, the instrumental and motivating idea, and ideal, of a global public helped foster interculturalism, but also stratified societies.¹

In many ways, Das Gupta is a familiar character for historians. He was a highly mobile man equipped with transnational resources. His projects were sponsored by the Maharaja of Baroda, a patron of Indian artists, students, and political leaders, and facilitated by the networks of Rabindranath Tagore, who was his mentor and his muse. Das Gupta believed that “a nation is known by its stage,” and he carried out his cultural activism between London, Chicago, and New York, wearing multiple hats as a theater man, an organizer of interfaith meetings, and a director of pacifist organizations.² In all these different activities, his goal remained the same: to build a global intercultural public that could transcend racial and religious differences.

Although the early twentieth century witnessed many such idealists who were driven by the cosmopolitan ethics of the *fin-de-siècle*, Das Gupta differed from others in his role as a stage manager rather than a starring actor. He was not a commemorated writer, thinker, religious guru, artist, or public intellectual like those featured in existing scholarship on transnational encounter. He was not in front of the camera but behind it. He was also not solely concerned with the national cause. All his approaches to staging were driven by his pursuit of a global intercultural public that brought strangers of the East and West together, to borrow his own phrasing.

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Figure 7. Photo by Nubelson Fernandes. Unsplash.

Das Gupta began his career in London, where he traveled to in 1907. Although he initially sought to study law, he found his calling in theater rather than in court. This switch was not a complete gamble. Theater had become a popular form of entertainment between 1890 and 1930, and London in the early twentieth century saw increased collaboration between Indian and British artists and writers.³ He created the Indian Art and Dramatic Society, which later became the Union of the East and West, “to bring before the Western public the Art, Drama and Literature of India, with a view of promoting a closer understanding between India and Great Britain.”⁴ Through this society, he staged and published numerous plays based on Indian texts. He featured the works of Rabindranath Tagore, sometimes with modification; he shared his own work that fused British and Indian motifs; and he presented adaptations of Sanskrit texts such as *Ratnavali* and Kalidas’s *Sakuntala*. The music for his plays also reflected Das Gupta’s intercultural commitment, as he often selected the works of Indian and British composers like Inayat Khan and Rutland Boughton. To appeal to his audience further, he cast popular European performers as main characters. His tactics earned him a successful career in theater production, leading him to stage his work at different venues—including the Royal Albert Hall, India House, Wigmore Hall, and the Grafton Galleries.

In the early 1920s, Das Gupta expanded his work to New York. Although he put on a few productions of Tagore’s plays in Manhattan, his focus shifted from theater to interfaith conferences and civil society organizations. Responding to the aftermaths of the First World War, his goal grew in scale from improving Indo-British relations to advocating international peace. Similar strategies of finding local collaborators and translating Indian culture shaped his work on pacifism. Together with the humanitarian Charles Frederick Weller, Das Gupta created the World Fellowship of Faiths and hosted the International Conference of Faiths in Chicago in 1933.⁵ This conference was modeled after the Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in the same city in 1893. Both took place alongside international expositions and proclaimed the dawn of a new era in human progress. Compared to the Parliament of the World’s Religions, the International Conference of Faiths had more diverse participants. Black intellectuals and representatives of the Ahmadiyya movement in India and of Cheondoism in Korea were in attendance. And although small in number, leading female social reformers participated, such as Muthulakshmi Reddy from India, the civil-rights activist and suffragist Mary Church Terrell, and the pioneer of birth-control legalization Margaret Sanger. Despite the diversity of speakers and represented religions, the conference elevated Hinduism from other religions: it opened with a citation of an excerpt from the Rig Veda that Das Gupta translated, and it hosted several sessions devoted to M. K. Gandhi. Such prioritization of Hinduism as the main language of interreligious dialogue built on the earlier works of nineteenth-century Hindu monks like Swami Vivekananda, who had presented

Hinduism as a world religion that tolerated all faiths at the 1893 parliament.

One of Das Gupta's final acts, the All-World Gandhi Fellowship, more explicitly weaved India into the fabric of "the world." According to an invitation Das Gupta sent to W. E. B. Du Bois in June of 1932, the All-World Gandhi Fellowship was a pacifist organization promoting Gandhian ideals of ahimsa (nonviolence) and satyagraha (soul-force).⁶ It initially aimed at creating a "sort of a colony" in New York following the model of Gandhi's ashram, to bring together "like-minded workers" to promote "peace and happiness of the world."⁷ The proposal of an ashram was not a radical one. The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of utopian communes, like the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa and Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Within the United States, too, there were several interfaith residences frequented by journalists, authors, women's rights activists, and religious personalities, such as the Threefold Farm and Green Acre, which both Du Bois and Mary Hanford—one of the fellowship's eight vice presidents and a leading suffragist—frequented.

Not much is known about the All-World Gandhi Fellowship apart from a few newspaper reports and the above-mentioned letter to Du Bois, which offers information on the location of the headquarters in Manhattan and on the composition of the board members (Fig. 8). An undated pamphlet available in the South Asian American Digital Archive suggests that the All-World Gandhi Fellowship eventually turned into a more conventional anti-imperial organization. No longer fixated on creating an ashram, the fellowship concentrated on "educat[ing] public opinion" and "aid[ing] India in the struggle for freedom by presenting an organized channel through which sympathetic public opinion may be expressed." It announced the bimonthly circulation of an Indian News Bulletin and maintained that it was working "to win friends for India through love, respect and appreciation of her great cultures, religions and philosophies," although how to generate such affection toward Indian cultures was left unexplained.⁸

Throughout his various careers in London and New York, Das Gupta remained an interculturalist, or "an infiltrator in specific domains of cultural capital," and maintained the same techniques.⁹ He promoted Indian figures whose names had already featured in newspapers in different parts of the world, and he used formats familiar to his collaborators and audiences— theater, conferences, and ashrams. While his methods led him to cultivate a transatlantic career, his success should not be considered solely as an example of bridging cultures that global historians tend to highlight. As many critics of interculturalism have emphasized, the issue of power cannot be neglected in intercultural interactions. Undergirding Das Gupta's stages was a series of negotiations of power, and the very methods that connected him to new audiences— translation and transaction— further stratified societies.

Let's first consider the issue of translation. For many South Asian writers and artists working in the metropole, a certain "performed exoticization"

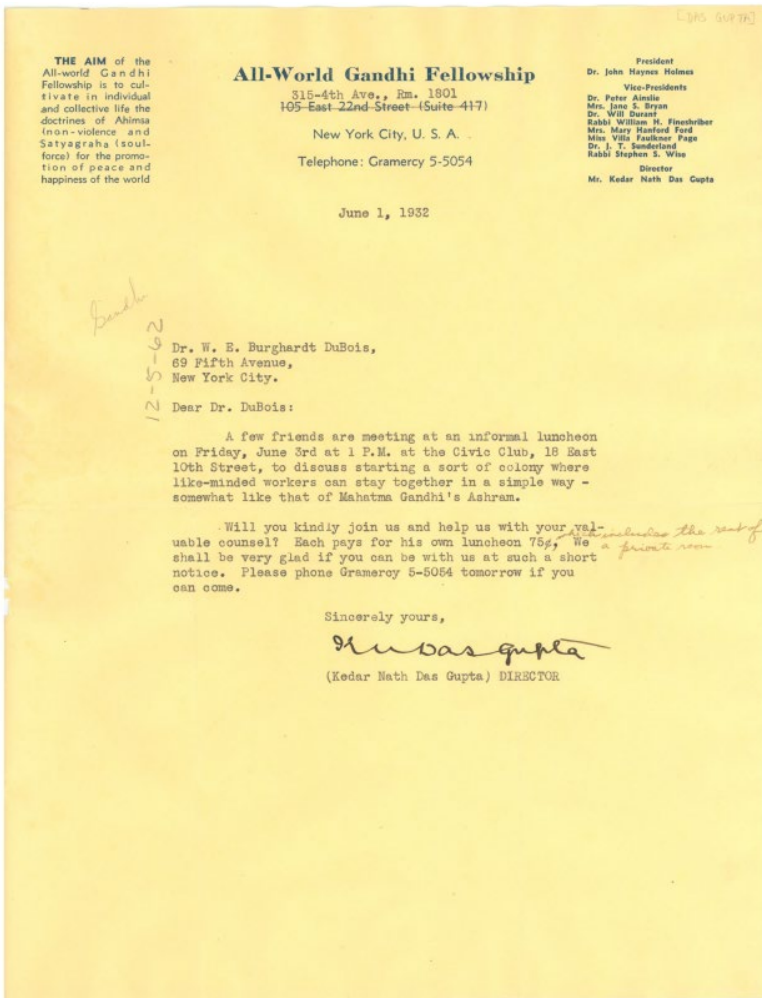


Figure 8. Letter from Kedar Nath Das Gupta to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 1, 1932. Courtesy of David Graham Du Bois Trust and the Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

was required to convince their British audience of their authenticity.¹⁰ Yet, as the English poet Laurence Binyon explained, Das Gupta focused less on “the reproduction of exotic[ism]” and more on the “fidelity to what is universal” in the message of the story itself.¹¹ This entailed replacing Indian actors with white performers for the roles of Indian characters in addition to abridging and decontextualizing the original stories. Featuring white performers for Indian productions was not uncommon. It was an effective strategy. The choreographer-dancer Uday Shankar, who toured Europe and America with his own troupe in the interwar period, initially starred Anna Pavlova (Fig. 9). In privileging the message over accuracy and presentation over representation, Das Gupta managed to render his work digestible to his audience.

What should not be lost in the effective strategies of interculturalism are their broader consequences, as staging India had ramifications



Figure 9. Anna Pavlova and Uday Shankar, England, early twentieth century. V&A Images / Alamy Stock Photo.

beyond the concert hall in the metropole. As Rustom Bharucha reminds us, “one obvious paradox that liberal supporters of interculturalism fail to confront is that in countering one nationalism, other nationalisms are invariably in the making.”¹² Given that Das Gupta’s projects took place at the same time as anticolonial movements in India were growing and diversifying, the long-term consequences of his intercultural staging must be considered within the context of Indian nationalism. In particular, Das Gupta’s promotion of internationally recognized Hindu male figures—Rabindranath Tagore in the 1910s, M. K. Gandhi in the 1930s, and Swami Yogananda in the 1930s—and Hindu texts inadvertently aided the Hinduization of Indian culture, a process that gained momentum in India in the 1920s with the publication of V. D. Sarvarkar’s *Hindutva*.¹³ It also left a cultural footprint that helped the broader formation of Hindu diasporic communities in the US and the transnational politics of Hindu nationalism, as organizations like the Vishva Hindu Parishad America (VHPA, World Council of Hindus in America) continue to politicize culture to their advantage.¹⁴ Das Gupta’s method of staging thus produced, albeit indirectly, divergent consequences.

Another flaw in Das Gupta’s methods of fostering interculturalism was the unequal terms of transaction that he tolerated. Globalizing intercultural conversation required accommodating inequality and differentiating expectations. This is most clearly spelled out in Das Gupta’s promotion of his London organization, the Union of the East and West. The pamphlet of *Sakuntala* urged, “The East has met the West on the field of Battle, will you meet as well on the field of Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Drama by joining the Society?”¹⁵ This invitation,

designed to evoke a sense of guilt, exposes the strikingly uneven plane for the meeting of the East and West: a subscription fee in exchange for sacrificing one's life. It also highlights the limited scope of the targeted audience, as not everyone could afford to meet at the "field" of culture.

The elitist nature of Das Gupta's intercultural publics becomes more evident when the lives of Asian migrants are considered. The period in which he aspired to expand his organizations within the US coincided with the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, which followed the Immigration Act of 1917 and the verdict of the 1923 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, which denied naturalization to Indians. These series of events had left many political refugees from South Asia disenchanting with—and physically excluded from—America.¹⁶ Das Gupta's interreligious and intercultural societies remained silent and unaffected by such state-sanctioned discriminations against minorities and laborers. The participants and supporters of his projects were idealist, and in their particular articulation of idealism, they revealed their exclusivity.

Similarly selective views of the world and international peace framed his All-World Gandhi Fellowship. Here, the date of his letter to W. E. B Du Bois offers some insights. Das Gupta invited Du Bois to join the fellowship in June of 1932, after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and Du Bois's favorable statements regarding the Japanese Empire. Given that by the 1920s US newspapers reported on Japanese atrocities, and Korean anticolonial movement became more organized in the US, Das Gupta's choice of collaborator reveals that his "all-world" did not refer to the world-wide eradication of violence. The pursuit of world-wide happiness and peace involved a transaction: it overlooked the brutalities of one empire in creating an alliance against another.

In these ways, the ideal of globalizing publics, and its motivational impetus, often led its pursuers to replicate existing inequalities and create new hierarchies as they aimed and claimed to overcome them. The examples of intercultural publics explored in this article suggest that in order to consider the implications of staging as a means of globalizing publics, we have to broaden the scope of literacy. The importance of the reading public of the Habermasian public sphere aside, the intercultural publics pursued by many Indian actors point us to the equally significant issue of cultural literacy. This is not to position textual and nontextual media in a dichotomy. As scholars of theater have long argued, the two corresponded with each other. Not only did performances often depend on newspaper reports to build anticipation and generate ticket sales; theater has also been theorized as "literature that walks and talks before our eyes," although the "practical pragmatics of performance," as argued by Jeffrey C. Alexander, remains different from the "cultural logic of texts."¹⁷ The framework of staging culture reminds us how translation also occurs beyond linguistic and textual form and invites us to consider different types of literacy involved in the formation of publics. After all, Das Gupta's audience shared performance and

cultural literacy as much as linguistic knowledge. The key difference between the literacy campaigns explored by Valeska Huber in this issue and cultural literacy examined in this article is that the latter was not a democratizing initiative. It focused on a very particular type of audience who could afford to learn how to read different cultures. Although the interculturalists' emphasis on the universality of the message assumed the borderless effects of affect, it remained inaccessible and even irrelevant to many.

These factors, which are illuminated by early twentieth-century intercultural publics, resonate today more than ever before. The digitization of stages has created an illusion of publics without boundaries. Access to different cultures and sensitivity to them have increased in recent years, as have the roles of content creators. From influencers on YouTube and TikTok to the Korean boyband BTS, whose fans, known as "armies," operate globally, interculturalists seem to be everywhere. The early twentieth-century content creators remind us that staging always comes in tandem with localized repercussions and the (re)production of inequalities, however invisible they may be under the spotlight of new technology and its globalizing potentials.

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1 I build this framework on Michael Warner's statement, "the idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental". See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 12.

2 Cited in Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (London: Routledge, 2011), 75n68.

3 Christopher B. Balme, "The Local Life of the World: Theatre Publics in the Age of Empire," in *Global Publics: Their Power and Their Limits, 1870-1900*, ed. Valeska Huber and Jürgen Osterhammel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 91–113. On utopianism and the cosmopolitan bond in the metropole, see Leela Gandhi,

Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

4 Cited in Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain*, 75n69.

5 Das Gupta also organized numerous other religious conferences in the UK, namely in London, Cambridge, and Oxford.

6 Letter from Kedar Nath Das Gupta to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 1, 1932, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

7 Letter from Kedar Nath Das Gupta to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 1, 1932.

8 "India Needs Your Help Not Tomorrow but Now," Mahesh and Ishwar Chandra Family Materials, South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), accessed February 21, 2023, <https://www.saada.org/item/20121214-1153>.

9 Rustom Bharucha, "Politics of Culturalisms in an Age of Globalisation: Discrimination, Discontent and Dialogue," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 8 (1999): 477–89, here 480.

10 Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 22.

11 Kedar Nath Das Gupta, ed., *Sakuntala* (London: Macmillan, 1920), viii.

- 12 Bharucha, "Politics of Culturalisms in an Age of Globalisation," 480.
- 13 Das Gupta also arranged the lecture tours of Swami Yogananda in London in the 1930s.
- 14 Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath, "The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What Kind of 'Long-Distance Nationalism'?" *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 3 (2007): 278–95.
- 15 Das Gupta, *Sakuntala*, 151.
- 16 Moon-Ho Jung, *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).
- 17 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (2004): 527–73, here 530.