Jaipur Literary Festival in New York City, 2018

Having experienced explosive growth during the first eight years of its existence (2006 – 2014), JLF entered a new phase in 2015: the phase of expansion. First came Boulder, Colorado. In 2015, JLF collaborated with the Boulder Public Library to put on a two-day festival, featuring a combination of music, readings, lectures, and discussions. True to the programming profile developed during its first phase, JLF combined topics focused on South Asia with local, US themes. JLF Boulder was a first attempt to move beyond the festival’s primary location, and proved that this move was doable. Currently in its fourth year, JLF Boulder has been produced by Teamwork Arts in conjunctions with local hosts and sponsors.

Based on this success, JLF has since expanded to other locales, including Houston, Texas, the British Library in London and, beginning in 2018, New York City. What are the risks and rewards associated with this strategy of expansion? What parallel cases of cultural expansion can JLF draw upon to manage its own ambitions?

JLF at New York took place in September 2018 at the Asia Society. Founded by John D. Rockefeller 3rd in 1956 to promote “greater knowledge of Asia in the United States,” The Asia Society has since become a global institution with offices across the United States and Asia. The New York headquarters occupies a six-story townhouse on Park Avenue with gallery and event spaces, as well as a 258 rosewood-paneled auditorium. While in Jaipur, an audience from all walks of life entered the large grounds of the Diggi Palace through a crowded access road, the much smaller New York audience had to find its way to the exclusive Upper East Side neighborhood. The gates to the festival opened onto the elegant lobby of the Asia Society
townhouse, and from there via a winding staircase to the basement floor, where the auditorium is located. All events of the one-day program took place in that auditorium, with the exception of the concluding reception, which took place on an upper floor.

The Asia Society had been leaning towards China, but JLF in New York was part of a larger program call “Season of India,” which included an exhibition on 20th century Indian art as well as other events focused on South Asia. “Season of India” also describes the focus of JLF in New York’s programming. To capture something of the combination of literature and music that distinguishes JLF in Jaipur from other book fairs and literary festivals, the day began not with speeches and introductions but with the acclaimed Sufi Singer Zila Khan. This opening set the tone for the rest of the day, transporting the audience far away from Manhattan to some imaginary Jaipur created by the festival itself. Much of the following program revolved around South Asia, with topics ranging from the Kohinoor diamond, the most famous diamond in the world, and miniature paintings to recent writing about India, including a South Asian adaptation of King Lear. While JLF in Jaipur brought the world to South Asia, JLF in New York brought South Asia to New York. This was partly reflected in the audience, which heavily leaned towards those with an interest in the region.

As is the case with all JLF activities, JLF in New York was not exclusively focused on South Asia. The three directors sought to connect JLF to local culture by featuring a panel on New York City, immigration, and multi-lingualism, and they also included events on general topics such as medical narratives and the history of literature. Several of the invited speakers were based in New York.
The expansion of JLF beyond Jaipur, including to Boulder, Houston, and New York, has given it more exposure to North America. While JLF had always included a good number of speakers from North America, including such celebrities as Oprah Winfrey, it has been leaning towards participants from India and Great Britain. Generating visibility in the US, including in the US media, is an ongoing project, however, since JLF in New York has yet to achieve the exposure it has enjoyed in India.

Expansion has also brought with it a number of challenges. Unlike Jaipur, where JLF has no competition (except, recently, the competition it has generated itself), New York is the center of the publishing world, including the so-called Big Five publishers: Penguin Random House; Harper Collins; Simon & Schuster; Hachette; Holtzbrinck/MacMillan. New York also hosts many rival literary festivals, including PEN World Voices, the Brooklyn Book Festival, the New Yorker Festival, among many others. In Jaipur, JLF created a unique assembly for the discussion of ideas, contributing a genuinely new forum to the publish sphere. How can JLF operate in the much more crowded landscape of festivals and fairs of New York?

One strategy would be to double down on its South Asian focus in order to maintain its distinct profile. If JLF focused primarily on South Asian themes, it might be compared to the cultural institutes maintained by many nation states, from China’s network of Confucius Institutes to France’s Maisons Francaises and Germany’s Goethe Institutes. But these are funded by their respective nation-states, and JLF has traditionally looked askance at support from the Indian government. Or perhaps JLF should follow the model of the Guggenheim Museum, which moved beyond its original New York (and Venice) locations, from Bilbao to Abu
Dhabi by drawing on the strength of its brand and funding resources? This move brought with it enormous visibility initially but also risked stretching Guggenheim’s capacity to the limit.

Alternatively, JLF could deepen its connection to local themes and audiences in order to gain more media visibility in New York. One model might be the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, which brought a distinct European brand to Abu Dhabi, while also relating it to local culture. Since JLF’s success depended on contributing a new forum to the South Asian public sphere, in order to succeed in New York it might need to find analogous deficits in New York’s existing public sphere.

At the moment, JLF is still searching for the right strategy of expansion. The Asia Society emphasized JLF’s regional focus, but the festival could not maintain its democratic and open atmosphere in the exclusive environs of the Asia Society. The organizers also confirm that JLF in New York does not break even financially, due to high labor and hotel costs and competition for local sponsors.

These challenges are at the center of JLF’s second, expansionist phase. How should this expansion be managed? What are its goals, opportunities, and risks? How far—and where—should JLF go? Does this expansion risk distracting resources from JLF in Jaipur? Will it help JLF become a global cultural brand?