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Thrust into Heaven: Ambiguity and Degradation in Multi-Mediated Ethnographic Research

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Abstract

Navigating around stereotypes of Islam and non-Muslim belonging in Pakistan, Thrust into Heaven showcases instances of so-called "forced conversion" of Hindu girls to Islam. These incidents often follow a sequence: a young Hindu woman disappears from her house or place of work, and resurfaces again as a married and newly converted Muslim. Once a conversion occurs and has been publicly announced, a combination of legal issues and the street power of extremist religious groups makes it nearly impossible for newly converted women to go back to their former life. On the one hand, some of these conversions are utilized to conceal criminal acts including kidnapping, human trafficking, and rape. On the other hand, they are examples of female agency and ways in which young women navigate through Pakistan's rigid patriarchal society. Struggling for a dialogic approach to this sensitive topic, this film aims to give room to the various interpretations that emerge around the alleged forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan.

Keywords: Hindustan in Pakistan, forced conversion, Karachi, Pakistan

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Introduction

Cases of alleged forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam are a contentious political issue in Pakistan today. Often these conversions are immediately followed by the neophyte's arranged marriage into a Muslim family, making it difficult for their families to trace their whereabouts. In public discourses about such 'forced conversion and marriage' (from now on: FCM) the involved women's voice, agency, and intentions are often questioned and put on trial. Any research into these incidents, thus, needs to critically engage with the politics and representations of Hindu women in Pakistan today. While I cannot confirm that ethnographic film provides a solution to the conundrum of representation (Solanas and Octavio 1969), I nevertheless argue that multi-mediated research results—in this case film and text—can speak about and, in fact, perform the said predicament of representation through discursive and affective milieus. With the help of one scene from *Thrust into Heaven* I will show how even in direct interview situations, where women speak about their choices, the audience is left in doubt about who is 'actually' talking. At this moment, *Thrust into Heaven* repeats what it set out to criticize in the various media representations of FCM: the lack of voice and agency given to the women involved.

The impulse for studying the FCM of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan emerged out of my Ph.D. research on the pilgrimage of Hinglaj Devi in Baluchistan. Between the years 2009 to 2015, I studied the gradual solidification of narratives and rituals at this Goddess shrine, which had developed into one of the main centers of Hindu worship in Pakistan within only a few decades (Schaflechner 2018). During my numerous conversations with Hinglaj followers in Pakistan and India, people repeatedly mentioned the issue of forced conversion of young Hindu women to Islam and frequently described it as a severe threat to Hindu existence in Pakistan. Most Hindus agreed that zealous Islamists were behind these cases and that forced conversions were an attempt to rid Pakistan of its non-Muslims. In 2010, following the abduction of Kasturi Methi, a peasant Hindu woman from Tharparkar in Sindh, I started to document such and similar cases hoping to understand them better.[1]

In 2012 I received a research grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG) through the Cluster 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context' (University of Heidelberg) to analyze such potentially forced conversions and marriages in Pakistan.

1 This was only possible with the help of numerous individuals and organizations. I want to thank the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), the Pakistan Hindu Council (PHC) the Pakistani Hindus Seva (PHS) particularly.

Methodologically this study combined fieldwork in Sindh—to meet the women involved (whenever possible), the alleged culprits, family members, and activists—with a study of how FCM has come to be represented on national TV, as well as in the print and online media. The project management furthermore agreed to finance the production of an independent ethnographic documentary film on the same topic. This resulted in the 2016 film *Thrust into Heaven* (Schaflechner 2016) as well as in my 2017 paper "'Forced' conversion and (Hindu) women's agency in Sindh" (Schaflechner 2017).[2]

Pen and Camera

This opportunity allowed me to plan the production of a film and the composition of academic writing side by side. While I already had some experiences with ethnographic film, other research undertakings had a clear trajectory from the beginning. The film *…On Becoming Gods* (Schaflechner 2011), for example, was intended as a visual supplement to my Ph.D. research. The article *Economy of Sacrifice* (Schaflechner 2015), on the other hand, was the outcome of the research that I had conducted primarily for a film on the Devipujak community in Karachi a couple of years before (Schaflechner 2013). This multimedia project, however, was planned not to privilege either film over text or text over the film.

It quickly became clear, however, that the production of the film would largely take over the research. The film needed more resources in equipment as well as personnel. A second cameraperson, for example, was necessary to provide the film's B-rolls. Luckily, I found a great companion in Daaver Shah, at that time an art student from Karachi University, who swiftly proved indispensable for solving technical difficulties and who showed a skillful talent for sussing out remarkable film locations. The film also needed support in the post-production, which I had in Sarah Ewald, with whom I edited all of my films before *Thrust into Heaven*. Sarah was also responsible for many decisions regarding the film's storyline. Sunjesh Dhanja, the president of the Pakistan Hindu Seva, a Karachi based NGO which had worked on such cases for years, and who features prominently in the film was a crucial organizer for many contacts. Sunjesh and his team made numerous field trips to meet victims and family

2 Aside from academic funding through the Cluster, the South Asia Institute, and the Department of Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures (Heidelberg University), the film's post-production was also financially supported by the Medien und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Württemberg (MFG).

members, and they were often the sole reason why people opened up to us and in front of our cameras.

The decision to produce a film also took over the ways of doing research 'in the field.' Even in the initial stages of my research, many meetings became 'film-oriented'— notwithstanding if there was a camera around or not. After a few contacts, when people had become aware of my intention to produce a film on the topic, they often pointed me towards 'filmable' events such as press conferences, protests, or meetings with politicians. At times such events happened unpremeditatedly (or at least I heard of them on short notice), so I started carrying my film equipment with me more often.[3] This also meant more difficulty (and anxiety) when traveling through Karachi by rickshaw. In hindsight, during the research for this project, I was more a filmmaker who also happened to write a paper, than a writer who produced a low budget ethnographic film.

The Muddy Waters of Forced Conversion and Marriage in Pakistan[4]

While local media in Sindh often reported on Hindu women who went missing, particularly the fate of women from the scheduled castes rarely made national news in Pakistan. This changed in spring 2014, when Rinkle Kumari, the daughter of a well-off Hindu family from the north of Sindh, disappeared from her home, converted to Islam, and married a young Muslim man. The incident caused an unprecedented uproar and national and international media outlets started to pay more attention to alleged incidents of forced conversions (TiH 16:53–17:30). The fact that Rinkle came from an affluent Hindu family, and not from the often-overlooked scheduled castes, certainly was one reason for such intensified interest.

This new public concern was a double-edged sword, however. On the one hand, Rinkle Kumari's disappearance and conversion had put a spotlight on (non-Muslim) women's rights in Pakistan and especially on the fate of many peasant Hindu girls. It revealed the workings of patriarchal Sindh and made the commodification and

3 Aside from a Panasonic GH4, which recorded most of the stable shots, I also brought a Panasonic XA-25 with me to Pakistan. What this film camera lacks in image quality, it makes up in versatility. I often carried it with me when there were no shots scheduled. Most spontaneous events, therefore, were filmed—often hand-held—on the XA-25.

4 In this part, I will only provide a short overview of the obstacles that emerge when researching FCM. For a more detailed study see my 2017 paper.

treatment of impoverished women within feudal structures visible. In other words, Hindu women and their limited rights became a matter of public interest, which helped to highlight the involved women's demands to be heard.

On the other hand, however, the heightened media interest failed to produce a multilayered platform from which these women's stories could be heard. Quite the contrary: the media became one of the main agents in splitting the public, as it helped to produce two opposing blocs. Their particular groups were tied to each other based on rejecting the other side's claims. One side saw an alliance of a variety of (often antagonistic) Islamic groups (Barelvis, Deobandis, Ahl-e Hadith), who opposed a bloc consisting of liberal Pakistanis, human and minority rights activists, as well as Sindhi nationalists. Both sides, however, were triangulated by their shared rejection of the often complex and multilayered events behind such cases. They were intrinsically tied to each other in their mutual and silent agreement that the women involved had no say in this issue. Especially Rinkle Kumari's case showed that a large part of the representation of forced conversion in Pakistan today is based on the structural exclusion of the voice and agency of the women involved (Schaflechner 2017, 297–308).

In the following I will analyze this latter point through what I consider to be one of *Thrust into Heaven's* central scenes: the interviews by two allegedly newly converted Muslim women called Sherbano (formerly Sapna) and Aliya (formerly Puja) who embraced Islam at Bharchundi Sharif,[5] the same shrine where Rinkle Kumari also converted.[6] With the help of this scene, I will be able to show the advantages of multi-mediated results for the study of FCM in particular and ethnographical research in general. Before I will be able to do that, however, I will need to provide some background on how this scene came about.

Setting the Scene

To meet with Mian Mitho we had to drive to Ghotki, a district in the North of Sindh, around eight hours by car from Karachi. Sameer Mandhro, a former journalist at *The*

5 Bharchundi Sharif is a Muslim shrine under the patronage of Mitho's family and famous for conversions to Islam in Sindh.

6 My experiences while screening the film to a large variety of audiences were one crucial incentive for choosing this particular segment. Frequently Q&As came back to this scene and the many different ways of interpreting it. I want to take this opportunity to thank the people who engaged with me on the film and who have contributed to my thinking and my reflections over the years.

Express Tribune in Karachi, had established contact with Mitho, the alleged mastermind behind Rinkle Kumari's disappearance and the face of many alleged forced conversions and marriages of Hindu women in Sindh.

The interior Sindh is notorious for influential landowning elites such as Mitho or Ajub Jan Sarhandi (TiH, 34:13–54:37). Both embody religious piety and local sovereignty and often enjoy immense authority amongst their supporters. Mitho and Sarhandi can exert influence on the local police as well as the local media. Research in these corners of Sindh can, therefore, be tricky, and careful planning is essential. Sameer was confident about his connections in the north of Sindh, but he was also obviously nervous to drive into an unknown area with two non-Sindhis and thousands of Euros of filming equipment. Originally, we were scheduled to stay for two days; after some hours of filming, however, Sameer suggested not remaining in Ghokti but spending the night at one of his friends near Khairpur. This segment was thus shot within 8 hours.

Abdul Haq a.k.a Mian Mitho had been surprisingly eager to meet with us and discuss the events around Rinkle Kumari. Meeting Mitho in person was different than I had expected. Parts of the media had painted him as a ruthless Islamist who allegedly had a hand in the conversion of hundreds, maybe thousands of non-Muslim women.[7] Along these lines, I expected a staunch and larger than life ideologue whose main intention was to spread Islam among the non-Muslims of Pakistan. In real life, however, Mitho appeared fragile. He had visibly aged compared to the many TV interviews he gave in the aftermath of Rinkle's disappearance in spring 2012. He often sported a little smile which mirrored this conviction that he had done nothing wrong and had fallen victim to a conspiracy against him. He kept repeating this narrative to us throughout our stay (cf. TiH, 18:03—19:27).

I repeatedly asked Mitho about Rinkle Kumari, now Faryal Shah, and he told us that we would be able to talk to her on the phone at a later point in time.[8] He suggested that we could interview other women who had converted at Bharchundi Sharif instead. He also mentioned that a Hindu couple was scheduled to convert to Islam right on the day of our visit, and we would be able to film the event. Upon asking, Mian Mitho told us that we would not be able to do the interviews with the women alone because they would

7 An article from 2019 shows that this has not changed over the last years: https://theprint.in/opinion/mianmithu-the-extremist-cleric-whom-hindu-families-dread-in-pakistans-sindh/292617/

8 This promise, however, was never kept. The reason given was that she was busy being a mother and that she had married into a very conservative Muslim family. Our request to receive her number for contacting her at a later point from Karachi was ignored. Compare here TiH, 22:40–25:48.

not talk to us. The segment described in detail below is the result of this suggestion.

The journey from Mitho's guest house to Bharchundi Sharif resulted in the scene at 19:28. After stepping out of the car, I film Mitho entering into the dargah (TiH, 20:50). Between 21:22 and 21:31 the camera records a group of young Quran students standing on the left side of the courtyard. From the film material it is clear that, upon seeing us, they start moving towards Mitho and encircle him in the middle of the square. After re-watching the recorded material in the post-production, it became obvious that the students had been put there and were directed to move right at the moment when Mitho enters the Bharchundi Sharif. The scene, thus, shows him as a philanthropist, a narrative that he did not tire to repeat. The segment, however, has much more to offer. It not only shows how the film sets Mitho in a scene but also how he and his team set the scene *for us*. Admittedly minor in the narrative structure and easily overlooked, this *mise en scéne*, however, introduces the disposition for the later interviews with Sherbano and Aliya.

The Scene

The interviews with Sherbano and Aliya start when one of Mian Mitho's men suggests also talking to two newly converted women (28:00). The scene's framing, however, begins a bit earlier (at 26:10), when the distribution of people present in the room is visible. We, i.e. Sameer, Daaver and I, are seated towards the right side of the room. Mian Mitho and his associates (amongst them a few of his family members) sit down on the left side of the room, thus almost forming a circle. Sherbano and Aliya will take their seats in the middle of this circle of men. My camera is hand-held throughout and tells the segment's main narrative. The second camera first takes the scene's establishing shot of the room and later provides the B-roll close-ups of the speakers. The interviews start after a group of people (whom we had not met before) are ushered into the room.

At 28:48 Sherbano, a young, newly converted woman is told to come forward to sit down in front of the camera. The scene shows Mitho and three of his men sitting right behind her. Mitho's gaze is recorded as it wanders from the young woman to the camera and back. Sherbano speaks confidently into the camera; her words, however, do not tell much about her situation. She repeats how she wanted to become a Muslim because she likes how women are treated in Islam. She is asked by one of Mitho's family members how she likes the people at Bharchundi Sharif, to which she responds,

they are like parents to her. Sherbano says that there were no troubles at her home but adds that she will not miss anyone from her family.[9] She smiles a lot when she speaks; her smile, however, disappears after each of her sentences. She recites the *shahada* (profession of faith in Islam) and asks if she is done.

At 30:10 Aliya comes in front of the camera. Aliya appears to be less confident. She often lowers her eyes when she speaks and her every gaze wanders through the room. Aliyah says she converted a month ago and that it was her wish to become a Muslim. She adds that Islam respects women. When Aliyah is asked if she does *namaz* (Muslim prayer), she says no and adds that she never learned it.[10] She says that she likes Islam because Muslims recite the *shahada*. Her interview ends with Mian Mitho telling her that she can go.

Scenes of Ambiguity and Degradation

The two women's scarce knowledge about Islam, their way of expressing the reasons for their decisions as well as how they were presented to a foreign camera team surrounded by a group of men produces a degrading scene. Sherbano and Aliyah say very little about their situation and their words are commented upon or explained by the men around them (including how they eventually have been represented in *Thrust into Heaven's* final cut). The men sitting behind the women provide the segment with an ominous atmosphere, which becomes amplified when paying close attention to Mian Mitho's facial expressions throughout the scene.

My interview with the women contributes to the situation's ambiguity and degradation. My questions—and the circumstances under which they were asked—fail to elucidate the circumstances that led them to Bharchundi Sharif and instead add to a crude representation of Sherbano and Aliyah. At this moment, *Thrust into Heaven* repeats what it set out to criticize in the various media representations of FCM: the lack of voice and agency given to the women involved. The scene performatively explicates the obscurity of incidents of forced conversion as even in situations where women speak about their choices, the audience is left in doubt about who is 'actually' talking. The segment performs and reproduces the discourse of forced conversion and

9 Due to social pressure, new converts to Islam cannot go back to live with their non-Muslim families. Furthermore, because of understandings of piety, young unmarried women cannot live on their own and, thus, need to be married off to a Muslim man.

10 In this situation I misheard Aliyah saying that she never prayed, leading to the brief confusion.

marriage, which is constituted on questioning and even excluding the involved women's agencies. This double-bind—on the one hand hearing the women speak, but on the other having to doubt their words—is one of the main characteristics of cases of FCM.

Starting with 2012, especially in the aftermath of the Rinkle Kumari case, it became increasingly clear that such ambiguity is not a byproduct, but rather the *modus operandi* of FCM. This opacity and the impossibility of claiming any objective standpoint on the issue without making a political decision have a variety of reasons, and I have spoken about them at length (Schaflechner 2017). A film about such a topic, thus, needed to reflect the ambiguity and the degradation as central parts of how such cases are represented.

Mediating this in *Thrust into Heaven's* filmic form was one of the driving forces behind the editing of the above-mentioned scene (and others). The interviews, of course, needed to be shortened and subtitled. Sarah and I needed to provide the segment with a narrative framework, with protagonists, and a timeline. Nonetheless, we attempted to produce a final cut which not only reflects the ambiguity intrinsic to FCM cases but also hints at the degradation often at play when such incidents are represented today. Here the filmic montage provided the means to supply the segment with an open and ambivalent affective charge, which subsequently leaves it up to the audience how to *feel* about this scene. The absence of a narrating voice, as well as the intentionally short wording of the text introducing and finishing the segment, furthermore, contributes to the production of such ambivalent affects. This ability to perform parts of my experiences while researching FCM in the film is one important addition of audio-visual representations to the academic prose.

Text and Film

Multi-mediated results yield advantages over representing ethnography through one medium only—be that film or text. This is obvious. In this section, I want to look more closely at how my research on FCM gained from its multi-mediated results.[11]

The academic prose provided the study of FCM with a comprehensive history, an

11 Including this essay, the results of the project have been made public on four platforms: as an academic paper, as a film, as a short online essay which included filmed interviews (https://theconversation.com/forced- conversions-of-hindu-women-to-islam-in-pakistan-another-perspective-102726), and finally, this text which aims to establish the relationship between all of them.

analysis of its media representations, and a variety of case-studies. Academia's rules demand meticulous details, dates, and attestable evidence from research. In my written description of the aforementioned scene, however, I struggled and ultimately failed to provide the situation's 'affective charge.' My thick description of the segment was lacking in its ability to establish the ambiguity of the moment. The illustration of too many details produced tedious and loquacious prose, often unfit for the standards of peer-reviewed publication. A simplification of the writing, however, supplied the segment with an unwarranted narrative consistency which led me to abandon a written representation of the scene altogether.[12] In hindsight I can say that the filmic vmontage made it possible to produce a segment with generous space for interpretation. The camera's eye, combined with a certain style of editing, gave the people's facial expressions, gestures, and looks the central stage. This produced new, non-verbal expressions of the study's results.

Filming had also helped to depict the distribution of actors in space and the affective charge that such an arrangement entails. For some scenes, it was important to not only focus on the interviewee but also show how the speaker is positioned and who else is present without being shown in the mainframe. Some of the B-rolls not only serve an aesthetic purpose, therefore, but contribute to understanding how interviews were conducted and which spatial distributions have yielded the words said. This is particularly important for the above-mentioned segment but also for other moments in the film (see also 37:38 and 49:04).

Finally, reflecting on *Thrust into Heaven* in writing provides another plane from which one can engage with the material. Without intending to produce an additional (maybe superfluous) metanarrative at this point, I nevertheless want to emphasize how this circular process, unfolding from multi-mediated research results, foregrounds seemingly minor details in the study of FCM. But one example is Mitho's grand entrance into Bharchundi Sharif. The scene records how our host orchestrated a *mise en scéne* for our visit, thus contributing an air of ambiguity to the subsequent interview segments. The numerous Q&A sessions following the film's screenings at universities all over the world indicate that most viewers would not pay much attention to this minor part. Pointing it out during the discussions—or now in this essay—provides additional insights that may retroactively change the perception of the film (and the paper).

Conclusion

12 In my short synopsis of the scene above, I intentionally left out descriptions such as nervously, shyly, or cautiously which, to my taste, would have qualified the situation with more certainty than appropriate at this moment.

As already stated in the introduction to this issue, Max Kramer and I lay emphasis on film and its potentialities for slow-paced and multi-mediated research results as a reaction to the hegemony of textual productions in ethnography. Our approach does not aim to privilege one medium over the other, however. As this essay has shown, the production of film in combination with academic prose not only supplies the implied audience/reader with a broader picture of cases of FCM. Its recursive reflection also produces novel planes of engagement that may retroactively change the perception of both film and text. Taking this particular case study as an example, I have shown how multi-mediated research results yield a large number of potentialities and synergies for the social sciences.

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