



DASTAVEZI  
THE AUDIO-VISUAL  
SOUTH ASIA

## Ghungroo

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### Abstract

Ghungroo is a film that aims to critically reorient dance in the contemporary cultural landscape of Pakistan, focusing mainly on the lived experiences of Dawood Bhatti, a Kathak dancer. Bhatti tackles the binary representation of gender and thus is emblematic of emergent discourses on gender identity and dance in Pakistan. Ghungroo is the depiction of struggle and success derived from the freedom of a gender-fluid identity, using dance as a subversive medium with the power to explore the boundaries of power and patronage.

**Keywords:** Gender, Karachi, Kathak, dance

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### Why and How I Came to Make this Film

Dance, like any other creative exercise, drives excitement and joy—the classical *Kathak* is no exception. This ancient South Asian dance form is dying in Pakistan due to religious conservatism. However, dancers like Dawood Bhatti are reviving it. *Ghungroo* is the story of Dawood Bhatti, a 26-year-old Pakistani Christian and practicing *Kathak* dancer who challenges masculinity and patriarchal gender roles with profound agility and grace. With this film, I hope to recognize and contribute to the struggle of his and other voices who are fighting for bodily autonomy from the normative and hegemonic gender binary in South Asia. From an early age, dance as a practice has been very close to my heart; it is akin to visual poetry flowing from the spirit, in which each movement is fluid and rhythmic. I have always watched with fascination as performers captivated audiences regardless of age, class, or creed. It is bewildering to realize the exceptional power of dance that can move people to tears with great poise and emotive storytelling. As a filmmaker, I wanted to highlight the importance of art as a medium for revolutionary change. One such art form is *Kathak*.

With this in mind, I approached Sheema Kirmani, a leading artist and major proponent of the *Bharatnatyam* in Pakistan. She is also the founder of *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, an organization that paved the way for the feminist movement within the country. The group focuses on organizing workshops and seminars for women with an inclination towards cultural and creative activities, such as theatre and dance, to convey a message of gender equality and justice. It is also because of her that I first met Dawood during a performance at an International Children's Day seminar at the Movenpick Hotel in Karachi. For me, this performance was one significant reason to make this film. I had the opportunity of meeting Dawood again when I attended a three-day youth convention organized by *Tehrik-e-Niswan* in 2017. It was this event that led me to his in-house studio months later and to the decision to produce an independent documentary film about his art. I found myself drawing motivation from the experience of navigating the streets of PIB Colony Karachi and the brick-lined rooftops of Dawood Bhatti's vibrant neighborhood to discover a mesmerizing art that can no longer be confined by society's ideals. It has been a privilege and honor to represent Dawood in my feature documentary *Ghungroo*, where he shares his journey as a male dancer and the passion that keeps him going, despite the deep-seated patriarchal culture that continues to threaten his life and work. It has been a gradual learning experience that has taught me how to create films that can be used as tools for advocacy, despite

monetary constraints. This film was made possible under the project 'Film Talents: Voices from Pakistan and Afghanistan,' jointly funded by the Goethe-Institut Pakistan and Prince Claus Fund. It was filmed during a year-long fellowship in 2017.

### What is *Kathak*?

*Kathak* is one of the ten major genres of Indian classical dance that lays great emphasis on a critically self-examined balance, by which the dancer establishes a rhythmic motion of the fixed upper torso and footwork. *Kathak* is the only Indian classical dance form, which fuses the Hindu traditions of storytelling and Muslim traditions brought by the Mughals, an Islamic dynasty from Persia (Sundaram, n.d.). Its roots originate from the traveling sonneteers of northern India to the Mughal courts where *Kathakars* were a primary source of entertainment for the nobles. The cultural relevance of *Kathak* and other dances heavily declined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the British colonial era, which saw the rise of the anti-dance movement. The attack on dance performances was a result of Victorian morality and the opposition from British-educated Indian men, who considered *Kathak* and other dance performances as 'immoral and a social ill' (Walker 2016, 94-98). In 1983, classical dance was banned in Pakistan by General Zia ul Haq during his military rule. Zia's regime was known for its anti-women laws and its criticism of art forms, backed by a narrow patriarchal understanding of Islam. The after-effects of Zia's regime remain, making a revival of dance and other such art forms a rebellious act (Magsi, 2016).

### Dawood: A Rebel Dancer

Amidst such a hostile environment against dancers, Dawood is steadfast in his attempt to restore an ancient art form. He is confident that the world will once again revere dance as a sacred art form. His guiding principles are the foundation of theatre-based emotive storytelling as performers skillfully master each expression, rhythm, and movement to visually narrate encounters in history and mythology.

Originally, *Kathak* was a solo dance performance practiced exclusively by men. These male dancers performed multiple characters in a single performance, 'effortlessly switching gender portrayal as the roles appear in the narrative' (Shah 1998, 3). However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, female *Kathak* dancers started replacing their male *gurus* (Natavar 1999). Today, most *Kathak* dancers are women.

Appropriating this role in the contemporary world, male classical dancers are often interrogated through the prism of gender, sexuality, and queer studies by scholars. Dawood reflects on how his passion for dance has managed to thwart some misconstrued beliefs. He says, in the past, people in his neighbourhood have called him all kinds of names, using derogatory terms to shame him: 'They would call me effeminate, *hijra*, transvestite' because a man doesn't wear bells (*ghungroo*). But who decides what any person wears or not? Certainly not the people who live in your neighbourhood' (*Ghungroo*, 00:30).

With *ghungroos* (bells) adorning his feet, Dawood is determined to defy these modern ideals of masculinity. He is set on performing in his neighborhood, to show everyone that being effeminate is not diminishing for a man. Dawood is a powerful force to reckon with. The bright pink walls in his room are a welcome sight compared to the muddy, whitewashed walls of the rest of the colony. He is set to perform in front of everyone this evening, in the hopes of 'shutting up everyone with his dance' and ending this ridicule: 'Today, I will show them how it is done,' (*Ghungroo*, 01:07) he says, as he tightens his *ghungroos* and fixes his blazing red *kurta* and walks out, confidence oozing with each step. He is ready to claim his space.

Much of society's poisonous attitude towards Dawood and dancers like him stems from the notion that the worst thing a man can do is to emulate what is perceived as feminine. Those who do not conform to such gender roles are instantly labeled as deviant. It becomes evident that dance is seen as a feminine practice that cannot be done by men. However, this gendered conception is a modern phenomenon, as historically it was men who dominated the art of *Kathak* dance (Shah 1998, 3).

As Dawood walks from his house to the rooftop that is his stage for the evening, his *ghungroos* are a symbol of empowerment. The shot that follows him to the roof is emblematic of his courage (*Ghungroo*, 01:24), the sound of the *ghungroo* echoing in the background fading in and out with the cheerful appraisal of his fellow residents. At a screening of this film in Lahore in 2019, many people present among the audience were reminded of their own time during the dictatorship of Zia Ul Haq, when activists took to the streets to peacefully protest the doctrines of a despotic state.

In his own words, Dawood calls out the people who perceive dance as a sinful indulgence. He says, 'I don't understand people who dance at weddings but object to my dancing' (*Ghungroo*, 01:05). Over the years, countless people have told him that dance is not a respectable profession; they look down on it because it is not 'our' (i.e.

Pakistani) culture.

Dawood says his mother has always been very supportive of his craft. She has been an anchor in tough times. In a conversation with his mother, she revealed fondly that Dawood was persistent in his attempt to learn dance from the very beginning, but it was Sheema Kirmani who gave him the confidence that has allowed him to bloom.

His mother recalls moments from their life when she became aware of her son's talents as he began performing in events all over the continent. His training has given him the chance to travel abroad, an experience that most people from low-income housing can only dream of in Pakistan. The recognition that Dawood has received over the years has affected the negative opinion of people: 'Kids in the neighborhood call him *Ustaad* (teacher) now. I feel really proud' she exclaims, as she sits among a scattered pile of old newspapers highlighting her son's achievements (*Ghungroo*, 02:18). It is inspiring to see how Dawood's persistence has managed to dismantle societal conventions in Karachi's PIB colony.

### Dawood: A Trainer

As the day recedes, Dawood is ready to take the stage underneath clear blue skies. I look back at that day now and think about Dawood, his heavy kohled eyes are playful and hungry to show everyone that he is not afraid of them. For me, he is an icon of fearlessness as he shatters sedimented gender roles, while adults and children look on from their windows and rooftops. In a moment of ecstasy, Dawood moves to the sound of the beat, making everyone attentive to each of his moves. His red *kurta* swings with the wind, with the graceful fury of a storm among the colorful parapets and orange tarps.

With his art, Dawood has touched the lives of many people. He continues to inspire and train individuals in his in-house studio, where he teaches modern dance. This studio is the only safe space for many young boys who wish to train as a dancer. The vivid yellow walls of the small room might be more comfortable than a home for a young teenager who is under Dawood's training. I wanted to find a way to shoot his student that would not impede on his comfort or risk his safety. For this reason, it became a creative choice to protect his identity with a mask that Dawood had found in his studio (*Ghungroo*, 04:09). It is rather unfortunate to see the lengths one has to go to protect oneself from society's disapproving remarks. The young boy is passionate

about dance but has to hide this part of himself from his own family and friends, knowing that they would never allow him to continue training – ‘If my parents find out about this, I will never be able to leave the house anymore’ (*Ghungroo*, 05:17). As he travels across the city, he makes a variety of excuses at home so he may be able to pursue his dreams.

Dawood is familiar with the struggles of his students. Many students may not be able to pay their monthly fees, but he still lets them join the classes. Some students, however, have dropped out due to their families’ disapproval. In a society that is heavily tarnished with conservative understandings of gender roles, it is very difficult to navigate these forces that seek to define and generalize a gender in new ways.

For many such children who are trying to muster the strength to break stigmatization of male *Kathak* dancers, every day becomes a struggle. Dawood plays a very important role in each of their lives. He is a mentor who looks out for them, who protects and nurtures them as they come closer to accepting themselves for who they are. Perhaps the biggest roadblock for male dancers to getting equal performing opportunities is the silent issue of sexuality. A dancing man is often presumed to be gay and many male dancers strive to appear hyper-masculine on stage. Across the world, we see that many of these stigmas are being destroyed because of fearless men like Dawood. I look forward to seeing a world where dance can finally be perceived as an ungendered form of art and expression.

### **The Impact of a Public Dance Performance**

After a tough day for both me and Dawood, we were perched atop his roof, sharing a laugh in the quiet moments of the night. It was then that we noticed a girl’s silhouette dancing in her room, away from prying, judgemental eyes. At first, I was unsure of the ethical implications of using this footage. But with encouragement from my producer Till Passow, I took a bold step and incorporated it as part of my film. For me, this was a moment when I truly believed in the power of performance. As the silhouette glided across the room, in those seconds, I knew it was Dawood and the impact of his show just a few hours ago that had enabled this girl, whoever she was, to stop caring about social expectations and dance as much as she wanted to.

The value of taking a classical dance form out of an auditorium was immediately evident as Dawood took up space on a roof to announce his art as a form of a protest. Dawood’s

dance on the roof can be seen as an attempt to preserve a dying traditional dance form that is often only performed by female bodies. Dawood is not only going against the religious fundamentalists of the country who perceive *Kathak* as an un-Islamic act but also against the gender norm that says only female bodies can dance.

Gender stereotypes and a strict gender binary have been constructed and reinforced by the media. Popular culture has tarnished the imagination for an alternative future without a gender binary. Whether it is Dawood's students or the girl who might have been inspired by Dawood to dance that night, these young people have to hide their art from most people in their life because they are afraid of their judgment and the violence that may follow. However, the impact of Dawood's work is clear: despite all the social challenges, he not only inspires his students to dance, but by performing publicly, he makes a statement.

When the private starts unfolding in the public sphere, it becomes a gesture that has the power to redefine convention. It is not just about the dance anymore; it is part of a movement of self-actualization and gender performance. Every time we dance in a public space, we are making our presence known. Dancing is a confident flaunting of the body. Whereas hiding away and shaming the body is how patriarchy polices people—especially in the context of Pakistan where dance is seen as indecent, vulgar, and against religious values. In a public space like Dawood's rooftop, audiences cannot be controlled as they would be in an auditorium. In choosing to perform publicly, where people of different classes, castes, and genders proceed to become onlookers, disapprovingly or otherwise, Dawood is making a statement that he will not let these gazes police him.

The message is clear: you can no longer shame us into retreating to our homes. We are asserting ourselves to this city, with its winding lanes and paved streets, but most significantly, to ourselves—because these are our streets too. We are teaching ourselves to meet the public gaze, and in being unembarrassed, we are challenging the assumptions that wish to demean our existence and stand in the way of our dreams.

The tragedy of dance is such that we have continuously failed to uphold, recognize and promote a cultural environment for its survival. If we wish to carve out new ideals for ourselves and the future of the world, it becomes imperative to fight back against the stigma forced upon our identities. For Dawood, who has carved out a niche for himself, and in doing so, created a platform for other aspiring young artists, the best

way to fight the prevalent bigotry among the masses is to ignore everyone and shine in his own success.

## Glossary

<i>Bharatnatyam</i>	A major form of Indian classical dance performed in a team
<i>Ghungroo</i>	Musical anklet adorned by classical Indian dancers
<i>Kathak</i>	A type of northern Indian classical dance used for storytelling
<i>Kathakar</i>	<i>Kathak</i> dancer
<i>Kurta</i>	Loose collarless shirt worn by people mainly in South Asia
<i>Ustaad</i>	Teacher or mentor

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