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## **Kashmir Cultural Memory through the Lens of Film:** *Paradise on a River of Hell* revisited

Abir Bazaz in conversation with Max Kramer

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### **Abstract**

Abir Bazaz tackles the question of what it means to make a film about the Sufi traditions of the Kashmir Valley. In conversation with Max Kramer he talks about the film-form and *Dastavezi's* interest in aesthetics and theory.

**Keywords:** Kashmir, cultural memory, Sufism

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**Film:** <https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/15258/14856>

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### **Introduction [Max Kramer]**

This piece consists of my two conversations with Abir Bazaz, who, in collaboration with Meenu Gaur, is the producer and director of *Paradise on a River of Hell* (2002). The first interview was conducted in New Delhi in February 2013. It frames the question of what it means to make a film about the Sufi traditions of the Kashmir Valley. The second conversation resulted from an email exchange in April 2021 where we talked about the film-form and *Dastavezi's* interest (aesthetics and theory). Instead of keeping the two conversations separate, I integrated them into one coherent narrative that connects questions of production and cultural context to those of form via a topical organization.

## Production

**M.K.:** Can you tell me something about the production context of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust [PSBT, an Indian state co-financed trust that funds small documentary productions] in the early 2000s? How was the allegorical form developed within the power matrix of that particular moment in time—in Kashmir and in Delhi?

**A.B.:** There were hardly any documentaries on Kashmir by the early 2000s. An excellent film which had been made before *Paradise on a River of Hell* [2002] was Ajay Raina's *Tell them the Tree they had Planted has now Grown* [2001]. The allegorical form which we developed had to do with the realization that the situation of power left Kashmiris few choices and the most appealing of these choices was a possible turn to their cultural and spiritual history in search of new ideas. Lal Ded and Nund Rishi appeared to both Meenu and me as intensely political figures who survived in Kashmiri cultural memory as exemplars of passive resistance. It was also a very difficult time to make films in Kashmir when a more literal representation of everyday truths was almost impossible. The allegorical form offered us a compromise.

## Visual style

**M.K.:** The visuals are saturated in color, almost picturesque at times. You also use fisheye filters. I assume these devices are meant to estrange audiences from their expectations of Kashmir while simultaneously catering to the tourist gaze. The film flows smoothly, the audio-visual language is marked by tranquillity. It has an overall elegiac tonality (also due to the intriguing soundtrack) that binds historical events to particular sites through the flow of personal memory and boat journeys on the river Jhelum. Can you say something about how you developed this style? What discussions were happening with your cameraperson, editors, and the music director?

**A.B.:** The film does not outrightly reject the tourist aesthetic. It seems to be suggesting that this too has shaped Kashmiri self-images. The sheer beauty of the Kashmiri landscape is not shunned, but the distortion that is built into our perspective is hinted at through the lensing. The film was trying to put Kashmir's beauty into brackets without trying to discard it as one of the many ways of thinking about Kashmir. The elegiac tone, it is true, had to do with our own despair about the situation. We decided to go with our cameraperson's instinctive urge to capture the beauty of images and then chose to problematize it through editing by making it appear more dreamlike and

unreal, almost fantastic. Our music director, Madan Gopal Singh Ji, is an eminent Sufi singer and film theorist. He intuited this elegiac tone of the film and combined different musical influences to evolve the music and the soundscape. His music, in some sense, shapes the thinking of the film.

## Belonging

**M.K.:** You have made a film on a particular tradition of Kashmiri Sufism, the *Rishis*. How do you see your film with regard to the way Kashmiri identities are often framed through questions of religious conflict?

**A.B.:** I was looking at the way the historical memory of faith in Kashmir is fundamental to ideas of politics and future. This does not necessarily mean that these ideas are not secular. What it means is that they are different and their difference somehow escapes a certain logic of thinking secularism and a certain logic of thinking religion.

**M.K.:** This logic is silenced by the hegemonic discourses of religious conflict. So your question is: how can we dig up Kashmiri voices by looking at *Rishi* traditions?

**A.B.:** I have approached these questions in the past by turning to the *Rishis* and the Kashmiri language. This runs the risk of being reduced to some form of a discourse on national culture. I feel this is a mistake. Paul Celan is helpful here: you fight in the name of language with the understanding that you don't own language. It is not your own. If one is going to think about language and if one is going to think about the *Rishis* then one must not reduce Kashmir to either Kashmiri language or the *Rishis*, but one must approach them with an understanding that they offer a possibility and nothing more. One cannot reduce this to a discourse on national culture, but one can turn to it towards some sort of opening.

**M.K.:** The literary scholar Ananya Kabir (2009) said that your film was deconstructing the spatial imagination by showing shrines, mosques, and temples in their "singularity."

**A.B.:** Yes, I think she is right in certain ways. The idea of singularity as we encounter it in contemporary French thought is somewhat of use in thinking about Kashmir. In a sense, it is a question of the connection between singularity and sovereignty which is at stake in Kashmir. We often fail to understand what "belonging" is and that this belonging has nothing to do with "identities." It might be easy for people to connect the struggle in Kashmir to questions of identity such as the question of the "resurgence

of Islam,” or the question of a unique struggle as in the discourse of “nationalist liberation,” but to me these are all inadequacies of thought in addressing the singular history of Kashmir. What has been at stake in this history is the desire to envision a democratic political community, which is much more imaginative, much more open, much more—I don’t have the right words, I’m struggling with language here—but “open” is the right word, “democracy” in a certain sense is also the right word.

It is this vision that has been at work in Kashmiri cultural memory—in its texts at least—from the fourteenth century onwards. When we look at the rise of Kashmiri literary culture, we see huge political turbulences in Kashmir, not unlike the present. From that time onwards this memory of a different relationship between language, self, and politics has survived in Kashmiri culture: The possibility of a different way of imagining two different communities, dialogue, border, place, space, and in the end, time.

### Memory, history, and temporality

M.K.: How can we imagine Kashmiri time?

A.B.: I can give you an example, a rather crude one. You have Ozu, he is a Japanese filmmaker, and during his time you have the classical Hollywood realism: You have a camera on the tripod and the classical cinema shot structure of Hollywood. Ozu is rather uncomfortable with this style of filming. Japanese traditionally eat on the floor; they usually sit on the floor. And he is like: “I think I need to take the camera off the tripod. I need to place it on the floor.” I see this as an event in the history of cinema in the real sense of the word. If a modern technological form like cinema has to connect to the history of Kashmiri meaning, then it must also unfold from within a history of such events. It calls for courage and what Gandhi calls “self-respect.” And we are still far from that moment. I have not seen many of the new films that have been made like *Valley of Saints* (Syed 2012) and so on. I don’t know to what degree they are doing it. Largely, I am a bit pessimistic about the future. The idea of expressing oneself is there and my point is “why”? I have struggled myself with this idea of an audience which somehow already dictates what film you are going to make. I look at some poets and writers in the Kashmiri language who know they have an audience, they also have their eyes on the Sahitya Academy award, they are more free. Nobody is going to read them, so they are free. And if I could make films with the freedom that nobody is going to watch them and I wouldn’t care, I think it might be possible to make better films. I have been thinking about certain inner spaces for many, many years and I don’t know in

which language I can express that space. That space, that memory of place which is Kashmir and which is being destroyed every day. There is something indestructible in its history, something which resists. But nonetheless there is a forgetting and that forgetting is dangerous. You can have a thousand films made by Kashmiris, great cinema. You can have a Kashmiri winning at Cannes. You can have all of this, but it still involves the forgetting of the opening of cinema in Kashmir.

**M.K.:** When rewatching your film in 2021, I have been listening more closely to the narrating subject's voice-over. There is a man and a woman speaking of memory (events, massacres, places), there is a movement between the personal, the historical, and the philosophical. This also translates into the form. While we begin with hopscotch as an allegory of the fragmented space of conflict, we move along the Jhelum, the river of time, to eventually end with an alternative vision of Kashmiri belonging via the *Rishi* tradition. Would you like to tell us a bit about the narrative voice-over and how you developed it? What debates did you and Meenu have on how to integrate these diverse layers of experience through the voice-over and its linkage to the allegorical form?

**A.B.:** There was quite a bit of debate between Meenu and me about this. We wanted the voice of Kashmir's spiritual past to be a feminine voice. It was appropriate because we were actually quoting Lal Ded. The idea was also to separate the voice of Kashmir's premodern past from the narrator's voice which reflects on the political present of the film, i.e. the 1990s. As you point out, if Jhelum symbolizes the river of time, the lake in Lal Ded's words puts this time in relation with eternity.

### Thinking through film

**M.K.:** This is an essay film in the way it links the personal with a philosophically-inclined reflection on a subject. I think you told me that the subject of the film is freedom. The way you have handled it makes me think about the possibilities of filmic thought. I don't believe that there is only one way of conceptual thinking, while aesthetics is just a handmaiden to it. There seem to be two questions at stake: First, what can film do to make us think through certain concepts while achieving this through the means of the filmic medium? And second, how does one think filmically—through the medium of film—to push film more and more towards the creative potential of the medium?

**A.B.:** I think this is a difficult question. It is similar to the question of the gap that opens up between thinking and philosophy. One is tempted to suggest that at times one approaches film almost like a transcendental medium. But film is also so particularizing, so subjective. As far as I am concerned, film is a constant search for that which remains hidden in the seen, the visible. It is thinking in the sense that it seeks revelation. Film is thinking in as much as thinking is a form of awareness that reveals the care that is always involved in the human condition. It is a form of touch.

### Contributor's Biography

Abir Bazaz is an Assistant Professor of English at Ashoka University. Bazaz's research interests include Kashmiri literature, Urdu literature, South Asian literatures in English, Asian Cinemas, Religion and Cinema, Intellectual History of Islam in South Asia, Sufism, Faith and Literature, Existentialism, Negative Theology, Comparative Mysticism, and Violence Studies. He is currently working on a monograph titled *The Negative Theology of Nund Rishi*. He is also a documentary filmmaker.

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