

Introduction

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This is the fourth edition of *Dastavezi the Audio-Visual South Asia*, and we are happy to welcome five authors from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany, and the United Kingdom as contributors. Aside from two documentary films and two photo essays, we extend our repertoire to feature a piece by the singer and artist Wajiha Naqvi, who, with the help of one of her audio recordings, reflects on how her embodied practice produces affective atmospheres.

In our first contribution, Mallika Leuzinger discusses the role of cameras in what has, in the past few years, almost become its own genre: enabling children from disempowered backgrounds to document their lives through donated cameras. Often applauded in the Global North as a way to include the voice of those most marginalized, Leuzinger's piece criticizes the shortsighted belief that cameras provide more immediate knowledge of subaltern voices. Instead, she shows how such projects perpetuate stereotypes and are far removed from attempts to pry open the sedimented imagery of poverty and childhood in South Asia. Even more so, she shows how the contributors in particular projects have been tricked into believing their lives will substantially change for the better once they participate in the documentation of their precarious circumstances. While their (usually white) producers collect revenue and gain international acclaim, the participants frequently remain invisible. Leuzinger's piece is a criticism of participatory projects that aim to use photo cameras to portray the life of the wretched objectively. She argues that there is no outside to the representation conundrum, and the camera, as an allegedly neutral tool in the hands of the subaltern, cannot neutralize the neocolonial frames informing the very foundation of many allegedly participatory projects.

In a piece on her musical apprenticeship with the *Qawwal Bachche*, a hereditary lineage of musicians associated with the 13th century *Qawwali* musical tradition, Wajiha Naqvi reflects on the shaping of her singing voice in devotional Sufi-Islamic practice. Being a disciple of this tradition, Naqvi provides unique and personal insights into how her teacher creates her voice (Urd. *awaaz banana*) by teaching her various

embodied techniques. As a student, she cultivates a “musical space in the throat” (*gale mein jageh bithana*) through listening, repetition, and memory. Naqvi shows how this musical space produces sonic intensities through a symbiosis of rhythms, lyrical elements, and bodily practices that simultaneously affect the performer and the audience. The power of affecting and being affected makes the performer’s voice (*awaaz*) the main instrument to experience and share notions of the divine in the tradition of the *Qawwal Bachche*.

What emerges as a common thread between the following two essays, authored by Vindhya Buthpitiya and Iffat Fatima, is not only the theme of the Sri Lankan Conflict but also the shared question of how “the visual” relates to agency and desire. In her photo essay, Buthpitiya explores the photo studio as a site of the collective production of desire. From this vantage point, she engages with the history of one particular studio, how it was impacted by armed conflict, the changes in digital technology, and the war-related dispersal of the local Tamil community. In pre-digital times, the studio’s photographs produced identification and political memory—although susceptible to the destruction of film due to tropical weather (compare here Karinkurayil’s essay in Dastavezi’s last issue) or as a casualty of war. In post-war digital times, the circulation of personal identification portraits, as well as those of martyrs, gave way to cinema-style weddings and creative self-representations. In the conflict zone’s fraught peace, as Buthpitiya calls it, images are memory layers that drive multiple desires.

Watching Fatima’s film and reading her and Buthpitiya’s essays side by side, we encounter a conflict archive: a time shortly before a fraught peace, where the destruction of war is still visibly inscribed on the people and the landscape. While Buthpitiya speaks of the studio as a catalyst for aspirations for mobility and conflict memory, Fatima’s *Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace* (2002) demonstrates how the film camera catalyzes similar desires. In the accompanying essay, Iffat Fatima revisits her film shot in 2002, just after the peace contract in Sri Lanka was signed. It traces a drive along the A9 highway, connecting the Tamil North with the Sinhalese South of the country. Crucially, both together enable us to rethink audio-visual agency in zones of conflict. We can understand Fatima’s approach as a way of inducing an active force into stereotypically frozen relations. She beautifully expresses this notion in her essay, noting:

The camera does come with a certain amount of power. [...] I think [our interlocutors] somehow willfully appropriate the camera's power; they acquire agency. It gets them out of their victimhood in a way. Once the film is made, the agency's power has been transferred there, into the film. When you say it's a powerful film, what do you mean? Essentially, the power of this agency is reflected in the movie.

The purpose here is to rethink the documentary film's aesthetic power and limitations—one of our journal's main concerns. As Leuzinger has shown above, the distribution of cameras and lenses to marginalized groups is not enough to pry open the emancipatory potential of audio-visual media. It is rather a question of the political ethics of form.

Fatima understands the documentary form as energized by the creative power of people—as a micro-politics of filmic thought that moves below the surface and is continuously adaptive to changing contexts. The “revisiting” of a film many years after it has been created precisely reveals such alternations. In the case of Britta Ohm's contribution, it is now almost thirty years ago that she undertook the project which resulted in the documentary film *Darshana: Inverting the Gaze* (1993). Ohm begins her essay with Indian prime minister Modi's visit to Germany in early 2022 and reflects on the meaning of a photograph depicting Modi in 1993 standing in front of a statue of Charlemagne—uncannily revealing the Hindu nationalist leader's loose play with the aspirational power of aesthetics. Ohm's contemplation of Modi's image sets the tone for her essay in which she revisits the film made with two colleagues in that same year. The viewer quickly notices the filmmaker's perceptive power that came with her (then) lack of familiarity with South Asia. Ohm recontextualizes some aspects of the film that do not conform to how she understands the ethical expectations of ethnographic filmmaking today. While she criticizes her former use of what one could call the voice of documentary—a form of address as a device of representing the story and its characters—she appreciates the anticipatory stance of the film. Dastavezi's emphasis on multi-mediated formats is crucial in this regard. From Ohm's essay we discover that the sound recorder was lost during production—prompting the use of an essay-like voiceover commentary. Only by reading the essay together with the film can we engage with the ethics of filmmaking in more nuanced ways. Watching *Darshana* today, it is uncanny how the film team's reflection on the cinematic gaze and its relation to

changing media environments and gender relations predicted the desires of Hindu nationalism in post-liberalization India. We hope that through these and similar contributions, Dastavezi will become an archive for a media history of the present moment.