

Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema

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Abstract

"The Kolachi Brothers" is a video strewn together from hours of cell phone footage, film skits, private jokes, and commentaries shot by the Sindhi Kulis of Cantt Railway Station, Karachi. The videos were made as part of a project by the Tentative Collective called the Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema, which ran from 2012-2015 collaborating with residents across ethnically and economically diverse residential colonies and urban intersections of Karachi to create a poetic archive of everyday life in the city. The collaborative mobile cinema worked with participants to produce self-generated media using locally available, vernacular technology and set up free screenings of low-res cell phone videos in the sites where they were produced.

The coolies who made "The Kolachi Brothers" all hail from the Kalochi family. They are porters and daily wage earners who live on the Cantt Railway Station platforms until they have enough money to return to their families in Ghotki, Interior Sindh, 300 miles north-west of Karachi. The Tentative Collective worked with this group for about three to four months and held three screenings of different cuts between October and December 2013. The screenings were projected using a rickshaw powered projector on various surfaces like the dented bodies of trains and the stony walls of colonial architecture.

The coolies of Cantt Railway Station sing songs of unrequited love, longing, and despair, but simultaneously project a strong sense of humor in their situation, as well as an acute awareness of the power dynamics of seeing and showing—this complicates the hierarchy of voyeurs in interesting ways.

While Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema seldom screens site specific video outside the neighbourhoods where they were made, the Kolachi Brothers' insistence on being visible outside their environs, and their expert manipulation of the screen and its voyeurs has allowed their work to travel and be a part of this platform.

Keywords: Karachi, Kolachi, Cantt Railway Station, Coolies, Public Screening, Tentative Collective

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Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema (2012–2015)

The collective's third project, *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* (MKMC), ran from 2012–2015, using a rickshaw powered projector to screen self-made cell phone videos in the neighborhoods where they were produced. Asking participants to respond to the prompt “What do you do in your free time?” the collected low-res cell phone videos formed a poetic archive of everyday spaces of leisure across Karachi. Over the course of the project, dozens of participants and collaborators worked together from five different neighborhoods in the city.

The video projection events by *MKMC* challenged commonly held expectations of everyday private and public space. This work travelled to various residential neighborhoods and public nodes of the city including Ali Akbar Shah Goth in Ibrahim Haidery (where migrants, particularly Burmese-Rohingya and Bengali fishermen and garment workers reside); Cantt Station (the old railway station built during British colonial rule); the Sea View waterfront (Karachi's public/working class beach); and Lyari (a lively Baloch neighborhood with an exaggerated reputation for being the most dangerous part of Karachi). Months of regular visits to each neighborhood revealed the various subjectivities and inequalities amongst residents of different parts of the city. The way urban sites were inhabited, securitized, socialized or improvised began to take structural form within the invisible hierarchies of the emerging world city.

MKMC developed a slow process, taking months to form relationships in each neighborhood, gradually building up momentum to make and screen videos together. It privileged the perspectives of invisible and peripheral publics, and those parts of the city that are seldom beneficiaries of globally projected urban planning exercises.

Like the Tentative Collective, *MKMC* initially emerged in response to feelings of communal isolation, loss of communal space and social exchange across the city. In hindsight, feelings of isolation were most palpable in the elite neighborhoods of Defence Housing Authority, and the art world, in contrast to the likes of Bangali Para in Ibrahim Haidery or the Baghdadi area in Lyari (the latter two, bustling with social networks and communal outdoor activities). In any case, by the time the project was being developed (2011), the markets in Pakistan had been liberalized and Karachi had turned into yet another city ready for the absorption of capital surplus, thus transforming rapidly from a place meant for living to an opportunity for local and global investment. In 2011, half of the population of Pakistan was under the age of 25 and almost everyone had a cell phone. Internet and Wi-Fi were still not cheap, nor available

to everyone but cell phones with portable SD cards were ubiquitous, creating a significant change in the consumption of media across various classes. New networks began to arise and added novel layers of connectivity to Karachi's pre-existing socio-cultural landscape. Parallel to the spreading of cell phones, the growth of the city was a force to be reckoned with as it stumbled to catch up to the imagined techno-futures. Coinciding with the liberalization of the markets was the liberalization of Pakistani media by (four-star army general and 10th president) Pervez Musharraf (2001–2008). Countless privately-owned television channels and 24-hour news cycles sprouted which formed a robust propaganda machine for the state. These outlets broadcasted a surge of images, soundbites, and stereotypical representations of the Pakistani people, reproducing and cashing in on globally circulating binary identity politics of the post 9/11 rhetoric of terror. To give an example, Pakhtun migrants who moved to Karachi in large numbers after 9/11 (mostly displaced from the northern areas because of the various anti-terrorism military operations) were simplistically lumped together as an ethnic group of Islamic extremists and focused targets of interrogation. In addition, American imperialism, the Pakistani state's own collusion in the wars on terror, and the sensationalist private media, pandered to an economy of mass hysteria and unfortunately exacerbated the production of divisive memes in a city that was already struggling to hold itself together.

At around the same time, various speculative urban redevelopment plans like the Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020, were aiming to transform Karachi into a world city; one that was able to participate visually in the circuits of global capital. As a consequence, urban space was being rapidly privatized, segregated, and surveilled; notions of public space were being performed as sites of display for select global and privileged audiences; and flexible open and free public commons were being replaced by malls, gated communities, 'family only' parks and multiplexes for the desired publics of Karachi. In 2011, the Occupy Movement had just swept across the US and not too long ago, protestors had used their cellphones to start a historic movement on Tahrir square—this was the political and technological moment within which *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* emerged in Pakistan.

Stepping back to analyze some of the things we learned from the project, it wouldn't be a surprise to say that we have been living in an aggressively theatrical time which has intensified the affinities between politics and performance. In this context, how could we think about *visibility* triangulated between politics, performance, and

publicity?¹ The collective was using cheap cellphones (readily available vernacular technology) to make videos about everyday spaces of leisure across the city: What did these archives of low-res images tell us through their hard to read pixelated visuals? What could their politics of ‘resolution’ be? How could these images and gestures become analogous to ways of occupying the city differently, slowly, with opacity, as a kind of resistance to the high-speed circulation of capital?

MKMC became an opportunity to look inward via the relationships that were formed over the course of the project. It was a lesson in humility and self-restraint. An exercise in curbing missionary impulses and recognizing the agency of others often deemed powerless by colonizing saviors.

The first screening was held in the Ali Akbar Shah Goth neighborhood of Ibrahim Haidery, a low-income settlement situated near Karachi’s shoreline and comprising mainly of Bengali and Burmese-Rohingya immigrants (legal and illegal) whose livelihood was tied to the fishing and textile industries. The second screening was held in an upscale neighborhood known as the ‘Defence Housing Society’ where videos were projected at a popular café and cultural hub, called the ‘T2F.’ The third and fourth were held at various locations inside Cantt Railway Station, several more in the previously described Lyari neighborhood and at Seaview public beach.

The project did not strive to enter areas blindly and without invitation. Working across class meant that the imbalance in privilege had to be acknowledged and full transparency of the project was shared before entering a neighborhood. Navigations in Ali Akbar Shah Goth were facilitated by Zeb, a Muhajir migrant and long-time resident of the area (she was introduced by a colleague who had worked extensively in the neighborhood).² At Cantt Station we worked with a group of *kulis* (luggage porters) from Ghotki, a city in interior Sindh. Fawad Kolachi, Himat Kolachi, and Fazal Kolachi led a group of more than 20 *kulis* to work together in making the videos. They called themselves ‘The Kolachi Brothers,’ and their film, bearing the same name, was strewn together from hours of footage, film skits, private jokes, and commentaries over the course of three months. These *kulis* were itinerant workers living on the railway platform, carrying luggage for tips until they had enough money to return to their

1 A conversation held with Lawrence Liang where we were discussing how media has been used by protestors to either make bodies overly visible—or invisible as intentional political positions.

2 Anwar, Nausheen. 2014. “The Bengali can Return to his Desh but the Burmi can’t Because he has no Desh: Dilemmas of Desire and Belonging Among the Burmese-Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants in Pakistan.” In *The Question of Return*, edited by M. Bass. Amsterdam: University Press.

families about 300 miles north of Karachi. Three screenings of their videos were held on various platforms, bodies of trains, and facades of the colonial railway station building itself. The on-site screenings were always hosted, introduced, and run by the *kulis* who themselves had produced the media. The videos were then edited by the project lead and a few research/editing assistants who had laptops according to the demands of each site and audience.

A donated *Sazgar* rickshaw³ was retrofitted⁴ with projection equipment into a traveling cinema. Its aesthetics drew on vernacular *Pakhtun* automobile lighting and design. Friendships with strangers, sentiments of collective ownership, community and *fun* enabled the screenings to be intimate and self-organized. Sometimes they were held in the street outside a participant's house creating ephemeral projections on doors and windows. Sometimes on concrete and metal, sometimes on the surfaces of vehicles and billboards and ships on public beaches. The luminous projections engaged the architectures of the city, perforating myriad boundaries and surfaces. And with each screening, new gatherings of people were formed and new questions about 'publics' and 'public space' were opened up. Some of these questions asked: Why are certain places/people considered undesirable? How can an event rupture preconceptions and normative codes of behavior around 'desirable/undesirable publics' as well as 'desirable/undesirable spaces?' How are projections of these desires cultivated by mass media, national narratives of progress, and city beautification schemes?

Media played a big role in the formation of these questions. The choice of a poor medium—the cheap retrofitted cellphone—was not accidental. This kind of cell phone was a tool accessible to everyone. It was also one of the artifacts of global progress that could be appropriated and turned around. In fact, it was already being appropriated in Karachi. The inexpensive second-hand cell phone, arriving from the global North in containers and dumped in second hand markets of poor cities, was being hacked, opened up, refitted, and reused. It resisted its own obsolescence by being repaired and resurrected by the thousands of corner shops in Karachi, used as portable computer here, family camera there, and now a story telling device, thus becoming a metaphor for the slowing down of circulating capital—capital that was

3 Donated by Shalalae Jamil's uncle. She was briefly one of the members of the project and continued to support us in various ways emblematic of a generosity that was received from various friends and strangers who believed in doing this 'thing.'

4 Raja Sabri, introduced to the collective through word of mouth, generously donated hours of his time and his office resources in building the nuts and bolts of this traveling jalopy/cinema.

somehow able to turn people into simplified, transparent objects, and new customers in untapped global markets.

In this era of commodification, hyper-consumption, and high-res image making, we tried to disrupt the circulation of neat images by telling our own stories of everyday life; for ourselves by using the cheap tools we already had available. We created slow images, we embraced opacity. We created low-res images; images that resisted the expectations of aesthetics that accompanied progress i.e., more gigabits, more pixels, higher and higher resolutions... from 720p, to HD to 4K etc.

Using cheap media meant that there would be breakdowns in our program that resembled the city's own infrastructural fragility. Phones would run out of space, media players would heat up, the rickshaw would break down, the projector would stall. We embraced these breakdowns as part of the project's aesthetic, solving problems collectively, with the same improvisational '*jugaaru*' (makeshift) strategies that were already present and common all across Karachi as pragmatic solutions to the demands of modernity. People (including the Tentative Collective) simply didn't have that much money! These improvisational strategies became unintentional models for a kind of home-grown resistance to the constantly consuming-discarding-renewing hunger of capital.

Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema's exploration was further complicated by the gendered nature of public space, by the parameters of permeability and penetrability, securitization, and by the amplification of desire in the presence of vernacular mobile technology. By responding to the above, we explored alternative perceptions of the city such as invisible public space in the peripheries of Karachi's informal, semi-planned and uncared for public commons and neighborhoods— invisible to the gaze of aspirational publics and erased from the desired projections of the city where a majority of the working class, refugees and unemployed reside. We were also very careful about the power dynamics between seeing and showing: wary of the objectification of the publics on display and the publics who could become voyeurs of poverty. We seldom showed our films to foreign audiences or audiences outside the familiarity of the neighborhoods we worked in. Instances come to mind, where screenings in elite/middle class neighborhoods (made by young people from such areas) were shut down by the police, or were weakly attended, or denied permission altogether by the district administrators; meanwhile poor and peripheral neighborhoods like Ali Akbar Shah Goth integrated and encouraged the events with the consent of the entire community, including the designated thugs, middlemen, and MQM unit leaders. In

poorer areas, the street became the most vibrant public space activated by various temporal activities to which *MKMC's* screenings became an additional layer. In contrast, the idea of projecting videos at Seaview beach in the surveilled waterfront area drew suspicious alarm from DHA administrators who claimed possibilities of terrorist attacks and requirements for crowd control (concerns that were later assuaged by circuitous payoffs).

The difficulty of documenting this kind of project of long-term engagement resulted in the use of different strategies of storytelling. Experimental editing was used at times. Sometimes fragmented or poetic text worked as an analogy to the experience of being in the project, an experience that we hoped would invite participation rather than summarization. For example:

Screening # Three

(Platform One, inside Cantt Railway Station)

There were rumors of a country-wide strike.

Double sawari was banned.

It was Friday rush hour on Shahrah-e-Faisal.

We passed barricades: Metal snowflakes, black and yellow stripes, concrete blocks, horizontal bars, *policewalas*.

The traffic to Cantt Station was diverted to the second gate.

Silence.

Hardly any pedestrians, the parking lot seemed empty.

Platform one.

Policewalas stopped us with authority.

They were not informed of our arrival.

Anger. It was 7:15, we should have been setting up.

The Station Master was absent.

Name dropping, flirting, confidently filming with a large DSLR camera and we were allowed entry.

I walked down the platform with a *policewala*.

We re-invited people he had just turned away.

Free, public screening

The Kolachi brothers surrounded us. *Kulis* greeted our family and friends.

Policewalas looked amused.

Fawad took the microphone, a blue projection on his face, throwing a shadow on the

saloon behind him.

He invited distant viewers into the huddle. They were around us on other platforms,
waiting for trains,
smoking on benches,
snacking near *khokas*,
gathered in bunches,
peeking intermittently.

Metal, grease.

Teeth, orange uniforms,
purple light.

A rectangle projection on the surface of the saloon.
Doors and windows negotiated the depth of a new surface.

Daood pushed a toy train down a restaurant table.
Himat sang about a lover who would arrive today.

Waaga paya e ma naasi Mera dilbar aj aasi...
I am dressed in red
My Beloved is coming today

The song was Sindhi.
The jokes were Sindhi.

Kulis laughed in unison.
Guests whispered, asking for meaning.
Dislocation.
Translation.
Words passed around.
Generosity.

Screening # Four

(Main Façade, Cantt Station)

Day two. We were late.

This was a private, VIP, screening in one of Karachi's most public spaces:
an inauguration of Cantt Station by Pursukoon Karachi's art festival.

"...15 minutes only. Just a trailer" we had said.

"We won't do it if the *Kulis* are not allowed to attend."

The Governor's entourage blocked our entry into the station.
 Metal snowflakes, black-yellow stripes, concrete blocks, bars, security rifles. Uniforms.
 On the wall, a stenciled figure tossed a handgun into a trash can.
 We waited for the entourage to drive out of Cantt Station. Security rifles pointed at
 our rickshaw briefly.

"So sorry. Stuck in traffic, please buy us time."

Security.

Everyday pedestrians appeared to be missing.

A *kuli* rushed over and said, "if you hadn't arrived today we would have
 died of shame."

Cantt station transformed—

—sandstone chiseled, façade brightened and lit

banners hung in perfect symmetry,

a purple silk stage in the emptied parking lot,

trees glowing with fairy lights.

It felt like Grammar School on the night of May Queen Ball.

A dream of several pasts.

Hygienic.

Organized.

Selectively public.

Who were the guests?

Was it their first time visiting Cantt Station?

Had they ever taken the *Tezgam* or the Business Express?

Was '*kuli*' a slight or a reclaimed and vernacularized term for porter?

Each of the 20 *kulis* allowed into the screening

had an identity tag around his neck for this event.

They were standing in familiar territory transformed into strangers.

Fawad clutched the microphone cable,

he stood between the projection and the façade.

He started to speak. Paused.

Waited for the Railway Minister to walk by to the rickshaw.

Everyone took positions. Heads tilted up.

The 'Kolachi Brothers' appeared in large letters across the façade.

Himat's song in Sindhi:

*Garhain saal thi gae
Naheen yaar miliya
Naheen dosth miliya...*

*(Many years passed
by I did not find a lover
did not find a friend)*

A rectangle on the façade dissolved into the interior of a train car.
Daood's face zoomed in on the audience.
His eyes got bigger than the windows.
The projection moved across the masonry.
It looked back at the viewers with confidence.

VIP afraad.
Paused. Sound repeated.
VIP afraad.

After five minutes, the Minister interrupted the projection to speak.
Handshakes and a huddle.
a circle of *kulis* around him.
Himat beaming. Kalimullah laughing.
Fawad poised, '*Aaj tak Kuli musafiron kay peechay bhaagthay thay.*
Aaj musafir Kuliyon key paas aa rahay hain.'

(Till today kulis used to chase after travelers. Today travelers are coming towards the kulis.)

The minister spoke. Unexpectedly charming,
I'm going to get rid of these numbers on your uniforms...
but we have to work a little harder...

'Yeh taqir naheen mukalima hai' (this is dialogue, not a speech)
"Pakistan Zindabad," he said

Everyone clapped.

MKMC acknowledged the shifting contingencies of power that allowed the project to exist. The project's 'everyday,' was a shifting body of experiences and performances between individuals, communities, courtyards, houses, streets, and cities within cities—certainly, this access was allowed to the project initiators based on a certain degree of privilege.

Acknowledging the limitations of our subjectivities and the variations of the social contract allowed us to think differently about collaborative practice. This helped re-

evaluate our own spaces of power within academia and social life, and more critically our agency within these foreign neighborhoods we had entered. This agency shifted dramatically between Haidery, Defence Housing Authority, and Cantt Station. In each location, the level of participation we expected was circumscribed by existing politics of power, gender, and degrees of opacity.

MKMC shed light on the mediating role played by technology in art practice. Our everyday acts of image making revealed the potential of the low-res as a reminder that we (a consuming privileged public) should not have access to everything nor should we have an unobstructed view of every person and place.

Referring back to the power dynamics between seeing and showing, our project's challenge was (and is) often to discern which images to foreground and which to leave out in an effort to prevent performing publics being turned into objects of display for privileged audiences. In leaving the context of the sites where and for whom these images were made, they run the risk of compromising privacy, and becoming ethnographic exercises, shedding the subtle nuances of power against the glare of privileged voyeurism; a voyeurism that is unequal and un-reciprocal in self-exposure. This particular video of *The Kolachi Brothers* that accompanies this text was the only video edited specifically to screen outside Cantt Station, Karachi, at the request of the *kulis*, at a small event at the MoCA Los Angeles 'Screen' program in 2018 and for the publication in this journal.

The Kolachi Brothers was selected for this platform and public viewing because of the *kulis'* expressed desire to be seen, because of their manipulation of the screen and awareness of the scrutinizing external gaze. In that sense, *The Kolachi Brothers* maintain a certain agency palpable in the films they orchestrated for *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* even outside of the original context of Karachi.

This essay was written in 2018, three years after *MKMC* ended its day to day work and screenings with primary audiences. However, the project still leaves a lot to unpack *vis á vis* the many experiences and exchanges of agency, the attachments and betrayals of entering and leaving communities and lives... And the words and images that could not be repeated, could not be documented, or were left unsaid.

Kuli's Song

by Fawad Kolachi

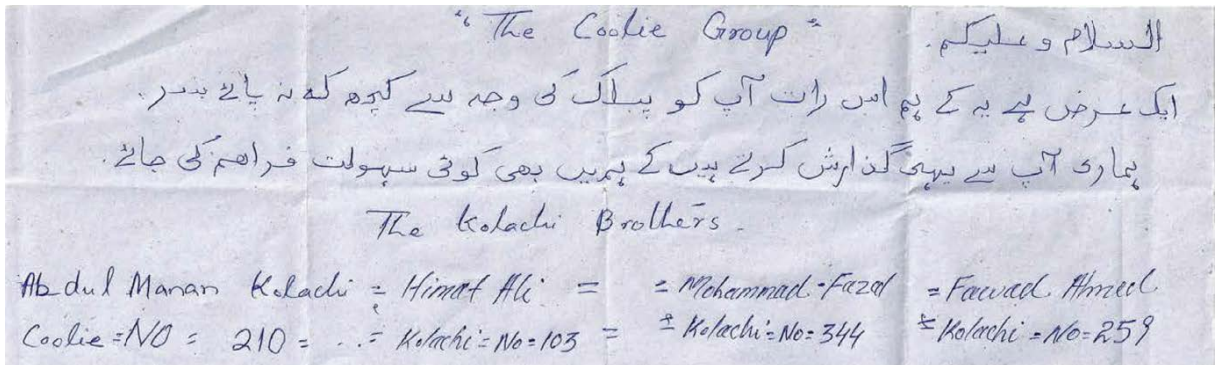
Us, half-fed, hungry bellies
unwinding at the train station, watching travelers go by.
Us poor men, the world knows our secret.

Us, half-fed, hungry bellies
we eye with intent your luggage and your money.
Us poor men, the world knows our secret.

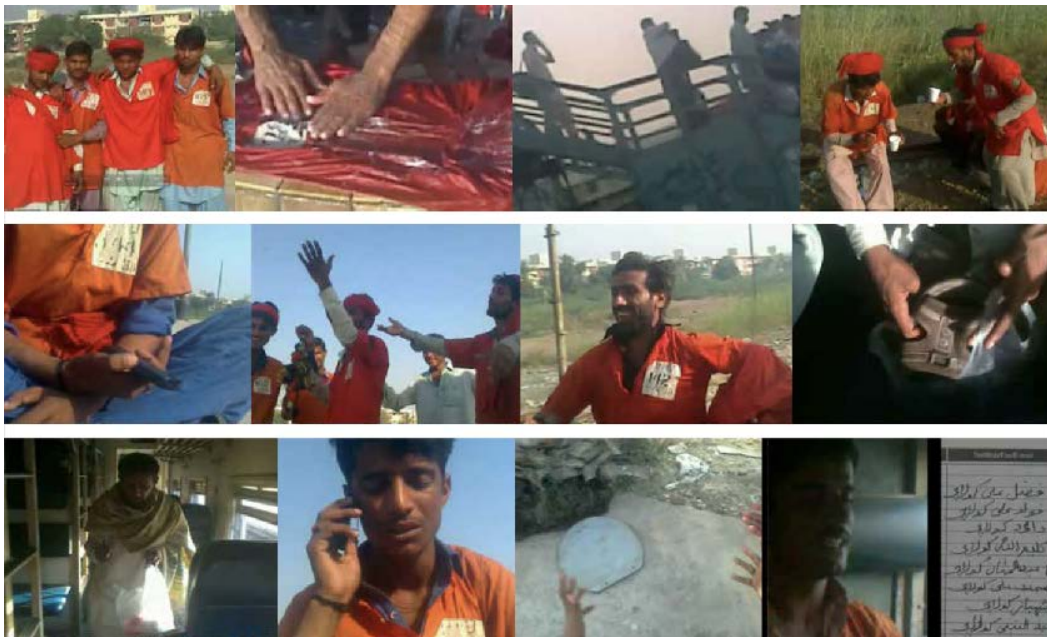
In our homes, scarce food, a broken charpoy,
A dry tap, a barren field.

Us poor men, the world knows our secret.
The world knows our secret.
The world knows our secret.

(translation from the Sindhi by Asad Alvi)



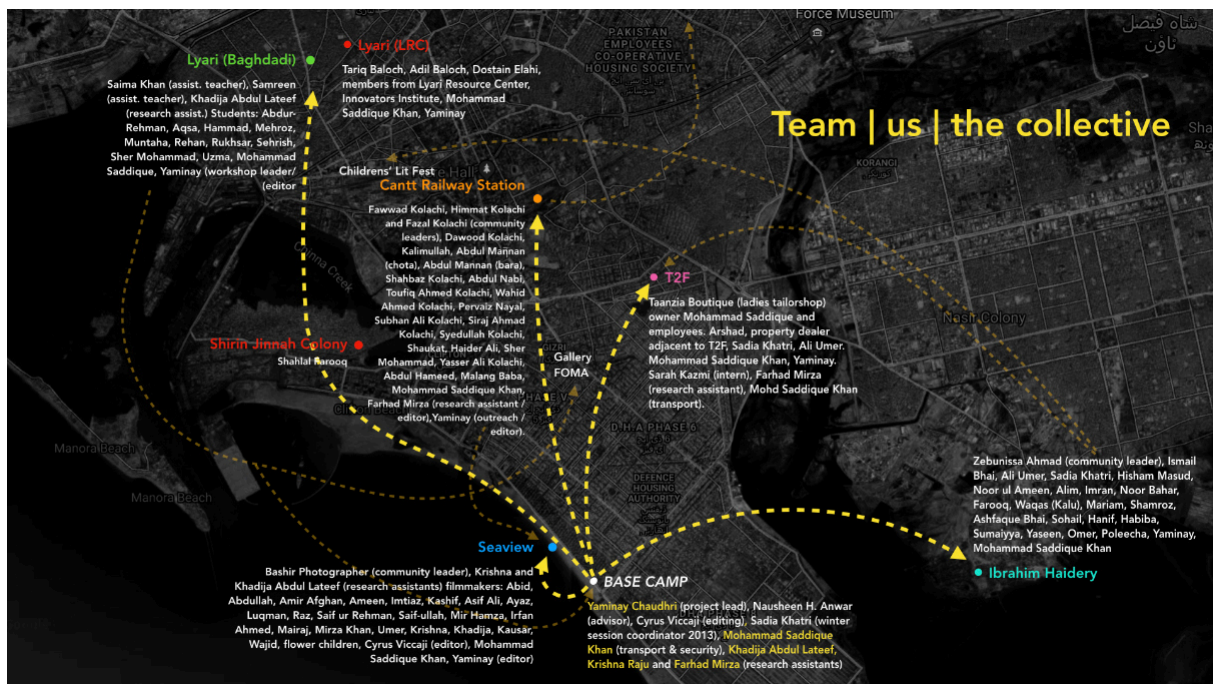
Fawad was cornered by the others for not asking the minister for benefits at the screening. Hence having lost the first opportunity, he sat down with three others and wrote this note. There was no doubt that the pathos of the situation was clear to everyone involved. ("Salaam Alaikum. This is a request. That night we weren't able to say anything to you because of the public. Our request to you is to please provide some facilities to us also—The Kolachi Brothers.")



Video stills from *The Kolachi Brothers*, made by a group of 20 Kulis at Cantt Station, Karachi. Kulis transported the DVDs of these videos to their village (Gothki) in interior Sindh and held several private screenings for friends, family, and distant relations.



March 15, 2014. *Sahil Aur Hum* (the beach and us). This screening on the side of a docked ship at Sea View waterfront attracted over 150 people. The participants included video producers from Cantt Station, video producers from the waterfront, vendors on the beach, animals, all-terrain vehicles, guests and their families.



Map of the screenings by the collective.

Glossary

<i>Gali</i>	Narrow street
<i>Thekedar</i>	Contractor
<i>Qameez</i>	Long shirt
<i>Naala</i>	Covered or exposed channel for sewage and storm water
<i>Hilux</i>	Pickup truck typically retrofitted with security guards
<i>Double sawari</i>	Pillion riding- or when more than 2 people sit on a motorbike
<i>Policewala</i>	Policeman
<i>Zindabad</i>	Long live
<i>khokha</i>	A small portable kiosk selling an assortment of items
<i>afraad</i>	People

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