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SOUTH ASIA

About Dastavezi

Dastavezi the Audio-Visual South Asia is an international peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal, which seeks to reposition the audio-visual as a central mode of knowing and thinking about South Asia. It is the first peer-reviewed journal connecting scholarly research from and about South Asia with audio-visual practices.

The journal is committed to promoting various modes of knowing by offering a platform for knowledge production and research on South Asia in audio, visual, audio-visual, and text forms. It is motivated by our desire to enhance the understanding of contemporary political, economic, and social developments in South Asia. Acknowledging the proliferation of audio-visual material in academic research, the abundance of camera-based research in ethnographic and regional scholarship, and the potential of documentary film to contribute to knowledge production, we consider the division between media practice and scholarly research to be mutually limiting. Instead, Dastavezi seeks to establish a platform for scholars and artists, to evolve new theoretical and practical epistemologies in their engagement with South Asia.

The journal incorporates audio, visual, audio-visual, and textual materials as equal outputs of academic research in order to nourish the various affordances emerging from the nexus between film production and academic writing. With its hybrid and open-access format, Dastavezi not only enables a dialogue between academics and audio-visual practitioners, but also provides an interested public with access to audio-visual productions on South Asia and the corresponding discussions.

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Between Documentary and Dastavezi: A Slow-Paced Approach to Theorizing Transnational Film-Practices

Jürgen Schaflechner and Max Kramer

Abstract

This is the first edition of Dastavezi, a journal for scholars and filmmakers, filmmakers as scholars, and filmmaking scholars working on regional and transregional South Asia. Dastavezi aims to be a platform for the dialogue between textual and audio-visual productions in current research. In the introduction we address some common difficulties and convergences of - as well as differences between filmic and academic practices.

Keywords: transnational film, film studies, film theory, media anthropology, documentary film

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Introduction

This is the first edition of *Dastavezi*, a journal for scholars and filmmakers, filmmakers as scholars, and filmmaking scholars working on regional and transregional South Asia. *Dastavezi* aims to be a platform for the dialogue between textual and audio- visual productions in current research. The trajectory 'from documentation to *dastavezi*' is meant to indicate a shift from hard and fast boundaries between filmic and academic practices and genres towards conceptualizing new connectivities. The Urdu term '*dastāvez*' implies a 'bond,' an 'instrument,' and an 'action' pointing towards a variety of potentialities linking various forms of knowing, perceiving, and creating. In our journal, we wish to expand on the Hindi/Urdu adjective '*dastāvezī*' (usually used as '*dastāvezī film,*' a translation of the English term 'documentary film') to emphasize how audio-visual experiments have the ability to bind together, (mutually) instrumentalize, and through their performance also transgress academic and filmic genres. We understand this usage in accordance with the way documentary film maker and scholar Paromita Vohra (2011) has described alternative genealogies of the experimental documentary film in South Asia.

With this journal, we hope to contribute to a tendency within the social sciences and humanities which increasingly accepts documentary film not only as an object of study, but as a suitable medium for academic research, expression, and output.

Dastavezi wishes to create a forum where the shifting boundaries between academic research and filmmaking can be renegotiated and where creative tensions between transnational and local publics instigate novel discussions about representation and misrepresentation, aesthetic forms, as well as the politics of time and funding in filmic and academic practice. In short, the journal is interested in the particular ways 'academic' and 'filmic-aesthetic' knowledge overlap and how this intersection may instigate new forms of sensing and representing South Asia within (trans-)cultural power asymmetries. A couple of examples from the current volume can demonstrate this.

Aditya Basu's short film *Kaifiyat* (2016) translates community memory into fictional form. The filmmaker defines the Urdu term '*kaifiyat*' as 'denoting a continuing condition and its mood, often a lyrical expression of this mood' (in this volume). The film attempts to evoke tonality (an aesthetic arrangement of expressive space) instead of emphasizing narrative (an unfolding of linked events in time). Basu's work

represents a crucial contribution to *Dastavezi*'s conceptual stakes, as it opens up the boundaries between reality and regional reference to South Asia. *Dastavezi* is not primarily about the established form of the documentary genre, but about formal explorations that establish a new space beyond generic limitations (be they audio-visual or textual). *Dastavezi*, therefore, goes beyond the geo-political territory of South Asia, including all territorialities that can be linked with it (symbolic, imaginary, [trans-]national, [trans-]regional, and [trans-]local). The visuals of Basu's film—using a forest in California to represent Kashmir—are an example for this. The mechanical recording of *some* reality through the camera is not testimonial *per se.* Memory and mediated post-memory (Hirsch 2001) are part of what it means to live within highly mobile communities of Kashmiri Pandits, many of them suffering from exile.

Basu deeply engages us with the mobility of the deictic space of film practice through his personal experience of film production in the United States, as well as Kashmiri Pandit community memory. By connecting film and essay, we learn how the author's imagination of an implied US American audience expresses a Kashmiri Pandit's experience of exile through the trope of a 'Navajo returning to his native land.' This intermediality makes Basu's contribution a fascinating exercise to negotiate between 'non-narrative film' and contextualization made possible only through a close reading of the filmmaker's essay.

Mobility, however, does not only pertain to deictic shifts, experiences of exile, and mobile forms of producing and negotiating films (Mukherjee 2012; Schneider 2015; Kramer 2019). Mobility also implies the shifting positions between producer and protagonist that have become an increasingly salient feature of independent documentary practices due to developments in communication and technology since the digital turn. Cheaper equipment, smaller cameras, and more options to edit and present material have brought about a democratization and decentralization of both, the production as well as the circulation and consumption of documentary film. Such developments pertaining to the emergent prosumer culture (producer + consumer) enable new relationships between research in academia and amateur/professional visual cultures. They also give new momentum to the ways in which documentary filmmakers approach their protagonists and audiences.

One excellent example for the possibilities of rearranging spaces emerging out of filmmakers' new forms of mobility is Yaminay Chaudhri's *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* featured in this issue. Chaudhri's project transgresses traditional methods of

film making and screening by attaching a projector to a rickshaw in Karachi. Her 'mobile cinema' screens cell-phone video clips which were shot by local communities as a response to Chaudhri's question 'What do you do on a day off?' When the films were brought back to the community and projected on walls in public spaces, the cell phone filmmakers turn into audiences of their own products, and the gathered audience turns into protagonists of the screened films. Chaudhri's *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* produces a looping effect presenting and representing the communities' everyday life in Karachi. Such mobile forms of filmmaking question the triangle of filmmaker, protagonist, and audience and thus open our attention to more entangled ways of representing South Asia's day-to-day life. Chaudhri's project poses the question about how social scientists might in their work also shift between their roles as researchers, protagonists, and audience members.

Mahera Omar's contribution to this volume is another crucial example for the close resemblances between academic and filmic practice. *The Rebel Optimist* is an intimate portrayal of Parween Rahman, an urban planner in Karachi who was shot in 2013 by the land mafia. By depicting Rahman's exceptional life, as well as hinting at the hazy circumstances surrounding her death, the film is not simply an epitaph, but rather an active agent in creating her as a philanthropist. Through its meticulous qualitative research in and around Orangi Town, one of the world's largest slums, the documentary portrays the grim reality of the area's turf wars centring around property and access to water. Through her essay, Omar reveals the challenges and obstacles she encountered during her fieldwork and film-work in Karachi. Irregular visits, changing vehicles, and random schedules are but a few of the safety measures the filmmaker needed to take—a situation akin to the circumstances of ethnographic field work in other areas of Pakistan (Schaflechner 2018).

The films and essays in this journal portray a variety of convergences and exchanges between filmic practice and social science research. That is to say, social scientists have understood the potentialities of multi-layered storytelling rendered possible by film, and artists as well as filmmakers have looked towards methods in social science to further their methodological reflection (Köhn 2016). Documentary film and ethnographic practice, in fact, share a particular interest in the aesthetics of the everyday. Both, filmmakers and cultural anthropologists often question binary oppositions and hegemonic taxonomies by focusing on everyday life-worlds with all of their sensual complexity. In her contribution, Fathima Nizaruddin points to the importance of focusing on the various planes of lived experience beyond stereotypical

notions for her film and academic work. Her documentary *My Mother's Daughter* could be seen as both, the medium and the result of research, thus extending the notion of 'research' to the form itself.

Furthermore, both social scientists and filmmakers are interested in localizing their work through context specific concepts by putting them into dialogue with transatlantic theory. In her academic work, Fathima Nizaruddin (2017) has recently exemplified how the concept of *tamasha* (from Hindi/Urdu '*tamāśā;*' show, entertainment) challenges generic boundaries by comic modes and irony to undermine alleged 'antinational' contents in the context of India's nuclear program. She shows how *tamasha* points to a particular way of ridiculing seemingly invincible scientific-realist forms of representation (p. 214). Deeply rooted in South Asian cultural contexts, the concept of *tamasha* challenges traditional forms of 'the sober' documentary voice in its role as a pedagogical format that perpetuates the telos of the modernizing postcolonial state. By linking *tamasha* to Rancière's theory of 'dissensus' (2015), Nizaruddin localizes and uses transatlantic hegemonic theory as a supplement to her practice.

Converging Temporalities

The production of transcultural concepts (through the link between academic and filmic practices) needs to be embedded in more global forms of producing, funding, and circulating academic as well as filmic knowledge. Discussions on the globality of political economies are not only entangled with technological innovations (e.g. digital audio-visual technologies, storing devices, and non-linear editing software), but rather require a conceptual openness to approaches towards different cultural moments.

We already see the world around us from within historical material arrangements that direct our attention and has formed our abilities to see, hear, and read. The emergence of the digital documentary has the potential to enable us to refine our sense-perception in a more open-ended process and beyond the earlier material scarcities (film, video tape, etc.). Film used to be expensive, the potential of refinement resulting from the abundance of audio-visual representation, therefore, needs to be understood against economic backgrounds. Together with the surge of mass-creativity, we are witnessing the emergence of fast-paced, low-context, actuality-based footage (the building blocks of audio-visual evidence now often turned into stand-alone

attractions on platforms such as YouTube). Such tendencies are embedded within an acceleration of our everyday perceptions through digital communication and the rise of actuality-based footage as spectacle. This is, of course, not altogether new since early cinema already had presented actuality footage as an attraction (Gunning 1990). What is new is the environment audio-visual actualities have entered into after the emergence of the digital. Digital editing software, for example, provides us with an opportunity to almost immediately react to communicative events. Such reactions, however, are often produced within the click = money-oriented infrastructures of social networks. It is thus particularly important for scholars and filmmakers to think about the different ways of how to 'become public' (McLagan und McKee 2012, 10) through and beyond social media networks in national as well as transnational publics. Such dynamics of *becoming public* are also crucial to understand the creation of evidence (both audio-visual and as a result of social sciences) beyond the articulations of rhetoric voice and argument. Rhetoric articulations may follow realist patterns that aim to convince through references to 'facts' that are ready-available in online archives as decontextualized 'raw-material' in instantaneous time (Udupa 2015). For example, media-savvy Hindu nationalists in India are archiving 'documentary' data on their homepages. This data is meant to serve as 'evidence as a riposte' (Udupa 2015, 222), a kind of 'realist' knowledge production (Rajagopal 2001) that is delinked from complex epistemological protocols which involve deep, long term investments into the aesthetics of both research and the presentational form.

Accepting this to be foundational for the current conjuncture, often framed through concepts such as 'populism,' 'post-truth,' and 'digitalization,' we deem a critical engagement with questions of 'time' as one important vantage point to rethink theoretical and practical interventions against information capitalism. For example, do filmmakers and anthropologists follow the rhythms of the phenomena under scrutiny, or do they primarily stick to the career-schedules outlined by neo-liberal academia and film practice? Drawing from academic and the filmmaker's experience, our journal proposes an unhurried and intermedial exploration of complex sensual forms of knowledge. Such 'Slow Theory' (SloTh) could be one important counter-strategy to the decontextualizing tendencies of our time and the hegemony of neo-liberal academia.

In his work on transnational representation of democratic theory, Michael Saward (2011) describes 'Slow Theory' as marked by at least three dimensions: As theory done slowly and attentively, as a way to emphasize that theory's conclusions call for slow actions, and, finally, as theory that considers its own understanding of

temporality to be crucial in its production (p.3). For Saward, '[s]low theory stresses close consideration and mindfulness of the particularities of locality and culture' (*ibid.*). While we agree with Saward in his basic assumption that theorization needs to be conscious of temporality and dialogically open to culturally specific contexts in the production of knowledge, we also aim to extend his concept to engage with aesthetic forms (written or audio-visual). Artistic and scholarly practice may slow down perceptions and enable differences to appear if done being mindful of temporality and the conceptual labour of the practitioners involved. This also criticizes the current political predicament which is marked by a shift from epistemological protocols of scholarly/journalistic/political culture to synchronic political space (my 'evidence' vs. your 'evidence' as a question of positionality and spectacle). Time, thus, becomes one of the most crucial components in the struggle against what Wendy Brown called a 'neoliberal rationality' (2015).

With its approach, *Dastavezi* wants to counterbalance the fast-pace of information capitalism and its flattening of evidence. Moving slowly not only helps to contextualize and situate knowledge within transcultural mediascapes and flows (Appadurai 1990) between South Asia and Europe, but also allows us to utilize the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of both, academic as well as filmic practice. Slow paced approaches, thus open an ethical field which is conscious about the drawbacks of the information capitalism machinery but does not shy away from harnessing its practice of branding in the process of *becoming public*.

Commonalities and Creative Differences between Filmic and Academic Practices

The following will introduce three theoretical perspectives which aim to stimulate a discussion about the relationship between social science research and documentary filmmaking.

(1) REPRESENTATION. Social scientists and documentary filmmakers alike attempt to capture the world around us through a variety of aesthetic expressions—be they textural or audio-visual. Even though the medium of these expressions varies, both fields claim a shared reality. Differing from, for example, feature film or fictional prose, for a documentary genre to be recognized the implied audience needs to agree

with the validity of the production's 'voice'[1] which bears witness to actual events (Corner 2011, 72). Academic research and documentary film, therefore, often share a wide range of protocols—such as accurate time and space relations, verifiable statements, or the possibility of a third party to (re-) scrutinize the events documented—which are crucial for the validity of their truth-claims. This is especially important when working with the testimonial status of images and words on the Global South, where questions of representation and misrepresentation have been particularly pertinent. Both, documentary film and social sciences, thus, often come into existence as an argument and a rhetoric voice that references events taken to be real (Nichols 2016).

(2.) AFFECT. Documentary films mediate knowledge through multiple ways of emotional mobilization. Gilles Deleuze, for example, has elaborated on how films affect us differently than texts. In his books *Cinema 1* (2001) and *Cinema 2* (2005), he explores ways to rethink philosophical concepts of time and movement after the emergence of cinema. For Deleuze, cinema is not just another object to write *about*, but an expression of one of his main philosophical concepts: *life as becoming*. Grossly simplified, Deleuze thwarts stable notions of being and instead claims that fluidity, movement, and becoming are prior to stasis. With Deleuze, cinema ceases to be a system of signs, languages, and metaphors which refer to some deeper or hidden meaning (Marks 1998, 140). Film becomes a 'machine' with the ability to move people beyond arguments, rhetoric voices, or the logics of representation.

While affective aspects are often central to filmmakers, social scientists usually do not consider them important to the ways in which they communicate knowledge. Academics, however, often wonder how to make their voice more prominent without losing critical positions and methodological protocols in the process. Social scientist might, in fact, learn about more creative ways of public-address from filmmaker's ways of becoming public. South Asian documentary practices have been particularity marked by experiments with the aesthetics of form and ways of becoming public (Wolf 2007, Vohra 2011, Schneider 2015). These are often highly contextualized ways of creating and interacting with publics (Kishore 2017) within a volatile sensorium (Mazzerella 2013). In other words, in moments when our filmic or academic

1 Film scholar Bill Nichols has engaged with 'voice' through questions of rhetorics as an epistemological necessity of any documentary practice which 'might speak with multiple purposes and to different ends but in ways that strive to compel belief as much as they might please or prove. Rhetoric gives a distinct voice to those who wish their perspective and their interpretation to enter into dialogue with that of others' (Nichols 2016, 106).

articulations open up to mass-communication, effects contrary to what filmmakers or academics intended to say can emerge (Ghosh 2010). Since *the* public is an imagined relationship between strangers, actors addressing this abstracted public will always talk to unknown listeners (Warner 2002). Protests against the US Indologist Wendy Doniger, for example, whose book *The Hindus* was banned in India or flash mobs attempting to disturb screenings of films considered 'anti-national' are only a few examples from South Asia. This line of thinking about the visceral aspects of our filmic and academic practices within increasingly affect-driven information capitalism is of growing importance (Berardi 2009). Scholars and documentary filmmakers alike need to tackle questions about emotional mobilization of an imagined audience of strangers at, what Mazzarella called, the 'open edge of mass publicity' (Mazzarella 2013, 37).

(3.) AESTHETICS. Jacques Rancière's work converges aesthetics and political theory. For him cinema is not representational, but rather a question of dissent through aesthetics: A different sense-formation between medium, spectator, and filmmaker. Cinema's aesthetics—mixing of images, editing, and montage—are, for Rancière, the defining characteristics of modern-day politics. Most significantly, modern political life and cinema are lacking any necessary 'plot' which determines their rules (Panagia 2018, 53). Modern aesthetics and politics, in fact, cannot rely on any underlying form which they would simply *represent*. Rancière, therefore, needs to look for other ways than organising the relationship between 'reality' and 'representation.' In *Film Fables* (2006), he critiques notions that oppose documentary to fictional film on the basis of their respective relationship to 'the real.' Documentary and fictional film, Rancière argues, are not opposed to each other as documentary deals with acts of the everyday and fictional film with scripted sequences. To the contrary, *both* produce systems of 'internally coherent signs' (*ibid*). Since our age is marked by an abundance of information, the act of constructing meaning, is 'the work [*oevre*] of fiction' (*ibid.*). The documentary genre, however, is marked with novelty as it is not an 'effect to be produced,' (as is the case in fictional film), but rather a 'fact to be understood' (*ibid.*). This renders documentary as a special branch of cinema since it triggers 'contestation[s] over the real' or the 'common' (Baumbach 2010, 65). Academic output similarly triggers contestations as it claims the right to facts being understood. This entanglement of documentary and academic output as ways to challenge our notions of 'common sense' is mutually beneficial and can fruitfully be extended by elaborating on their affective potentials.

We hope to establish *Dastavezi* as an open archive of audio-visual knowledge, which supports filmmakers and scholars working on South Asia and encourages them to use documentary film as a legitimate source of academic production. By providing films with Digital Object Identifier (DOI) numbers, *Dastavezi* aims to make audio-visual productions visible for academic and non-academic audiences within and beyond the structures of the market domain. This will help to widen the horizons of the existing field of documentary film-studies, visual-anthropology, and film practices on and from South Asia.

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My Mothers's Daughter

Fathima Nizaruddin

Abstract

Some times, love can be so powerful that you have to run away from it. While making a film about her matrilineal Muslim family in Kerala, India, the director arrives at this realisation.

The film begins as an exploration about the lives of great grandmothers who were strong matriarchs. But soon enough, cracks from the present creeps into the stories of the past. The volatile relationship between the filmmaker and her mother leads to many arguments which raise questions about the choices made by different generations of women in the community.

Without mom, the daughter would have never made it this far. But does it mean that she will live by mom's rules?

Keywords: Matrilineal Muslim family, autobiographical documentary, Kerala, Muslim women

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'My' Camera and the Possibilities for 'Our' Stories

Mother…mother…mother…mother…

In the therapist's chair, the blame for every fold in life is outsourced to her. She from whom I inherited wings.

Every day I walk past a thousand images of beautiful cages. They are everywhere; on the road to work, the ads that flash on my laptop, the films I love, the stories that make me cry.

My tired dusty wings and the shining comfort of cages.

But…the matriarch who ran the estates, the woman who ran away from home, the one who used to shut the door at her husband…

It must be them. As soon as I touch the edges of a cage, I flinch back. The metal always hits me with electric shock.

As Alisa Lebow (2012) has pointed out, first person filmmaking could be termed as a 'cinema of we' instead of a 'cinema of me.' In the case of *My Mother's Daughter* (Nizaruddin 2011) 'my' story was invariably entangled with the stories of earlier generations of women from my mother's side of the family. Growing up in Kerala, India, during the 1980s and 1990s, in what can be termed as a conservative Muslim family, required negotiations that were often frustrating for my younger self. Interestingly, the trickiest dialogues I had were with the world outside of my family. To this world, a headscarf wearing Muslim girl was very often a 'victim.'[1] Assumptions about the lack of agency of a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf or veil are hardly specific to Kerala (Hoodfar 2001). At the same time, the figure of a traditional Muslim woman from Kerala, an *ummaachi*,[2] who was a constant presence during many of my tricky interactions with the world outside of the family, was definitely rooted in the Malayali cultural landscape. As the only teenage girl in my neighbourhood and school who wore a headscarf, I learnt to hate this figure, whose rightful place was supposedly in an earlier era or generation.

1 my childhood years in my hometown Thiruvananathapuram, in South Kerala, which does not have a high concentration of Muslim population. I left Kerala for higher studies in 2002. Today, many young Muslim women from South Kerala wear a head covering, which was not the case during my teenage years. I stopped wearing the headscarf regularly in 2013.

2 'Ummaachi' is a colloquial term, which is used in South Kerala to make fun of Muslim women who wear a headscarf or head covering. It refers to a traditional Muslim woman from Kerala and has strong connotations of being backward and behind the times.

Despite my resentment, the tag of the helpless *ummaachi* continued to follow me. The matrilineal tradition of my mother's side of the family made things even more complicated. While growing up, I was surrounded by stories about great grandmothers who were formidable figures. According to these stories, they were key figures in managing the family affairs and were the ones to make important financial decisions. None of them fitted the victimizing description of the *ummaachi* that I frequently encountered. Of course, as one of the very few Muslim communities in South Kerala that continue to relate to its matrilineal past, the Muslims from my mother's locality (Kurakkanni at Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district) are not a representative sample of the Muslims in Kerala. In a situation where 'the Muslim' is often constructed as a flat essence (Devji 1992), however, it is important to map diverse forms of life.

The complexity of lived experiences in my family was beyond the scope of the stereotypical accounts about Muslims that proliferated around me. The film *My Mother's Daughter* began as an effort to portray this complexity. At the same time, this portrayal was not intended to create a glorified picture of a Muslim matrilineal universe where women did not face any discrimination. How far the matrilineal tradition in Kerala can be viewed as a challenge to patriarchy is debatable (Eapen and Kodoth 2003). Any which way, after my grandmother's generation, the matrilineal tradition was slowly on its way out. Rather than coming up with a 'positive' narrative about Muslim women, I was more interested in using the production and pre-production processes of *My Mother's Daughter* to confront, and if possible, make sense of the contradictory positions that I used to find myself in due to my gender, religion, and family background. Being a woman, being a woman in Kerala, being a woman from a conservative Muslim family—none of this was easy. Unsafe streets, travelling on public transport with the ammunition of safety pins to deal with potential gropers, tales about grandmothers who were in control of their lives, hushed whispers about the dangers of any sexual transgression, the insistence that one should study hard and be very ambitious, expectations about the coy acceptance of an arranged marriage, snide remarks from acquaintances about the sad plight of Muslim women, having a headscarf-wearing mother who used to enjoy defeating neighbourhood *Maulanas* in bitter theological arguments about women's rights in Islam—all these demanded a nuanced articulation.

I hoped that the filmmaking process would end with a narrative closure that will allow me to make peace with the chaos and contradictions around me. This must be the ill-

placed belief that prompts many a filmmaker to turn the camera on themselves or their family. At least in my case, I can say with confidence that such a happy ending did not ensue. I started filming in 2009 and the film was completed in 2011. At the end of the process, my family still wanted me to have an arranged marriage and I found that my arguments with them were becoming all the more exhausting. Animating the memories of great-grandmothers who all seemed to have a mind of their own did not buy me any respite from the expectations about a dutiful 'Muslim' daughter. Still, there were moments during the filmmaking process when the camera served as a shield, which allowed me to confront and question instead of the usual routine of leaving the room in anger or bursting into tears during an argument. This could be seen as a therapeutic use of video (Dowmunt 2010).

While the camera did allow me to probe deeper into the situation at hand, I was also anxious about charges of self-indulgence that often get levelled against autobiographical projects. As Tony Dowmunt[3] points out, it is 'difficult to separate self-indulgence from revelation' in autobiographical work and the need to separate both is questionable (Dowmunt 2010, 154). At the same time, my experience of constantly having to explain to almost every other person whom I met that I was not the headscarf-wearing-Muslim-girl-stereotype[4] of their imagination also made me less inhibited about charges of self-indulgence. 'My' story has been told again and again. Quarrelling with the victimhood in those stories was often almost like quarrelling with a shadow. In such a circumstance, opening up the complexity of my experience through filmmaking felt like a necessary act.

The *ummaachi* tag suggests that the choices available to Muslim women are pre-determined because of their upbringing and religion. This notion about the limitations that Muslim women face is prevalent in popular narratives and films. Let us take the case of an online article about two Muslim women characters in Malayalam films (Izzie 2013). The two films in question, *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* (Chandran 2003) and *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* (Jose 2012), depict very diverse social situations.

3 Tony Dowmunt was my teacher during my MA in Screen Documentary from Goldsmiths, University of London (2009–10). His mentoring certainly helped me during the course of the making of *My Mother's Daughter*. My teachers at AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, from where I first learnt filmmaking were also instrumental in helping me to become more comfortable with the autobiographical mode of filmmaking. Just like it takes a village to raise a child, the anxieties of doing self-revelatory work in an atmosphere where "'self'-denying norms" (Dowmunt, 2010, p. 155) prevail, also requires reassurances from various quarters.

4 These stereotypes were not always the same.

Shahina from *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* is an underage girl from a poor family who is forced into a marriage with a much older man who already has a wife and family. Though Shahina's desire is to continue her education, her circumstances thwart this wish. Sainu from *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* is an educated girl pursuing a medical degree. However, she is unable to choose her Christian lover because of family compulsions. Despite the differences in their age and social circumstances, their 'Muslimness' becomes a cause for the tragedies in their life.[5] Izzie (2013) writes that such films will have a 'lasting impact on the parts of Muslim societies who see their daughters not as human beings with a right to their own life but rather a burden or a stalwart of their family honor' (Izzie 2013).

Based on my own experiences, I could not relate to such accounts that reduce the lives of diverse sets of Muslim women into an essence of victimhood. Because of the matrilineal tradition in my mother's family, a girl child was seen as the heir of the family and not as a burden. As far as the question of 'family honour' and the control of female sexuality are concerned, they were major preoccupations for all communities around me. This does not mean that underage marriage or polygamy is not an issue for the Muslim community in Kerala. Narratives that define Muslim women in terms of their so-called 'victimhood,' however, turn a blind eye to the agency of individual women and their diverse life worlds.

So, for me, *My Mother's Daughter* was part of an effort to articulate the heterogeneity of experiences, which are subsumed within the category of Muslim women. Here I was working with a framework which acknowledges that the subject is constituted through the 'process of naming and imag(in)ing' (Lebow 2008, xviii). The dominant imagination around me placed religious identity as the defining factor which limited the choices available to Muslim women. In *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam*, Shahina's Hindu friend leaves for higher studies and possibly a future with more freedom. All Shahina can do is yearn for such a future which is forever out of her grasp. The prevalent religious symbolism in the movie underscores that the diverse life trajectories of both the girls result from Shahina's 'Muslimness.'

The self that *My Mother's Daughter* constitutes narrates a very different story of being a Muslim woman. This is because, unlike Shahina, religious difference did not

5 While *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* underscores the relationship of Shahina's victimhood with her 'Muslimness', the plight of Sainu in *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* could also have been that of a non- Muslim Malayali girl.

determine the choices available to me and my non-Muslim women friends. All of us had to face the challenges posed by the patriarchal set up in which we lived. After finishing graduation, many of us wanted to move out of Kerala to pursue higher studies. Some of us were able to move out. Others could not because their parents insisted that girls should not go far off for higher studies. I was able to leave my hometown to study filmmaking in Delhi. Many of my non-Muslim friends could not make such a journey. Unlike what popular culture might portray, however, the lives of Muslim and non-Muslim women may not always follow predictable trajectories on the basis of their religion.

In fact, much of the social mores that tried to limit my own choices came from the local codes for young women in Kerala. Almost all the communities in the state insist on a heterosexual union, preferably through an arranged marriage. The 'social conservatism' (Osella and Osella 2007, 2) of my family's 'Malayali values' was often a cause for confrontation between us. In this case, it is difficult to distinguish between the expectations from a dutiful Malayali daughter and those from a dutiful Muslim daughter. Stereotypical discourses around women from the minority Muslim community in Kerala often eclipse such fluid identities. In other words, there are more ways in which 'Muslim women's issues' could overlap with the 'Malayali women's issues' than it is generally acknowledged.

So, in *My Mother's Daughter*, my effort was to engender a relational construction of self (Lebow 2008) where my story was entangled with the stories of various other women. Some of them are women from earlier generations of my family. However, they are not the only ones who are part of my relational construction of self. The film also anticipates audience members, especially from Kerala, who can see traces of their own lives within the unravelling of the conflict in my family. I hoped that this could lead to an understanding about the shared nature of our situations, which might contain a possibility to destabilize common sense notions put forward by stereotypes.[6] The reception of the film at the International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala in my hometown Thiruvananthapuram, in 2012 reassured me that this anticipation was not out of place. After the screening, several people came forward and talked about how the film touched a chord that resonated with their own experiences. Here, our interactions were based on the common features in our

6 In Kerala, confrontations between family members and young women over the question of marriage occur across religious divides.

situation and not the 'otherness' of the figure of *ummaachi*.

The way in which *My Mother's Daughter* engages with my family's matrilineal past was also an attempt to invite audience members to move beyond historicist accounts that deny contemporaneity to minority experiences (Chakrabarty 2008). A linear notion of time that frames experiences of earlier generations of Muslim women as essentially belonging to a 'dark past' negates the complexities of their lived circumstances. The majoritarian narratives about Muslim women around me suggested that in order to redeem myself, I need to expunge the traces of the 'dark past' of my ancestors. However, the stories about great grandmothers from my mother's family that were orally passed down through generations suggested differently. From these stories, it transpired that despite the limitations of the matrilineal system, inheriting family wealth and being the carriers of the family line enabled the women from earlier generations to have at least a certain amount of decision-making power.

Recounting these stories in *My Mother's Daughter* opened up two different possibilities. On the one hand, it enabled a filmic expression that problematizes the linear and homogenous nature of common-sense notions about Muslim women's past in Kerala. Simultaneously, the process of filming these oral accounts with my family allowed me an opportunity to find a new set of allies in my confrontations over the choices that I was making in my life. My female ancestors became such allies in the narrative universe of *My Mother's Daughter*. Aligning what my family saw as my 'stubbornness' with similar traits of other women of the family including my own mother was an act that claimed a legacy where women asserted their right to make individual choices. These choices may not always have been in tune with the wishes of the family. For example, in the film, my uncle recounts how he and others tried to dissuade my mother from covering her head at a time when most educated Muslim women in Kerala did not wear a headscarf. However, my mother stuck to her decision and the family did not pressurize her further. In a much earlier generation, another woman used to shut the door at her husband; the family members could not persuade her to change her behaviour towards the man. *My Mother's Daughter* places my refusal to settle for an arranged marriage on a similar plane. While the film depicts some of my bitter quarrels with my family, it also stresses that I probably learnt the first lessons of defiance from the same family. The role of the stories about strong female ancestors in forming my sense of self find articulation in the film.

However, *My Mother's Daughter* has also been criticized for using matriliny as a 'trope to defend primitivism and lack of education of women' (Nizar n.d.). Does the film imagine an idyllic past where women from earlier generations of my family had a certain degree of decision-making power? Contrary to such an imagination, were they really living in domestic drudgery (Nizar n.d.)? The thing with the past is that one will never know for sure. The oral accounts[7] about my ancestors contain stories about some very strong women. But, such narratives might repress many harsh realities.

In *My Mother's Daughter*, I have certainly chosen to trace a positive picture of the lives of my female ancestors. Going back to the past with a camera is always a 'process of remapping' (Lebow 2008, 38) and the self which emerges from this process is 'a product of the work' (Lebow 2008, 4). In my case, the filming process enabled me to script a self, which refuses the label *ummaachi*. There are certainly other ways in which the multiple experiences that get subsumed under the category of 'Muslim women' can be narrated. But such narrations will require many more films.

7 Most of these accounts are very detailed and generally the women of the family narrate them at any given opportunity. The men in the family used to joke about the women's confidence in the details of these stories, which were often about an earlier century.

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist

Mahera Omar

Abstract

“No one is safe in this city. Those who think otherwise are living in a fool's paradise", says Perween's best friend and colleague Anwar Rashid as he navigates the chaotic roads of Karachi. An architect and urban planner, Perween Rahman dedicated her life for the poor of Pakistan. She was shot dead by armed assailants on her way home in March 2013. When she joined the Karachi based Orangi Pilot Project, founded by Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan, Orangi's lanes were full of filth and choking gutters. Back in the early 80s, the people of Orangi, most of them migrants from India and Bangladesh, were taking their own steps to improve sanitation. Dr. Khan assigned Perween the task of developing a low cost sanitation model for Orangi. Perween's pioneering work in Orangi led her on a collision course with the various mafias in the city. She surveyed the water supply to Karachi and pinpointed locations from where water is being stolen from the bulk supply lines. She mapped and documented Karachi's informal settlements to provide the poor security against land grabbers. Perween had an alternate vision for the development of Karachi. "Development doesn't come from concrete. Development is not five star hotels and mega road projects. What we need is human development.”

Keywords: Orangi Pilot Project, Urban Planning, Karachi

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Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist

I ran into Perween Rahman at the Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) in 2013. She met me so warmly that afternoon that it is forever etched in my memory. We spoke briefly about the feature-length documentary I wanted to make with her about Karachi's sewage system. She was glowing, and since several people around her were vying for her attention, I told her I would visit her office in Orangi to discuss the documentary in detail.

It was the last time I saw her. On the evening of March 13, 2013, she was shot dead on her way home from work.

Perween was a much-loved architect and urban planner in Karachi. She was the director of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), a non-governmental organization based in Orangi Town, a low-income neighborhood of 2.4 million people in the north-western part of the city.

The OPP had led community-based improvement of sanitation in the area since the 1980s. These efforts were based on extensive mapping of the town's drainage channels under the leadership of Perween. The mapping team went on to document the entire sewage system of Karachi in the 1990s. They discovered that untreated sewage was flowing into the natural storm water drains all the way into the Arabian Sea. This led to an explosive situation with the city's municipal authorities whose claims of functioning sewage treatment plants were now laid to waste. The OPP sewage disposal plan for Karachi was later accepted by the authorities.

The inner workings of Karachi's haphazard sewage disposal and its effect on the urban environment have always held a strange fascination for me. This is what I wanted to make a documentary about. I wanted to film it like an adventure though, as a discovery of the city. And I wanted to film it with Perween. I had pitched the idea to her and she supported it. She said she would help with the fundraising efforts. Little did I know I would end up making a documentary about her life and work instead.

After Perween's tragic passing, I attended a memorial talk held at the Arts Council, Karachi in her honor. Sitting in the auditorium hearing her friends, family, and colleagues talk, I was moved by the stories of their interaction with her. She had clearly touched the hearts of so many, and that's something I wanted to share with the world. After the talk, I met Perween's sister, Aquila Ismail, and told her I wanted to make a documentary about Perween.

Over the next two-and-a-half years that it took to put the film together, I found myself wishing more and more that Perween was still around. I had only met her a few times and did not know her personally. But as I spoke to her family and friends, and collected archival footage, I felt a connection with her. She had a way of warming up to people, leaving a lasting impression even if she met them briefly. For me, those who had a chance to know and work with her are truly blessed.

Perween was very generous with her time. Back in 2009, I interviewed her for my documentary *City by the Sea: The Future of Karachi's Coastline*. Arif Hasan, architect, urban planner, and Perween's mentor, suggested I speak to her about coastal pollution and land reclamation.

I arrived at her office expecting just a few minutes from her very busy schedule but we ended up talking for an hour as she patiently explained the importance of wetlands, the hazardous effects of land reclamation around Mai Kolachi, the fish there being deprived of their natural passage to the sea and the intricacies of water supply to the city.

She spoke of the sea breeze, the colors of the Clifton beach and one of her favorite Karachi haunts where she often spent weekends with her family. She chuckled when she said how the sea breeze is therapy and how she often took friends who were feeling low to the beach to lift their spirits. And as I was about to turn off the camera, she pointed to some cute little green bee-eaters just outside her office window. "They are visitors from interior Sindh," she said with a smile.

Soon after Perween's death, most of the OPP staff shifted to an office in the heart of the city. With justice for Perween being sought in the courts, her friends and family are not safe either. "No one is safe in this city. Those who think otherwise are living in a fool's paradise," said Perween's best friend and colleague Anwar Rashid as I filmed him navigating the chaotic roads of Karachi.

A mobile van escorted his vehicle with four policemen pointing their guns at the traffic, nudging motorcyclists and donkey carts out of the way. With such security concerns facing the OPP staff, I wondered how to film the very communities that Perween loved so much.

As I began filming in Orangi, a few things were made clear by those close to Perween. I wasn't supposed to go to Orangi regularly. I had to keep a random schedule, alternate cars, not linger in any particular area for long and to always be

accompanied by the OPP staff. Most importantly, I was told not to go anywhere near a water hydrant and that they would give me the pictures instead.

When Perween joined the OPP in the ’80s, the first thing she did was to map the neighborhood lanes. “She was not familiar with much of the city,” Anwar Rashid shares on camera. “Areas such as New Karachi, Surjani Town, Numaish, Mazdooron Ki Basti (Workers’ Colony), and Manzoor Colony were all yet to be discovered by her. She kept a pen and notebook handy at all times to keep track of where she was going and to get back as well.” He chuckles as he recalls how she was known by the locals as “chhatri wali baji [the lady with the umbrella].” It was during all the months of filming that I realized what tough conditions Perween worked in, and I marveled at her dedication.

One morning, when the streets of Orangi were bathed in Karachi’s golden winter sun, my cameraman, Sohail and I wanted to film a scene from a rooftop. So, I asked the driver to stop at a corner where there was a school to shoot from the top. As we stepped onto the main road, we spotted a brickmaking yard. We lingered there for some time filming the workers busy churning out the bricks that people use to make their homes and little shops. The road was still deserted early morning, and it was pretty quiet and peaceful all around.

On the school rooftop, the person accompanying Sohail and I was curious to know what it was exactly we were there to film. “Are you here to film the scene of the murder?” he asked us. Apparently, just the night before, a man was shot dead in the middle of the road near the exact spot where our car was parked. We only later noticed the bloodstains on the tarmac on the way back to the car. The blood was still wet, like a stain from a *paan* (beetlenut leaf and areca nut preparation, consumed in South Asia as a stimulant and mouth freshener) spat out by someone from a moving bus. We slowly learnt to move only in those areas that the Orangi Pilot Project staff were familiar with or had worked in, as one could not just enter into communities without being aware of the situation on the ground—especially not armed with a camera.

One day, my eye caught a colorful lane bustling with activity. Pushcart vendors calling out their produce; bright orange carrots, blood red beetroots, and huge green squashes; the fish vendors holding up fresh fish for all to see; it was the Sunday farmers’ market and people were out and about stocking up for the week. We had been filming commercial activity on one of the main roads with Amir, a young staff member at Siraj’s Technical Training Resource Center (TTRC), when I told him I wanted to go into

that side lane with the market. “It is not safe to go into that lane”, he replied immediately. I sighed, another interesting scene off-limits for capturing on camera. “We have not worked with the communities there, so best to avoid it for now,” he explained. So, we moved on.

Another time a police mobile pulled up next to our car. An armed policeman stuck his arm out and hastily motioned for us to stop. It was a dusty and deserted stretch of road heading out of Orangi towards Hub Dam reservoir on the border of Sindh and Baluchistan. “Where are you going?” the policeman asked our driver, an elderly white-haired gentleman, as he rolled down his window. “Hub Dam, sir”, the driver replied nervously. “We have been following you for several miles. Get out of the car,” the policemen ordered. I could tell from the hot and bothered expression on the policeman’s face that we were in for trouble. There were four policemen in the van. None of them stepped out of their vehicle. Siraj, a community architect and Perween’s protégé with us that day, tried to explain to them that we were on our way to film the Hub Dam reservoir, one of the sources of Karachi’s water supply that Perween so extensively documented.

The Hub River is an important source of drinking water for Orangi, SITE, and Baldia town, three large areas of Karachi. Perween Rahman, in her 2008 landmark water study of Karachi had identified at least six unofficial hydrants on the Manghopir road to Hub reservoir. “What does your NGO do?” the policeman started interrogating Siraj. “We map the lanes of Orangi and work with low income settlements to help them improve the basic infrastructure of their neighbourhoods.” said Siraj. “Oh, yes?” retorted the policeman. “Why don’t you come with us to our police station and map the station?”

He did not seem familiar with Orangi Pilot Project and no matter how much Siraj tried to calm him down, he just kept hitting a wall. The policeman was quite irked by now and insisted on taking us to the police station. On hearing this conversation getting nowhere, I finally got out the car and walked up to the police mobile. On seeing me, the policeman began telling Siraj how foolish we were for moving freely in an area infested with terrorists. “This is a hotspot for terrorists, this Hub Dam road”, he enlightened us. “Why don’t you provide us with protection?” I asked him. By now he probably had had enough of us, especially with the ‘ladies’ who had just emerged. He let us go with these instructions: “Be careful, and stick to the main roads.”

41 percent of water supplied to Karachi is siphoned off from the bulk distribution mains

and sold to the people at high rates. “Mega management is needed. Siphoning has to be stopped on war footing.” wrote Perween. “This would enable provision of water to all at an affordable and humane cost.” Perhaps it was these unofficial hydrants the policeman didn’t want us to go nosing around for. Everywhere we went, we heard the same words repeated. We wondered how Perween worked for decades in such a fearful environment, and if she herself ever felt scared or threatened.

One of our last shoots took us to a small hill overlooking the outskirts of Orangi. The sun was setting over the crowded rooftops, the sounds of children playing could be heard from a distance before their mothers called them back in. On the other side, a smouldering trash heap in the middle of vast open land, dotted with empty plots surrounded by broken boundary walls. It looked like a pretty dismal scene, so we decided to make a time-lapse shoot as a last bit of filming for the day. We left the driver with the car, who was hesitant to come to this area to begin with. Sohail, Amir, and I made our way up the hill to get a good vantage point from where to set up our camera. It was windy, and the grey clouds were moving fast across the horizon; perfect for a time-lapse. We were quite pleased, and settled in on the hill for the next half an hour looking forward to a hearty dinner in the city.

I was checking something on my phone, pretty much oblivious to my surroundings, enjoying the cool evening breeze, when all of a sudden I heard the voice of a young man. He stood just inches away from me, and was reporting our location and activity to someone on the other end of his phone. Three other young men had surrounded us, apparently waiting for instructions. We were like sitting ducks. I have never been more scared in my life than on that hill that moment. I got up and motioned towards Sohail and Amir to pack up. The men moved away some distance, still eyes on us. We walked down the hill, hearts in our mouths, and stuffed our equipment into the boot of the car. The driver, who had been observing us from a distance, said “I told you this was not a good idea.”

As we rounded the corner around the hill, the men appeared magically in front of us again, as if from some secret shortcut, still following our movement, still on the phone reporting our location to someone on the other end. I rolled up my window even higher, as if to maintain our little safe bubble. We made it out of that area, resolving never to venture out on our own again.

Neither Anwar Rashid nor Arif Hasan thought Perween would last long in Orangi. After all, she had a privileged upbringing and was not exposed to the harsh realities

of low-income settlements. Initially, she had a tough time being accepted by the local community who were reluctant to work with her. “Who is she and how can she possibly help us?” they said. But in time, as I found out from her colleagues, her gentle nature and sincere efforts to forge relationships with the residents eventually won their hearts over.

With each interaction with the locals, and hearing stories from the women about how Perween would sit with them on the floor, they told me how they expected a typical madam to walk in, but she blended in, listened to them and valued their opinions. She championed the underdog. And it became clear that she was able to do the work she did because of who she was and how she interacted with the community. She could not bear injustices towards the poor. Perhaps her dedication towards them stemmed from her childhood in Dhaka, Bangladesh when her family was suddenly evicted and faced great hardship during the war.

One day, after filming the mapping team at the OPP, it was time for me to be dropped home in one of the office cars. But none were available, except one car wrapped under dusty covers in a shady corner of the compound. The covers pulled off, I was told that it was the vehicle I would be dropped home in. Thinking nothing of it, I got into the car and soon the driver and I were well on our way. I wondered whose car it was, since it didn’t seem to be in regular use.

I was filming the passing traffic on the Orangi lanes when the driver looked at me and said, “This is where she used to sit.” He was also the one who took her to the hospital that fateful evening. I didn’t say a word, not wanting to bring up painful memories. It was a sobering experience. I was in that car just briefly, but it was Perween’s car, the one in which she went to work every day.

People often wondered how she managed to go to Orangi continuously, to which she’d say, “It’s easy. There’s this one road ...” When told by her sister Aquila to be careful especially in times when polio workers were being targeted, Perween brushed aside all concerns, saying, “Nobody knows me.” “But everybody knew her. She was targeted,” says Aquila.

There was not a dry eye in the house at the film’s first public screening for 400 community members at the Orangi Pilot Project. These were people who loved Perween and whose lives she touched. But the film often invokes a similar reaction in complete strangers as well. Perween had a way of connecting with people and I’m glad this comes across on screen. Perween Rahman left behind a lasting legacy and her tragic death is a great loss for Karachi.

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema

Yaminay Chaudhri

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 begun 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* rickshaw[3] was retrofitted[4] 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 taqrir 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

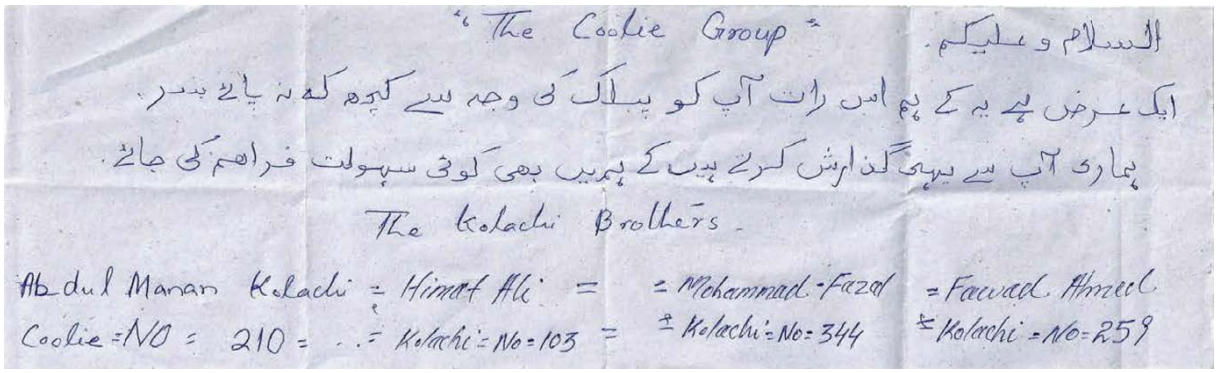
Us, half-fed, hungry bellies
unwinding at the train station, watching travelers go by.
Us poor men, the world knows our secret.

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)


"The Cookie Group"

السلام و علیکم.

ایک عرض ہے یہ کے ہم اس رات آپ کو پبلک کی وجہ سے کچھ کہہ نہ پائے بس.

ہماری آپ سے یہی گذارش کرتے ہیں کے ہمیں بھی کوئی سہولت فراہم کی جائے.

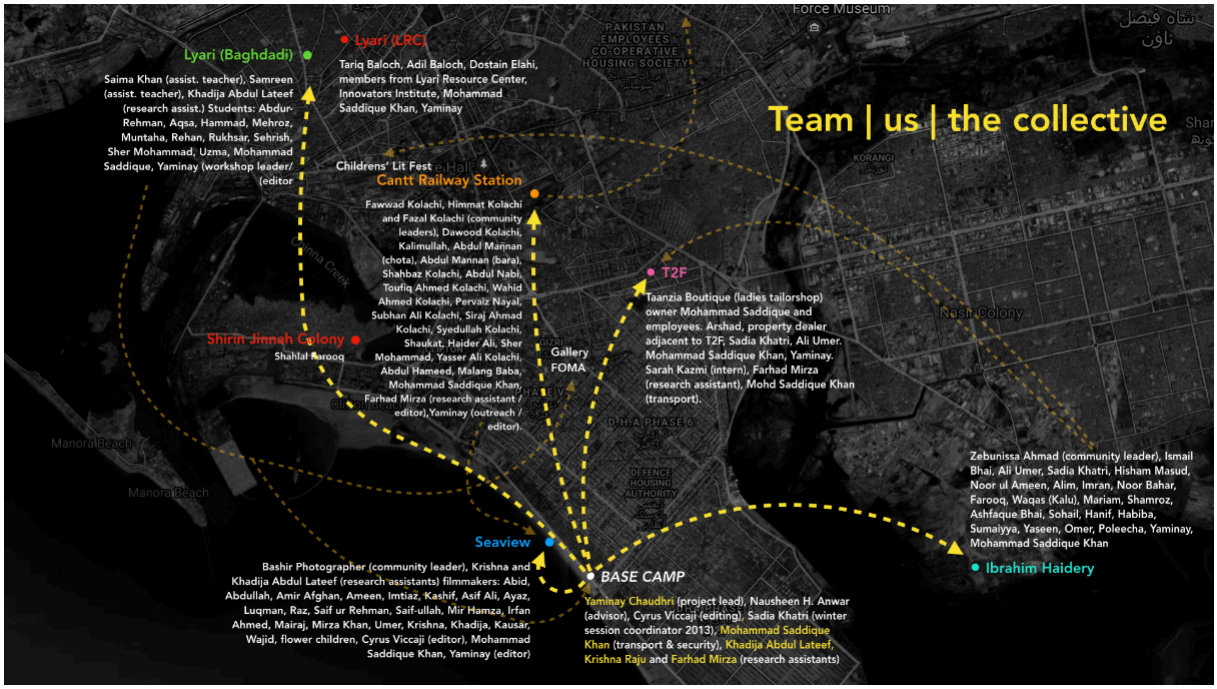
The Kolachi Brothers.

Abdul Manan Kolachi = Himat Ali = = Mohammad Fazal = Fawad Ahmed
Cookie=NO = 210 = . = Kolachi=No=103 = = Kolachi=No=344 = Kolachi=No=259

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

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

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Kaifiyat

Aditya Basu

Abstract

This film looks to explore experiences of reminiscence, haunting, and confusion, of the Kashmiri Pandit community, vis-a-vis Kashmir, the place considered by the migrant community, a lost home. I look to examine questions of the community's recent loss of agency, assimilation, and angst, from the vantage point of my own transferred inheritance of this experience. The resultant short film, written and made on a shoe-string student-film budget, is I hope ultimately an intriguing rabbit-hole leading into recent Kashmiri Pandit history.

Keywords: Aditya Basu, Kashmiri Pandit, Kashmiri Hindu, Migration, Exile, India, Kashmir

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Kaifiyat

There was a framed, frayed Kashmir tourism poster of glowing saffron fields leading up to serene, snow-clad mountains, up on the wall of my maternal grandparents' study in their Delhi apartment. They lived a brisk five-minute walk away from us, and I spent many school exam seasons preparing at their house. They lived quiet, regimented lives and ate at precisely the same time every day, come what may. It was the perfect environment for a chronic daydreamer coerced into passing exams.

My Kashmiri Pandit grandparents moved out of Srinagar when my mother was only a few years old. They left her and her elder brother (my uncle) behind at a maternal aunt's ancestral home and tried to make a life for themselves in the UK in the late 1950s. The known narrative even then was that Kashmir was a beautiful place to live, the crown atop India's head, where opportunities were limited, even for Kashmiri Pandits accustomed to plumb government jobs. A few years later, my mother and uncle were taken to Surrey where they lived till the mid 70s. My grandparents live in Surrey even today, and visit Delhi to stay with us to escape the cold English winter—but that framed poster remains on a wall wherever they are. A fading window offering a connection to something that no longer exits.

The insulated realities of my childhood in Delhi, spent closely around Kashmiri grandparents who called Surrey home, who spoke Kashmiri and met only with Kashmiri Pandit families, who ate only Kashmiri food at home, and looked forward to Kashmiri flavours even when eating out, comparing everything to those Kashmiri dishes—delicacies I've come to associate with comfort food—all have an underlying truth to them founded upon the fallouts of their assimilation.

My mother and grandparents were perhaps lucky not to have lived in Srinagar during the last three decades as tensions in the region have grown especially rife, leading to a mass emigration of Kashmiri Pandits following a spate of aggressive militant and pro-freedom activities, often targeting those who cornered much of the power after Independence. My grandparents' move was a voluntary departure, however over time it has become one without a choice of return. This short film, *Kaifiyat*, encapsulates impressions of this loss of agency.

The Script

I had been writing about this transferred migratory experience while in India, and in a class at UCLA's program for screenwriting professionals in 2015. My pieces were

based on memories from childhood, my grandparent's stories, Kashmiri Pandit oral histories, rose-tinted imaginings more fiction than truth, and my experimentations with ways to convey uprooted-ness, loneliness, loss. Within this space came a study of short films curated by our UCLA instructor Vanessa Knutsen, director of 2012 student BAFTA winner *The Promised Land*, a film about a foreign immigrant single mother.

Vanessa's aim was for the class to write a five-page script, translating into a seven-minute film, featuring one location and a maximum three characters, and face the challenges of directing and producing what we wrote.

It was in her class that I discussed and developed the idea for *Kaifiyat,* an Urdu term denoting a continuing condition and its mood, often a lyrical expression of this mood. Two short films in particular were instrumental in shaping the language I found lent to the themes of loneliness and disaffection in *Kaifiyat*. These were Jane Campion's *Peel*, and David Michod's *Crossbow*. Both films worked on non-narrative imagery to tell their stories, and I was keen to invoke these voices and images in *Kaifiyat*.

Two major factors were to define the path of *Kaifiyat's* concept, borne both of production instincts I had gleaned working on feature films in Bombay, and the atmosphere I hoped to evoke. The factors were firstly the intended audience, and secondly, the practicalities of production in the US. Shooting in Kashmir was unfeasible. It was broadly possible, but cost and time were unavoidable concerns. It would have required time off from UCLA classwork mid-term, ample time to cast and prep in volatile Srinagar where I had shot a documentary before and barely managed. Additionally, I would have required 5000 USD, instead of the intended budget of 900 USD. Many used Kickstarter and crowdsourcing methods, but eventually only two students got anything funded through this. These resources were not available to me, but I was intent on writing a sparse and very visual telling of an evocative story.

I sparred with the idea that the context of Kashmir, even less Kashmiri Pandits, was too alien for Americans. Cashmere wool scarves was the closest anyone in my class of 25 got to guessing the context or true subject of *Kaifiyat*, and this was immediately inhibiting. As a result, I wrote a version of the draft outline adapted to a Navajo returning to his Native land, all the while invoking Pandit themes, but ultimately my conviction was still with Kashmir. That was the story I knew and was within me. Vanessa was encouraging of this too, and I grew to believe that with a compelling script, the context would be self-explanatory. Yes, even if I went non-narrative, choosing to express a *kaifiyat* with concept visuals alone.

The class had two rounds of feedback on scripts, where instructors and peers gave notes to each other for grades. Common feedback we received was to start hot, and not extend verbal exposition that could be explained within a scene while writing conflict. I had initially written a short visual portrait of the key character Brij at the beginning of *Kaifiyat*, revealing his dowdy clothes, his vermillion *teeka*, and an ankle chain tied to him as he walked the woods, very much at home in a makeshift tent, till he chanced upon his childhood photograph. This was to give the impression of a refugee-like experience, but a voluntary one, resulting in a semi-natural assimilation. This portrait was culled in the end, and its elements blended into what is now one big narrative scene.

The key experiment for me was how to evoke a haunting image, or engage with ghosts of a character's past, without using the convenient hackney of flashbacks. Audio samples, voiceovers, and effects appealed greatly to me and I feel they eventually helped create this world. The idea was to play with what we as viewers hear within the key character's mind. I felt this was an interesting experiment, to use visuals as a mirror to convey history and context, by suggesting what it means for our main character. Brij is sick, confused, desperate, lost in memories, and hearing things. This is his last breath of life before he vanishes from Kashmir's consciousness. Possibly, from all humankind's consciousness.

The initial drafts of the script had different voices emanating from the house. The first time Brij approaches the house, he hears voices of a happy Kashmiri Muslim family sitting to dinner, and mocking a Kashmiri Pandit acquaintance who claimed he had returned to Kashmir to buy a house for himself. These were based on the real accounts of extended relatives who had returned to Srinagar to buy homes but faced circumstances far from welcoming. I had seen these voices as a possible tool to convey resentment, and aggression by showing Brij's reaction to them. Over drafts, and with feedback, I came to see how it became less comprehensible, and too expositional to those without Kashmir's context. The clincher however, was how difficult it was to cast these characters! That's what ultimately shaped many decisions on *Kaifiyat*. What eventually made the cut were ghoulish voices laughing at Brij for trying to own a house in Kashmir. They are voices everywhere and nowhere.

Following recent Kashmiri Pandit literature, even at a cursory level, it's hard not to see an emboldened stance in light of recent nationalist discourses. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (Rahul Pandita), *A Long Dream of Home* (Siddhartha Gigoo & Varad Sharma), *From Home to House* (Arvind Gigoo ed.), *Kashmir: It's Aborigines and their Exodus* (Col.

Tej K. Tikoo) are a few of the more recent publications that reflect the community's overall positioning and leanings towards *panun*, or homeland. Priding themselves on scholarship, many Pandit authors invoke a need to not be lost to history, highlighting their roughshod treatment by successive liberal governments, and the country that left them in dilapidated refugee colonies without a second thought. There is a cry for attention from the mainstream, there is self-pity, there is a grappling to highlight their identity as the most prominent of all caste brahmins, who upheld nationalist ideals for decades only to be betrayed by everyone, and of course there is incredible resentment. These were emotions I looked to explore in Brij's visit to his old home in this film.

The bitterness among Pandits is directed towards many quarters, but most keenly towards Kashmiri Muslims at large who Pandits believe 'exiled' them by their complicity with militant aggression. In my family and in many others, there is a persistent indignation that somehow Kashmiri Muslims who stayed back in Kashmir, though persecuted by the state at least lived in their own homes, and were far better off than those forgotten by the state who lost their homes completely. This strikes me as moot, but comparisons of trauma asking 'who suffered more' do little to bring closure, or even a better understanding of the Pandit experience. That Kashmiri Pandits address this question often, is I find testament to the community's belief that they were ultimately forgotten by the state and country at large, especially when they needed help most. The crumbling house in *Kaifiyat* was to become the edifice of this trust, and the object of both connection and umbrage.

Fatima's character is the counterfoil to Brij, but also for me, the life within this bubble of melancholy and confusion. All she wants is to play a game, to live, and it's up to Brij if the last thing he does before he vanishes is to try to get back his wrecked home. I feel that many from the Pandit community are living, and thriving around the world, but it is also a truth that all will have to live with the lack of closure when it comes to where they're from, and who they are now. Not unlike ghosts.

Casting

I began early stages of casting and scheduling in the second week of writing, putting up casting notices around LA's professional and non-professional, online and offline communities. I was immediately looking for Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri actors who spoke Kashmiri or Urdu. This in itself was ambitious, and an ultimately unforgiving

process. I searched for over two months around LA and up the West Coast, holding four open casting sessions hosted off websites and free casting community spaces. These sessions were frustrating and also hilarious in hindsight.

I had to make a conscious decision to opt for non-union, seeing as SAG affiliated actors charged higher rates, and needed their producers to handle the surfeit of paperwork. Two days before the shoot, I went locked on the actors closest to the images in my head—even if neither spoke Urdu or Kashmiri, and neither were trained actors. I was also excited that Ryan Joseph (born Rehan Yusuf), and Opal Waybase were playing characters of each other's actual faiths. However, they are both from liberal homes in a cosmopolitan city.

I held two days of rehearsals with both actors in the UCLA lawns, and began 'seeing' the scenes and blocking as I had written them. Ryan threw himself into the character and that was heartening. Opal however, was more of a challenge. She was extremely confident, and that was perfect for the role of Fatima, but being barely eight years old, she was also full of uncontrollable energy. It took a while before she got used to following instructions and learnt her lines.

A key production aspect of working with minors in the US are the strict laws to protect them on sets. Minors can only shoot for 8 hours per day, often less, of which up to 2 hours need to be 'school-work' with a union approved 'Studio Teacher.' These hours varied with age, but 6 shoot hours per day is all I had with Opal. This was not optional either, and though I considered throwing this law to the wind, I did want the child to have a good and healthy experience on my set and decided to pay the base

$200 a day for a Studio Teacher. I was also extremely fortunate for Opal's mother Meenu's kindness, as she decided to contribute $200 for the Studio Teacher's fees on the last day. I was so overwhelmed by this I offered to make her co-producer!

Location

I was shooting Los Angeles for Kashmir, in the heat of the West Coast July. Location was everything for this film. Production design was everything too. And I had not a penny for either. I had been warned LA was one of the most expensive places to shoot in the US because of location costs, and I learnt it the hard way. A classmate found a location to shoot, an abandoned home that set her back nearly $1500. Every option of an abandoned home in a wooded area that I found too was setting me back the total

budget of my film. I searched outside LA, in San Bernardino, in forest reserve areas around Los Angeles, even via friends in the Bay Area. My instructor Vanessa then mentioned Topanga Canyon, a hilly, arid area on the edge of LA with no phone reception. I made 4 trips up there in Ubers that shut down the moment they went out of reception. Topanga is remote, eerily quiet, and covered with ranches and empty summer homes. Winding roads led up to a group of small, sleepy shops, where I asked around about abandoned places for my student project, armed only with a letter from UCLA. Then, I walked 3–4 miles up those winding roads often going door to door, asking after places that looked the part.

I saw some beautiful ranches, with so many devastatingly striking empty homes resembling the abandoned Pandit homes of Kashmir. The profile of landowners I met in Topanga was, however, very different to the type of people I'd seen in LA, or the Bay Area. The area was far more rural, and felt much more conservative. I only saw men in these areas, and everyone wanted a pretty penny for their time, perhaps wise to films students or even film professionals who uttered the phrase 'shoot' and promised 'minimal intrusion.' Perhaps some were brusquer, or reluctant to help a bearded brown-skinned male, but I'll never know for sure if it was prejudice or just a general reluctance to have anything to do with a film shoot. Ultimately, it was one very blunt gentleman who pointed me in the direction of a ramshackle house belonging to a plumber named Dan Larson. Dan was elderly, extremely solicitous and smiley, a person of few words, and very tough to get hold of. He owned only a landline phone and was gone from his premises between 8.30 am to 8.00 pm when he returned home, he slept by 8.30 pm. All my calls and coordination with him had to take place before 8.00 am. Dan was literally the only person I had met in a month of location scouting who was amenable to a shoot the moment I met him. My instinct was that he needed the money. The house had holes in the side of it, as did some of his windows. The paint was chipped, there was tarpaulin hung on a part of the side for waterproofing, and the inside loo didn't work. I don't know how he was living in there. Grass and weeds grew wild, and rusted metal lay all around the place. All this worked excellently for me. The icing on the cake was that Dan agreed to the $200 location fee. I knew immediately that the location was one thing I got right for this film. Everything about the place gave me goose bumps... and wrapped in thick woods, away from cellular coverage, I wouldn't be caught dead hanging around past sundown.

Crew and Shoot

Finding good, dependable, and ultimately artistic technicians is any director-producer's pleasure, and nightmare. The key artistic collaborator for *Kaifiyat* was going to be the DP, and I had a few meetings before settling on Aric Coppola, an Iraq and Kuwait veteran and NYFA alum who had a deft skill and presence of mind. His wife Allison, also an Iraq veteran, also NYFA alum, offered to do makeup, and ultimately became the line-producer on the film. I can say without a doubt, it was her contribution in particular that saw me, and this short film home. I found a sound designer/recorder in Jason Freeman who came recommended by a UCLA acquaintance, while Nick Wyatt an ex-marine NYFA alum did lights and grips, and my editor (actor and class friend) Kirstin Doyle gave camera slate. Another incredibly talented director friend Clementine Clarke gave slate and logged footage the second day. I scrambled all the help I could get last minute and I was fortunate my friends supported me.

Though the base concept of the script was evident to some readers, it took some doing to get my key technicians on one page about Kashmir. Not all of them understood the political context, but were willing to go on the journey with me to see where it took them. I put together a research docket and artistic reference docket that included movies, images and news articles, but to expect them to thrash through all of it just for political context, and be on the same page emotionally for a two-day shoot was, in hindsight, idealistic on my part.

On Shoot Day 1, it rained for the first two hours and wet the set, and my lead actor Ryan was late by three hours. Our Studio Teacher showed up and fell asleep on set, while our secondary star Opal was on set wasting away as time on the minor-shooting-hours clock ticked away. I had to, for the first (and I hope last) time in my life, play Producer, Director, 1st AD, Script & Continuity supervisor, and Location Manager all at once. Once Ryan came in, we stuck to the shoot list Aric and I had broken down, and kept chipping away. The rest is a blur.

Day 2 was even more relentless, and we began first by re-shooting a Brij dialogue that wasn't in focus from the previous day (God bless the digital medium). At one point we were in a chase to finish all we had planned, but we did. We drove to a dive bar to get the crew drinks, and I was both relieved and extremely anxious to enter the next stage, post-production.

Post-production

Reviewing footage, I was immediately aware of all the things I wished I'd done differently! I half-considered re-shooting a full day, just to get Opal's performance to what I envisioned for the edit. Shooting with children can be painstaking. *Painstaking*. And while some children are more cooperative than others, what they all require is time to perform as actors.

My stand-up comedian-actor-writer friend Kirstin offered to edit on Premier Pro, and she did a stellar job getting a first cut together in time. I let her be with the footage a full week, and she brought a simplicity that the film really needed. I stepped in for the final edit and polish, and in the end, I think we got to the best version of the visual edit that we could—given what we shot.

Sound was a major challenge, and I genuinely struggled, having to switch between three different sound designers after my main designer Jason was involved in a road accident. Finally, to meet deadlines, sound editor Ali Berke did the best he could to deliver what we finally have. Ali was a friend of a friend, and he had two days to scrub through and clean up what he could. We coordinated only over the phone and didn't meet even once. That said, he didn't charge a dime, and I was thankful for that.

I delivered the final cut with sample music in the nick of time. I was one of only five others in class who got to that stage. Many shot their screenplays but couldn't edit in time. Even more didn't reach the shooting stage. By this point I was about $500 over-budget and was forced to reckon with what I put into for background music.

Evita Wagner offered to compose for credit only, and though she did not have much experience with Indian traditions of music, she was very diligent and did the best she could.

Takeaways

There were a few key learnings for me as a filmmaker and writer. A crucial point was deciding what aspects to be uncompromising with on set. On this film, it was the actors' performances. I wish I'd fought harder to give them more time, and capture the performances (on video and sound) perfectly.

The most important lessons, however, were to do with gauging the balance between technical completion, and story completion. It is clear to my mind now that story

completion, i.e. the clearest communication of the emotions of the story, must remain paramount. I set out making a semi-experimental, spooky ode to the Kashmiri Pandit experience, in 6 minutes. Though I did reach the technical completion of the story, I wonder if this film could bring a neutral viewer any closer to asking the mystery invoking questions that reveal the complete Pandit story.