DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
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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A Slow Theory Approach to Film and Social Science

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Abstract

With Dastavezi we link writings in Cultural Anthropology, South Asian Studies, and Critical Theory with audio-visual compositions and independent film. Establishing such connections takes time. Dastavezi provides a platform for slow- paced and multi-mediated research in the social sciences to propagate novel, alternative, and critical views on and from South Asia. With the help of the contributions to each issue (audio-visual and written), we reflect on the potentialities and challenges emerging from linking textual and audio-visual formats in social science research. We will continue to use the journal's introduction as a way to theorize the notion that critical research does not emerge through written discourse alone but results from aesthetic and affective processes that are present in it and intertwined with it.

Keywords: transnational film, slow theory, film studies, anthropology, time

Introduction

With *Dastavezi* we link writings in Cultural Anthropology, South Asian Studies, and Critical Theory with audio-visual compositions and independent film. Establishing such connections takes time. *Dastavezi* provides a platform for slow-paced and multi-mediated research in the social sciences to propagate novel, alternative, and critical views on and from South Asia. With the help of the contributions to each issue (audio-visual and written), we reflect on the potentialities and challenges emerging from linking textual and audio-visual formats in social science research. We will continue to use the journal's introduction as a way to theorize the notion that critical research does not emerge through written discourse alone but results from aesthetic and affective processes that are present in it and intertwined with it. As already laid out in the first issue, we suggest calling this form of critical and creative reflection *Slow Theory.*

Social scientists today—more than ever before—share a dearth of time for relation-building which respects the inner rhythms of different phenomena and beings at large. Today we may have much more temporal flexibility as compared to earlier generations. This, at least, holds for the academic Global North (which, of course, can also be found at universities in the 'geographical' South). Increased mobility and flexibility, however, continue to blur the lines between work and private life, producing the moral imperative of being 'always on'. Even when the coronavirus pandemic promised to drastically alter our commercial habits, enabling pseudo-monastic reclusiveness (quite well-suited for academics and filmmakers in the more contemplative stage), scholarly life turned into an array of zoom meetings, extra preparation for online classes, and heightened control through video recordings and new concerns about privacy. Being mindful of temporality is directly opposed to a 'free' disposal of time under the condition of self-exploitation, precarity, and control. In a world brimming with post-*something* metaphors (post-truth, post-fact, post-modern) we lack social studies research that addresses the problems *as they arise in their temporality.* How can we, as unrooted academics, relate our rhythms (biological and social) to a world in crisis?

In the process of developing *Slow Theory*, we follow a recursive strategy, where the content of our contributions—written as well as audio-visual— have an impact on our overall frame of analysis (Holbraad 2012). This follows recent developments in cultural anthropology, where a shift in perspective foregrounds ethnographies' ability

to create and redefine theoretical concepts (Das et al. 2014, Fassin 2014, Biehl and Locke 2017). Similarly, the contributors' reflections (written and audio-visual) in this issue are crucial for the way we imagine a *Slow Theory* approach towards research and its various forms of becoming public. We, therefore, don't consider *Slow Theory* as a ready-made and pre-packaged proposition, which will help us to understand the nexus of film and writing, but rather as a productive theoretical trajectory developing in and through *Dastavezi.* Thus, as a concept, *Slow Theory* is not representational but rather creative and ontogenetic as it produces new connections between audio-visual productions and writing. This productive-analytical openness puts theory and the multi-mediated research featured in this journal into relation. To further think about the implications of *Slow Theory* for connecting social science writing with film, we begin by taking inspiration from Isabelle Stengers' seminal call for a *Slow Science* approach as pertaining to the production of, and receptivity towards, different kinds of knowledge.

Slow Science

In her book *Another Science is Possible* (2018), Isabelle Stengers argues for an alternative approach within and towards the sciences. Overall the book makes a plea for scientists to be conscious about the results of their work and to engage with the social environments around them. While *Another Science is Possible* is mainly interested in the so-called 'hard sciences,' Stengers' critical engagement with the relationship between scholars and society is crucial for developing how *Slow Theory* imagines the link between film and social sciences.

In a time when the world is rushing to develop a vaccine for the global coronavirus pandemic (summer 2020), Stengers' arguments for a deceleration of science may appear odd. *Slow Science,* however, is much more a critique of cold, detached, and market-oriented forms of research than merely a critique of academic temporality. Her *Slow Science* is an ethical and methodological imperative, which urges scientists to push for dynamics of 'relation-making' (Stengers 2018, 101f). What sounds like a truism is a call to radically rethink and reinvent scientific institutions (Stengers 2018, 125) and, most importantly, to tear down the distinction between what is considered a (true) science and what isn't. While Stengers describes 'fast science' as a saturated space where scientists distinguish who matters for their research from those who don't (Stengers 2018, 116), *Slow Science* is marked by an openness to symbiotic arrangements and the possibilities that emerge when scholars engage with

other collectives—be they scientific or not (Stengers 2018, 103f.). By borrowing from Bruno Latour, she speaks of 'matters of concern.' These matters of concern connect the political with the production of knowledge and thereby help to overcome the dangerous ways in which responsibilities and the transformative force of science are abstracted and disavowed, mostly by natural scientists. Stengers emphasizes a symmetrical knowledge—opposed to the asymmetrical knowledge under conditions of fast science (Stengers 2018, 122)—which produces new ways for scholars to engage with the societies they live in, instead of merely remaining within confined scholarly planes (Stengers 2018, 109).

In *Another Science is Possible*, Stengers is mainly interested in the sciences and speaks only briefly about the role of other research areas such as the humanities (Stengers 2018, 125–126). Even then, however, her work misses the critical impetus we consider necessary for the social sciences—especially when working with and on the Global South (see section 'critique' below). Nevertheless, Stengers' arguments have significance beyond what she calls the 'hard' sciences.

From Stengers' *Slow Science* to Dastavezi's

Slow Theory

In our attempt to lay out what we mean when we describe *Dastavezi* as the platform for a *Slow Theory* approach to film and the social sciences, we will show convergences with but also divergences from Stengers' theory. The following will exemplify this based on three interdependent topics: relation-making, time, and critique.

Relation-making

Central to Stengers' work is her emphasis on relation-making. At one point she writes that *Slow Science* is a way in which researchers present themselves in a non-insulting way to members of other collectives (Stengers 2018, 100f). Stengers follows the philosophical ethics of Whitehead and Latour who have repeatedly called philosophers, social scientists, and 'natural' scientists to actively produce networks and relations in their efforts to create new worlds (Latour 1993, Whitehead 1967). Relation-making for *Slow Theory* not only pertains to how research is presented outside our usual peer-networks (what Stengers refers to as 'other collectives') but also how the

bringing together of different media potentially yields novel forms of understanding and producing research.

Firstly, relation-making means new encounters between academics and their environment. Research results from cultural anthropology and area studies often remain within their respective fields of interest and only at times gain general public attention. The reasons for them remaining within the ivory tower are manifold including, for example, academic jargon, the lack of accessible distribution platforms, or simply the fact that such outreach does not contribute to scholars' ability to secure tenure-track jobs. A *Slow Theory* approach foregrounds the importance of producing moments of relation-making with other collectives (i.e. non-academic publics, scholarly fields outside the social sciences, as well as our interlocuters) during the process of becoming public.

The practice of the scholar and filmmaker Yousuf Saeed is an example of relation-making as a way of becoming public. Aside from his work as a documentary filmmaker, Saeed has established the online audio-visual magazine *Iktara* as an archive and repository for the 'shared cultural history of South Asia—a digital platform for documentation and dissemination of history, heritage, and cultural legacy of India and South Asia through audiovisual and film media.'[1] His film *Campus Rising* (this issue) captures an important moment in India's recent past. Crucially, what both the film and the text address is the role of political mobilization on campuses in India today that have strong humanities and social science departments. The question of how arguments come to matter and how they are substantiated through the creation of a certain environment conducive to free debate is explored via sequences of protests and through multiple interviews.

Campus Rising questions what it means to be *properly* and *higher* educated in the eye of the nation-state. The film reveals how only a few people can afford to disentangle higher learning from citizenship and nationalism. While the tropes of the nation crucially change (from a Hindu nationalist to a more inclusive one), defending the university often needs to be coded in the language of rationality and factuality. This, however, is linked to a critique of the Indian middle-class's techno-centric aspirations where many want to see their children on the fast track of becoming engineers and medical doctors. Such and similar developments have rightfully been considered as

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1 See: http://etihas.in/what.html (access 20.07.20)

damaging India's intellectual culture. Humanist relation-making—that is, the free-flow of ideas and the infinite movement of self-education of the individual—however, is always threatened by being captured through the lens of the nation-state ideology. While the humanist university pertains to the inner time of autonomous scholarship it also detaches science from the concerns of different publics (Stengers 2018). This raises an important question: which possible rhythms of research can scholars enter when they are being mindful of the fact that what they are doing may be of concern to different people in different ways?

Another logic of relation-making is at work when we look at our attempt to theorize the connections between cultural anthropology, area studies, critical theory, and independent film under the concept of *Slow Theory*. While over-theorization and jargon may at times keep people from engaging with scholars' work (Billig 2013), conceptualizations drawn from empirical case studies can help to produce new relations. Think of anthropological conferences, where theories might often be the common language in which people can compare and speak about their particular ethnographies. This is a double-edged sword, as questions of representation, post- and decoloniality, as well as epistemic violence need to be addressed by theoretical language.

With the 'relation-making' of audio-visual productions and writing, *Dastavezi* (from the Urdu word '*dastavez*' meaning 'bond,' 'instrument,' or 'action') aims to be a platform for research which orients us towards the intertwined nature of affective and discursive knowledge. On a very basic level, affects can be described as visceral reactions or 'moments of intensity' in the body (O'Sullivan 2001). While the importance of bodily affects has for long been emphasized by proponents of the affective turn (Gregg et al. 2009, Clough and Halley 2007), its respective arguments have widely remained within the confines of academic textual production. Little has been undertaken thus far to provide avenues where affects are not only written *about* but also *produced* as a central part of presenting ethnography. The combination of different media caters to studies that need to involve affective performances to lay out their arguments.

One example is Schaflechner's film *Thrust into Heaven* (2016). Conceptualized as a multi-mediated research project, the film (2016), the academic paper (2017), and the essay (this issue) aim to provide a multi-mediated ethnographic *sensorium* as an answer to the question: 'What do we mean when we speak of Hindu women's forced

conversion to Islam in Pakistan?' In his contribution, Schaflechner focuses on one particular segment, i.e. the interviews of two Hindu women who have newly converted to Islam. The scene reproduces emotions of ambiguity and degradation, which, for Schaflechner, are central to cases of alleged forced conversion and marriage. While *Thrust into Heaven* set out to criticize the involved women's lack of voice, the analyzed segment reproduces the women's degrading representation. The scene's affective charge—brought about by facial expressions, the spatial distribution of the involved actors, as well as the film's editing—produces an aura of ambivalence, which is not a mere supplement to academic writing, but rather produces its arguments and affective statements.

Relation-making, at this point, is not merely the combination of two different registers. The written and the filmic plane do not observe the same phenomenon 'out-there,' albeit from different perspectives. A *Slow Theory* approach to social sciences (especially ethnography) takes the incorporation of different media seriously in its ability to create new research altogether. As the example above has shown, multi-mediated ethnography does not simply extend our perspective onto research, but rather produces an ethnographic sensorium, which instigates reflections and novel ways of engaging with research.

Time

Similar to Stengers' call for deceleration, *Slow Theory* emphasizes the politics of time in academic research. As already noted in the introduction to the first issue, we understand the slow-paced method as a form of research that is aligned with the rhythms and life-lines of the phenomena under scrutiny (Kramer and Schaflechner 2019, 6). Certain pilgrimages, for example, may appear only once a year, interlocutors might have to attend to urgent matters outside our ethnography, or lockdowns may make the gathering of interviews and testimonies impossible. In other words, ethnography, as well as ethnographic filmmaking, is—to a large extent—what happens outside the researcher's control and intention. A slow-paced methodology aims to foreground such contingencies and the value of long-term ethnography. This is particularity important as a way to counter the fast-paced and decontextualized forms of knowledge production characteristic of today's information capitalism (Kramer and Schaflechner 2019, 6).

We are, however, also conscious about the limitations of practicing slow-paced research for academics. Especially under short-term and precarious employment, slow-paced methods clash with more economically-driven concepts of time and funding structures. Film as a means to present anthropological research may serve as an example. Films often become a mere side project for anthropologists as their production frequently collides with teaching, admin, and writing responsibilities. Some projects, thus, might be forced to be executed in haste, while others may never materialize.

Time constraints may also be linked to the dearth of funding. While producing an independent film may be encouraged by some academic institutions—since the format serves as a marketable item decorating fellowship or university homepages— common academic funding structures only rarely financially cover the cost of professional production companies. A film produced without professional help will demand umpteen hours in postproduction for editing, subtitling, coloring, and so forth. Technical advances have certainly helped in the proliferation of small budget ethnographic films; more often than not, however, they demand personal financial investments from scholars and their cooperation partners.

Accepting this, *Dastavezi* aims to contribute to a 'slowing down' of material produced under such circumstances. Slowing down in this regard aims to revisit the links and possibilities developed in and through our academic research. Ali Kahn and Iqbal-Naqvi's film *Shabaz Qalander* (*SQ*) is an example of a 'slowing down' process in which scholars revisit years-long work through the contingencies of ethnographic film. In writing the essay, Ali Khan and Iqbal-Naqvi reflect on their own (and the whole team's) transformation process. Lumped together as 'white-collar city-slickers' (this issue) the team confronts their own colonial modernity during their time at the shrine. Unable to remain bystanders who merely hide behind the camera, Ali Kahn and Iqbal- Naqvi recall moments of affective charge at the site, causing a transformation of their perception of the shrine's rituals. *SQ* as well as the two authors' extensive essay shows how the saint's worship can be approached from a variety of planes. The two academics not only provide us with an in-depth historical and anthropological tapestry in their essay but make the crowd's (and to a certain extent their own) spiritual anticipation *felt* through filmic montage. Such additions are not merely a supplement to already established academic discourse but rather yield new questions (and answers) as they produce polysensory ethnographic life-worlds.

The essay on the making of *SQ* is furthermore crucial as it speaks about how the film needed to relate to the site's own temporality without the appropriate amount of funding. For *SQ* to become 'a film with scholarly depth which would appeal to both academic and lay audiences' (this issue) the team had to accept the shrine's own rhythm. Footage of the 'alam, a post associated with Husain's brother, for example, needed to be taken over a period of three years. The post's movement through the sacred space of Lal Shabaz Qalander only appears once a year during the days of Muharram. Filming it demanded expenditures of time as well as personal and financial effort to produce the ritual's ethnographic sensorium. In their co-written piece, the authors talk about how the production of *SQ* had to be done with a budget of merely 84 000.- Pakistani Rupees (around 900.- Euros at that time). While the script could build on Ali Khan's years-long research at the site, the film needed to be a group enterprise, and the production team had to agree to understand their work as a 'service to society' (this issue).

Taking our lead from *SQ* and its associated essay, we see that a *Slow Theory* approach not only aims to highlight moments of deterritorialization during the production of research but also foregrounds the importance of revisiting (slowing down) already established work through different or additional media. While research might be produced under 'fast-paced' circumstances (relating to time, money, and career opportunities), *Dastavezi* aims to provide an institutional platform from which scholars/filmmakers can—again—reflect on their work.

Critique

The term 'theory' in *Slow Theory* aims to emphasize our commitment to critical research on and from the Global South. While the Global South often functions as a metaphorical margin to the production of theoretical thinking (Kaplan 1996, 88), we aim to foreground critique of eurocentric theory through recursive change of analytical categories. In *Dastavezi* this recursivity is based on empirical case studies presented in film and writing from and on South Asia. Ali Rizvi's *Ghungroo* (Dancing Bells) is a good example of the coming together of theory and film.

Ghungroo portrays the practice of Dawood Bhatti, a male *Khatak* dancer in Karachi. At one-point Rizvi writes: 'Bhatti tackles the binary representation of gender and thus is emblematic of emergent discourses on gender identity and dance in Pakistan' (this issue). Contrary to media such as text and photography, the

film produces its own temporality through its movement of images experienced as duration. Documentary film intersects with space—tropes or representation (e.g. stereotypes of gender, stereotypes of places)—as well as with the actual space that is recorded. Rizvi's multi-mediated research, therefore, produces two kinds of rhythms: The film is staged and edited in such a way as to mediate the transformative power of dance performances, while his essay reproduces academic and theoretical work. But *where* and *when* does the space of theory—the immediate availability (to some) of a theoretical language on gender—intersect with a dance performance and its mediation through film? Thus, Rizvi's work poses interesting questions regarding time and critique.

Time has taken a back-seat in theoretical thinking over the last decades. The critical approach mentioned by Rizvi's essay operates primarily with metaphors of space, such as subject-positions, discourse (as patterns), and text-inscription. Time only emerges through the cracks of textual space as some form of difference in repetition. This results in a critique built mainly on the 'the social' as space, as a matter of topographic distribution. His film, however, presents the duration of a spatial practice; 'loitering' as a question of rhythm, sound, and dance (this issue). While the language of 'opposing binary positions' is properly available in theoretical space, Rizvi's film, alongside his essay, provides the possibility to sense and think *time with theory.* The durational character of the dance performance as well as the film's rhythm does not merely serve theory but embodies the concept of emancipation in novel ways.

Aside from the post-structural approaches to which Rizvi referred, there have been other traditions of thinking time, such as phenomenology and life philosophy, to name but a few. While speaking of 'matters of concern' as opposed to 'matters of fact', Stengers (who herself is close to the life philosophical tradition) takes up this Latourian differentiation to stress its temporal dimension. 'Matters of fact' can be understood as decontextualized resources. 'Matters of concern,' on the other hand, require hesitation, rethinking, imagination: they start a collective process of negotiation. They are not politicized; 'rather, what they require is to make people think about what concerns them, and to refuse any appeal to 'matters of fact' that would bring about consensus' (Stengers 2018, 3). We appreciate Stengers' differentiation; however, we think that a critical dimension is missing in her approach. Formulated in a question: who puts the choices of concern on whose tables and how does concern emerge out of emancipatory struggles? The question is not clearly advanced by Stengers. One could well imagine a world made of multiple stakeholders,

represented by think tanks and NGOs, discussing and debating with elected representatives about the most instrumental forms of knowledge.

The kind of agonistic politics we imagine is therefore not about taking an opposing stand outside of struggle but, more like Rizvi in this edition, to take part in the attempt to come to terms with problems as they impress on us a temporal and existential quality of their own. Time is the open possibility. By stressing the need to be mindful of temporality in the production of theory we plead for an openness towards global difference, often overlooked by being hedged into those frames which sell best and reproduce the academic class or the class of professional filmmakers. Our theoretical frames are not useless, but they need to be related to struggle. The particular struggle here is to be located at the intersection of the audio-visual, the text, and the precarity of filmmakers and academics who orient their work towards South Asia. Our understanding of critique is therefore geared towards the relations that could be built if time is taken seriously while approaching the above-mentioned problematic (film, text, precarity, South Asia).

Conclusion

Dastavezi is a platform for a particular way of linking writings in social science research with independent film on and from South Asia. We call this approach *Slow Theory* as it emphasizes the importance of relation-making, time, and critique when dealing with multi-mediated research. We do not imagine *Slow Theory* as a representational concept, but rather as the very act of creating relations and interdependencies between audio-visuals and writing for the sake of theory creation. The contributions to this second issue corroborate how a combination of writing and film supplies new planes from where to engage with social sciences. Such multi-mediated research adds affective aspects to traditional academic writing and has the potential to make our work known outside the confines of academic disciplines. Critical of the logic of the neoliberal university in producing knowledge*,* a *Slow Theory* approach aims to 'slow down' research that has been executed under time/financial constraints and invites filmmakers and scholars to revisit and re-reflect on their research. Their reflections— written as well as audio-visual—are a large part of our recursive strategy when developing a *Slow Theory* approach to film and writing.

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Campus Rising

Yousuf Saeed

Abstract

Universities are institutions of education and intellectual growth where young minds are nurtured in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and debate. But many well-known universities in India in the last few years have been subjected to thought control, restrictions, and social discrimination by the administration and the current government. Unfortunately, much of this discrimination is meted out to students and staff belonging to India's marginalized communities, women, and those with liberal and left ideology - identities that the current ruling party and its ideologues have traditionally loathed. Persons with right-wing ideology have been appointed as heads of most institutions to curtail academic freedom while funding and scholarships are cut down for deserving candidates. But the students are not taking such fascism silently. They are protesting against the closing down of democratic spaces and the muzzling of voices in many universities. The prejudice against students of certain 'low caste' had been so drastic that a few students such as Rohit Vemula (Hyderabad) even committed suicide, giving rise to a further heat in the students' protest in many more institutions. Unfortunately, much of India's mainstream media, kowtowing the ruling party's line, has run campaigns to malign the protesting students. While the students' unrest continues in many cities, this film travels to some seven Indian universities (including Jawaharlal Nehru University, Hyderabad Central University and Banaras Hindu University among others) to record what the students and some teachers have to say about how their freedom is being curtailed, and how this movement will not die until they bring some change of perception about the rights of the underprivileged. The film also explores a general decline in the production of knowledge in Indian universities, as enumerated by eminent scholars such as Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, Vivek Kumar and Ashok Vajpeyi, among others.

Keywords: university protest, Delhi, Hyderabad, education

Film: https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/dasta/article/view/12060/11813

Campus Rising: Political Documentary Film in Today's India

Introduction

> *'Every student who attends college is expected by his or her parents, and the college administration, to simply study and prepare for a career. Anything other than studying, of course besides eating, sleeping, and some sports, is not what they are being sent to college for. Protest and politics! That is not the job of a student.'*

This was a sarcastic comment made by a student from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, when asked about the role of students in social movements. While a large number of students, especially those pursuing the job-oriented technical courses, would like to stick to the ideal expectation of their parents and the state, many others are breaking out of this expectation and finding the campuses to be ideal platforms for raising concerns about injustice, inequality, and corruption in India. Through the voices of many irate and revolutionary students, *Campus Rising* explores why and whether a student should get involved in the politics of the country at all. Having produced TV programs and documentary films since 1990, much of my work focused on themes of science, history, and the shared culture of South Asia. *Campus Rising* (*CR*) is my first film with political content—that is, showing a struggle of the students against ruling powers for their rights. One must unpack the reasons for doing a political film after almost 27 years of my career. And those reasons may also signify a need for political engagement by those who have so far kept themselves aloof from the politics of India.

Crisis of Higher Education and Liberalism in India Today

The 2014 election victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) brought India to a significant political turning. An almost totalitarian rule dominated by Hindu-Right ideology suppressed freedom of expression, human rights, and cultural diversity in various forms. In any case, India's educational institutions, and the society at large, have been known for the discrimination of people of lower Hindu 'castes,' minorities, and women for ages. Instead of trying to reduce this social lacuna, the present government only helped in worsening the social hierarchy and bigotry. Many individuals and institutions of academic and artistic pursuits have been concerned about the growing intolerance, prejudice, and public violence against minorities and the Dalits (lit. those who are broken or scattered). Besides suppressing the

marginalized, the ruling party and its allies have also attacked many Hindus who advocate for rationality, scientific thinking, and the rights of the poor. Individuals like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, Gauri Lankesh, and M. M. Kalburgi have allegedly been murdered by Hindutva members since 2013 for their rationalist views, and many more are either being attacked or arrested (Chenoy 2018).

Universities are meant to be institutions of education and intellectual growth where young minds are nurtured in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and debate. But in the last few years, many well-known universities in India have been subjected to thought control, restrictions, and social discrimination by the administration and the central government. Unfortunately, much of this discrimination is meted out to students and staff belonging to India's marginalized communities, women, and those with liberal and left-wing world views—identities that the current ruling party and its ideologues have traditionally loathed. Persons with right-wing ideology have been appointed as heads of most institutions to curtail academic freedom while funding and scholarships are cut down for deserving candidates. The teachers and other staff are expected to remain silent about the situation or else risk losing their jobs. Students, however, are not taking such attacks on their liberty and rights silently. They are protesting against the closing down of democratic spaces and the muzzling of their voices in many universities, a struggle that this film documents.

The prejudice against students of 'low caste' origin had been so drastic that a few students such as Rohit Vemula (Hyderabad) even committed suicide, kindling further protest in other institutions (Shantha 2019). Rohit's suicide in 2016 triggered a series of protests on campuses all over India and brought the discrimination of Dalits in educational institutions into the limelight. Unfortunately, much of India's mainstream media, kowtowing the ruling party's line, has run campaigns to malign the protesting students.

While the students' unrest continued in many cities, I decided to document this movement through a film by traveling to some seven Indian universities, including the famed Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU, New Delhi), Hyderabad Central University (HCU, Hyderabad) and BHU (Varanasi) among others, to record what the students and some teachers have to say about how their freedom is being curtailed, and how the movement will not cease until it brings more rights for the underprivileged (Dasgupta 2017). Through *Campus Rising*, I tried to give space to students' voices who are often marginalized by the mainstream media.

When one makes a film on a topic like university politics, especially in the last couple of years in India, it is difficult to decide where to stop filming because students' struggle seems to be ubiquitous. Before one issue is over, another one starts at another university. Since this film has mostly been self-funded, I needed to ration my shooting trips to save costs. So after the initial few months, I decided at one point in time to stop shooting and start editing the film, even though the events still continued. This film is therefore not about the recent events only—it's more about the ideas that a university campus allows to grow. Instead of depicting only the slogan-shouting students, this film asks basic questions about education and freedom. What is the purpose of a university? How is a university different from other institutions such as a school or college? What does a student find in a university which is not available in other places? Are our universities fulfilling the dreams of young students?

Typically in India, there are many restrictions until students finish the 12th standard in school. In college or a university, they suddenly find a unique atmosphere of freedom—the freedom to study whatever they want, the freedom to make new friends, the freedom to dress the way they want, to eat whatever they want, and to attend whatever classes they want. Such freedoms are very important and essential for a young student's intellectual and physical growth. As shown in the film, students also find the right kind of atmosphere on campus to freely discuss and debate what they perceive to be the problems of their society. But do our universities and colleges provide that freedom to them today? When I began asking students this question, I found thoughtful answers—something that *Campus Rising* starts with. It then moves on to more serious issues such as discrimination based on students' identities–whether based on caste, religion, gender, or regional difference.

The film also explores a general decline in the production of knowledge in Indian universities, as enumerated by eminent scholars such as Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, Vivek Kumar, Ashok Vajpeyi, and others. One of the major concerns about higher education shared by many scholars is that there is too much emphasis on science, engineering, business management, and other job-oriented topics whereas social sciences and humanities are being discouraged or underfunded in most institutions as they don't appear to be 'lucrative.' This results in an entire generation of youngsters taking for granted that only sciences and technology provide solutions to life whereas social sciences have no direct relevance. Such a generation, especially if coming from the urban elite society, is pressured to pursue science and tech careers. After university is over, they get highly paid jobs, continue to improve the urban life and

economy, and more importantly, go abroad for further studies and IT jobs. But due to a lack of understanding in social sciences, history, and literature, etc., this generation remains mostly cut off from the harsh realities of rural and underprivileged India, where social hierarchies and caste-based discrimination is still rampant and does not allow millions of poor people to come out of their miseries, resulting in the widening of the rich-poor divide in India (Business Today 2018). This was discussed by several scholars and students towards the end of the film (*CR*, 1:09:15).

Here the film touches on another bone of contention between these elite or upper-caste Indians and the poor, 'lower'-caste and rural folk: a reserved quota in government jobs and admissions in educational institutions for certain 'scheduled' castes, tribes, and other backward classes provided by the Constitution of India to uplift their social status and livelihoods. While the need for such 'affirmative action' was strongly felt by the authors of the Indian Constitution in the 1950s, mainly Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, himself a big reformer, the reservation has always remained controversial. This is mainly because a large number of elites who do not come under this scheme complain that it discriminates against their hard work and merit and argue that everyone must compete equally and work towards improving themselves. However, the fact remains that most of these elites occupy powerful positions in the government as well as the corporate or business world. The reservation is the only provision that helps many marginalized students enrol in universities and pursue higher education. But even after joining elite institutions, the unfairness towards Dalits is not over, as the film shows. 'So far, the Dalits were untouchable,' points out a speaker in the film, 'and now when we come to the educational institutions, they've become *uneducable*—you cannot be taught, we are often told' (*CR*, 0:28:50).

Since the state-own universities are funded through people's tax money, they must cater to the public at large, especially to the most downtrodden of the society. Hence the education and facilities provided by government-run universities are also highly subsidized so that the poorest students can afford them. In fact, at campuses like Delh's JNU, they made provisions to give extra marks or credits to the students coming from remote or underprivileged regions of India, especially supporting women. These provisions, however, do not always get respected and are often exploited to exclude the marginalized people from the facilities that have been constitutionally promised for them. When students witness such injustice on the campuses, they see them as a reflection of the larger injustice in the country. Thus, they find it imperative to raise their voices and become political while pursuing regular studies and research.

Political Documentary Film

The documentary film medium has been used extensively to support peoples' resistance movements (Gulati 2017). Since mainstream media platforms do not help to disseminate documentary film, film festivals and informal screening venues are some of the only places where people get to see films about people's struggles. After its completion in August 2017, *Campus Rising* was also screened before a variety of audiences at numerous national and international venues, such as Film South Asia (Kathmandu 2017), Madurai Film Festival 2017, and Mumbai International Film Festival 2018 among others. The purpose of showing it was not only to inspire the youth to raise their voice against injustice but also to make the general public aware of the larger goals of educational institutions. Since a large number of people in India support the ideology of the current government, some viewers complained that the film appears to be biased towards a particular kind of political ideology. Someone in the audience even suspected me of belonging to the Congress or the Left parties. Repeatedly I had to state that I do not represent any political party with this film, but I also agreed that the film is politically positioned.

One may expect a newspaper or TV news channel to be unbiased. A documentary film, however, is not a news bulletin or a newspaper headline. It is more like an editorial, an opinion column, or commentary on the ongoing events. It can even be seen as a personal or subjective statement by a filmmaker. A documentary film uses creative and artistic styles of storytelling to make a statement, unlike the newspapers that are supposed to point out 'plain facts.' While the impact of news is immediate and direct, sometimes even shocking, a documentary film, if done right, expects its audience to sit back and slowly reflect upon the film's issue. Any news gets old and stale immediately after being told or heard, whereas a good documentary film should be timeless.

Some viewers asked me if the problems being discussed in the film, i.e. caste discrimination and the curtailing of freedom, etc., have arisen only recently, that is, after the coming of the Modi government, or if they existed even earlier? In fact, many existed earlier too—JNU in Delhi, which spearheads most of the students' movements, has been politically active since the early 1970s when it was established. There were students' protests during the rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, especially during the 1975-77 State of Emergency. Many students were even arrested along with other oppositional politicians. According to some who witnessed the Emergency, however,

repressive measures were not as bad then as they are now during the Modi rule (Deeksha 2019). One of the underlying themes of *Campus Rising* is the students' anger against the current BJP government. The film is thus not only a documentation of the students' protests but also a tool that inspires them to revolt against suppression and discrimination anywhere.

Documentary Film in the Times of Information Capitalism

A trained and professional documentary filmmaker today is faced with many challenges. The video-making technology has become very affordable and easy to use—anyone with a smartphone can shoot good quality video and make it instantly public on the internet. This might be seen as a democratization of media or the empowerment of people who previously did not have the means to use media. However, the untrained video-makers and most of their audience today assume that you do not need training or special skills to make movies. Probably not having been exposed to great documentaries and world cinema, they also do not fully recognize the quality standards and extremely hard work and nuances that go into the making of professional movies. Many see the documentary film as an extension of news or journalistic reporting and do not recognize the artistic, creative, and conceptual possibilities of the medium.

Even surveillance camera recordings or amateur home videos of babies, pets, and cooking, etc. gather tremendous hits or become viral. Most of the viral videos are simply sensuous (appealing to the senses) rather than cerebral or thought-provoking, although that does not mean that such videos cannot be powerful or cannot motivate people to mobilize. Social media sites are full of amateur videos, often with false information, that polarize the masses towards a certain ideology or identity politics, even provoking them to act, often violently.

I do not reject amateur videography and cell phone footage—after all, local news and unusual events are being reported now via personal phones. Many media activists have also involved local communities in South Asia to produce videos using mobile phones depicting the daily lives in their localities or settlements, making them a tool of empowerment. In the cases of people's or students' movements such as protests and rallies that get curbed or muzzled by state forces, the participants' video recording and the footage itself becomes a very powerful tool of resistance and its documentation, as we have seen in the recent cases of political movements such as

the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt (Baladi 2016). CCTV and mobile footage are regularly presented as evidence in the court of law to settle cases. Of course, the images and footage are also often being photoshopped to alter reality to suit political ends. It needs to be mentioned here because in the case of protests carried out in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016 and later, video footage of some slogan-shouting people was used, even doctored somewhat, to claim that anti-India and pro-Kashmir slogans were raised in the campus by a set of left-leaning student activists. This is something that has been featured in this film as well (*CR*, 0:11:48).

With this scenario of popular videography, the next challenge for a documentary filmmaker is to find professional work and clients who are able to fund such films. They cannot always hope to get documentary projects from TV channels and often have to take on odd video jobs for smaller clients or institutions. Most new clients today, when they look at a proposed production budget, ask, 'Why do you need so much money for this? Can't you just shoot and edit it on your iPhone?' Many of the less experienced videographers today are ready to charge much less to get work compared to what a senior or trained filmmaker did. The conceptual quality (maybe not the technical quality) of the videos made by videographers with less training would differ from a professionally produced film. But very few of the new clients care for or recognize the difference. One client, who wanted me to make a film about the career of a senior human rights lawyer told me, 'we want a film which should grab the attention of YouTube visitors in its first 30 seconds.' It didn't matter if the audience sits through the rest of the film or not.

The creative treatment of audio and visuals in a film is also something that many business-minded clients may not fully appreciate. To many, an 'informational' film has to simply preach the facts in a linear and literal manner. For instance, the images must correspond to what is being said in the commentary, etc. Any deviation or mismatch between images and sound may look like an error to some unless they are open to diverse interpretations. A couple of scenes in *Campus Rising*, for instance, use a counterpoint or an almost sarcastic juxtaposition, which an attentive viewer can catch. One example is when the film actor Anupam Kher, who is sympathetic to the BJP government, explains in a speech at JNU that, 'Instead of only highlighting the negative aspects, one should show what good things the government is doing all over India.' Simultaneously, the film depicts a map of India, pinpointing the incidents of mob-lynching of Muslims or Dalits carried out by violent cow vigilantes who got protection from the government (*CR*, 0:19:12). Similarly, while an activist mentions that the

students must decide what the education budgets should be, a graphic animation shows how military budgets are soaring while education budgets are being reduced (*CR*, 0:52:48). Such a sarcastic juxtaposition of audio and visuals is possible in a political or independent documentary and probably not in a 'corporate-type' work produced for a client.

Conclusion

A documentary filmmaker is at a crossroads today, at least in South Asia. The extremely hard work that s/he goes through while learning the skill and making good quality films is only appreciated by a minority. There is still no standard platform where all sorts of documentary films can be found and watched (unlike a published book that can be found in a library or a bookstore). Even a scholar of documentary film has to struggle a lot to find most of the films that have been made in India. Due to this lack of access, only a few books have been published on Indian documentary films (Kishore 2018, Battaglia 2018). Even the internet is far from representing most Indian documentaries. Independent filmmakers can only access popular platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video with difficulty to show their content. Thus, many Indian documentaries with great content do not reach large audiences.

In terms of competing with younger filmmakers, I feel that the great world cinema, the experimental documentary and the art videos that I or my peers were used to watching while we learned filmmaking in the late-1980s and early 90s, which gave us a better understanding of the visual medium and cinema, has not been part of the education of the 'millennial' generation. Originality, copyright, plagiarism, and the exclusivity of what you create have a very different meaning today. The latest technology and gadgets of high definition, Ultra HD, and so on have many times surpassed the limited means with which the filmmakers worked until the early 2000s. But the aesthetics today are all about creating a glitzy and sharp image and mind-blowing effects, with little thought or thought-provoking content that can make an impression on the thinking of the viewer.

Campus Rising, for instance, does not use any attractive or superficial effects to heighten its message—it simply expects the audience to listen to the voices being portrayed in the film. The concluding clips of the students in the last few minutes show hope and inspiration for the youth to rise and revolt against a government and a system that suppresses freedom and discriminates socially (*CR*, 1:14:00). In any case, the

bigger question that the film's screenings raises is: does the documentary film merely document a social movement or can it also inspire social change?

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Thrust into Heaven: Ambiguity and Degradation in Multi-Mediated Ethnographic Research

Jürgen Schaflechner

Abstract

Navigating around stereotypes of Islam and non-Muslim belonging in Pakistan, Thrust into Heaven showcases instances of so-called "forced conversion" of Hindu girls to Islam. These incidents often follow a sequence: a young Hindu woman disappears from her house or place of work, and resurfaces again as a married and newly converted Muslim. Once a conversion occurs and has been publicly announced, a combination of legal issues and the street power of extremist religious groups makes it nearly impossible for newly converted women to go back to their former life. On the one hand, some of these conversions are utilized to conceal criminal acts including kidnapping, human trafficking, and rape. On the other hand, they are examples of female agency and ways in which young women navigate through Pakistan's rigid patriarchal society. Struggling for a dialogic approach to this sensitive topic, this film aims to give room to the various interpretations that emerge around the alleged forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan.

Keywords: Hindustan in Pakistan, forced conversion, Karachi, Pakistan

Introduction

Cases of alleged forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam are a contentious political issue in Pakistan today. Often these conversions are immediately followed by the neophyte's arranged marriage into a Muslim family, making it difficult for their families to trace their whereabouts. In public discourses about such 'forced conversion and marriage' (from now on: FCM) the involved women's voice, agency, and intentions are often questioned and put on trial. Any research into these incidents, thus, needs to critically engage with the politics and representations of Hindu women in Pakistan today. While I cannot confirm that ethnographic film provides a solution to the conundrum of representation (Solanas and Octavio 1969), I nevertheless argue that multi-mediated research results—in this case film and text—can speak about and, in fact, perform the said predicament of representation through discursive and affective milieus. With the help of one scene from *Thrust into Heaven* I will show how even in direct interview situations, where women speak about their choices, the audience is left in doubt about who is 'actually' talking. At this moment, *Thrust into Heaven* repeats what it set out to criticize in the various media representations of FCM: the lack of voice and agency given to the women involved.

The impulse for studying the FCM of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan emerged out of my Ph.D. research on the pilgrimage of Hinglaj Devi in Baluchistan. Between the years 2009 to 2015, I studied the gradual solidification of narratives and rituals at this Goddess shrine, which had developed into one of the main centers of Hindu worship in Pakistan within only a few decades (Schaflechner 2018). During my numerous conversations with Hinglaj followers in Pakistan and India, people repeatedly mentioned the issue of forced conversion of young Hindu women to Islam and frequently described it as a severe threat to Hindu existence in Pakistan. Most Hindus agreed that zealous Islamists were behind these cases and that forced conversions were an attempt to rid Pakistan of its non-Muslims. In 2010, following the abduction of Kasturi Methi, a peasant Hindu woman from Tharparkar in Sindh, I started to document such and similar cases hoping to understand them better.[1]

In 2012 I received a research grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG) through the Cluster 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context' (University of Heidelberg) to analyze such potentially forced conversions and marriages in Pakistan.

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[1] This was only possible with the help of numerous individuals and organizations. I want to thank the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), the Pakistan Hindu Council (PHC) the Pakistani Hindus Seva (PHS) particularly.

Methodologically this study combined fieldwork in Sindh—to meet the women involved (whenever possible), the alleged culprits, family members, and activists—with a study of how FCM has come to be represented on national TV, as well as in the print and online media. The project management furthermore agreed to finance the production of an independent ethnographic documentary film on the same topic. This resulted in the 2016 film *Thrust into Heaven* (Schaflechner 2016) as well as in my 2017 paper "'Forced' conversion and (Hindu) women's agency in Sindh" (Schaflechner 2017).[2]

Pen and Camera

This opportunity allowed me to plan the production of a film and the composition of academic writing side by side. While I already had some experiences with ethnographic film, other research undertakings had a clear trajectory from the beginning. The film *…On Becoming Gods* (Schaflechner 2011), for example, was intended as a visual supplement to my Ph.D. research. The article *Economy of Sacrifice* (Schaflechner 2015), on the other hand, was the outcome of the research that I had conducted primarily for a film on the Devipujak community in Karachi a couple of years before (Schaflechner 2013). This multimedia project, however, was planned not to privilege either film over text or text over the film.

It quickly became clear, however, that the production of the film would largely take over the research. The film needed more resources in equipment as well as personnel. A second cameraperson, for example, was necessary to provide the film's B-rolls. Luckily, I found a great companion in Daaver Shah, at that time an art student from Karachi University, who swiftly proved indispensable for solving technical difficulties and who showed a skillful talent for sussing out remarkable film locations. The film also needed support in the post-production, which I had in Sarah Ewald, with whom I edited all of my films before *Thrust into Heaven*. Sarah was also responsible for many decisions regarding the film's storyline. Sunjesh Dhanja, the president of the Pakistan Hindu Seva, a Karachi based NGO which had worked on such cases for years, and who features prominently in the film was a crucial organizer for many contacts. Sunjesh and his team made numerous field trips to meet victims and family

members, and they were often the sole reason why people opened up to us and in front of our cameras.

The decision to produce a film also took over the ways of doing research 'in the field.' Even in the initial stages of my research, many meetings became 'film-oriented'— notwithstanding if there was a camera around or not. After a few contacts, when people had become aware of my intention to produce a film on the topic, they often pointed me towards 'filmable' events such as press conferences, protests, or meetings with politicians. At times such events happened unpremeditatedly (or at least I heard of them on short notice), so I started carrying my film equipment with me more often.[3] This also meant more difficulty (and anxiety) when traveling through Karachi by rickshaw. In hindsight, during the research for this project, I was more a filmmaker who also happened to write a paper, than a writer who produced a low budget ethnographic film.

The Muddy Waters of Forced Conversion and Marriage in Pakistan[4]

While local media in Sindh often reported on Hindu women who went missing, particularly the fate of women from the scheduled castes rarely made national news in Pakistan. This changed in spring 2014, when Rinkle Kumari, the daughter of a well-off Hindu family from the north of Sindh, disappeared from her home, converted to Islam, and married a young Muslim man. The incident caused an unprecedented uproar and national and international media outlets started to pay more attention to alleged incidents of forced conversions (TiH 16:53–17:30). The fact that Rinkle came from an affluent Hindu family, and not from the often-overlooked scheduled castes, certainly was one reason for such intensified interest.

This new public concern was a double-edged sword, however. On the one hand, Rinkle Kumari's disappearance and conversion had put a spotlight on (non-Muslim) women's rights in Pakistan and especially on the fate of many peasant Hindu girls. It revealed the workings of patriarchal Sindh and made the commodification and

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3 Aside from a Panasonic GH4, which recorded most of the stable shots, I also brought a Panasonic XA-25 with me to Pakistan. What this film camera lacks in image quality, it makes up in versatility. I often carried it with me when there were no shots scheduled. Most spontaneous events, therefore, were filmed—often hand-held—on the XA-25.

4 In this part, I will only provide a short overview of the obstacles that emerge when researching FCM. For a more detailed study see my 2017 paper.

treatment of impoverished women within feudal structures visible. In other words, Hindu women and their limited rights became a matter of public interest, which helped to highlight the involved women's demands to be heard.

On the other hand, however, the heightened media interest failed to produce a multilayered platform from which these women's stories could be heard. Quite the contrary: the media became one of the main agents in splitting the public, as it helped to produce two opposing blocs. Their particular groups were tied to each other based on rejecting the other side's claims. One side saw an alliance of a variety of (often antagonistic) Islamic groups (Barelvis, Deobandis, Ahl-e Hadith), who opposed a bloc consisting of liberal Pakistanis, human and minority rights activists, as well as Sindhi nationalists. Both sides, however, were triangulated by their shared rejection of the often complex and multilayered events behind such cases. They were intrinsically tied to each other in their mutual and silent agreement that the women involved had no say in this issue. Especially Rinkle Kumari's case showed that a large part of the representation of forced conversion in Pakistan today is based on the structural exclusion of the voice and agency of the women involved (Schaflechner 2017, 297–308).

In the following I will analyze this latter point through what I consider to be one of *Thrust into Heaven's* central scenes: the interviews by two allegedly newly converted Muslim women called Sherbano (formerly Sapna) and Aliya (formerly Puja) who embraced Islam at Bharchundi Sharif,[5] the same shrine where Rinkle Kumari also converted.[6] With the help of this scene, I will be able to show the advantages of multi-mediated results for the study of FCM in particular and ethnographical research in general. Before I will be able to do that, however, I will need to provide some background on how this scene came about.

Setting the Scene

To meet with Mian Mitho we had to drive to Ghotki, a district in the North of Sindh, around eight hours by car from Karachi. Sameer Mandhro, a former journalist at *The*

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5 Bharchundi Sharif is a Muslim shrine under the patronage of Mitho's family and famous for conversions to Islam in Sindh.

6 My experiences while screening the film to a large variety of audiences were one crucial incentive for choosing this particular segment. Frequently Q&As came back to this scene and the many different ways of interpreting it. I want to take this opportunity to thank the people who engaged with me on the film and who have contributed to my thinking and my reflections over the years.

Express Tribune in Karachi, had established contact with Mitho, the alleged mastermind behind Rinkle Kumari's disappearance and the face of many alleged forced conversions and marriages of Hindu women in Sindh.

The interior Sindh is notorious for influential landowning elites such as Mitho or Ajub Jan Sarhandi (TiH, 34:13–54:37). Both embody religious piety and local sovereignty and often enjoy immense authority amongst their supporters. Mitho and Sarhandi can exert influence on the local police as well as the local media. Research in these corners of Sindh can, therefore, be tricky, and careful planning is essential. Sameer was confident about his connections in the north of Sindh, but he was also obviously nervous to drive into an unknown area with two non-Sindhis and thousands of Euros of filming equipment. Originally, we were scheduled to stay for two days; after some hours of filming, however, Sameer suggested not remaining in Ghokti but spending the night at one of his friends near Khairpur. This segment was thus shot within 8 hours.

Abdul Haq a.k.a Mian Mitho had been surprisingly eager to meet with us and discuss the events around Rinkle Kumari. Meeting Mitho in person was different than I had expected. Parts of the media had painted him as a ruthless Islamist who allegedly had a hand in the conversion of hundreds, maybe thousands of non-Muslim women.[7] Along these lines, I expected a staunch and larger than life ideologue whose main intention was to spread Islam among the non-Muslims of Pakistan. In real life, however, Mitho appeared fragile. He had visibly aged compared to the many TV interviews he gave in the aftermath of Rinkle's disappearance in spring 2012. He often sported a little smile which mirrored this conviction that he had done nothing wrong and had fallen victim to a conspiracy against him. He kept repeating this narrative to us throughout our stay (cf. TiH, 18:03—19:27).

I repeatedly asked Mitho about Rinkle Kumari, now Faryal Shah, and he told us that we would be able to talk to her on the phone at a later point in time.[8] He suggested that we could interview other women who had converted at Bharchundi Sharif instead. He also mentioned that a Hindu couple was scheduled to convert to Islam right on the day of our visit, and we would be able to film the event. Upon asking, Mian Mitho told us that we would not be able to do the interviews with the women alone because they would

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7 An article from 2019 shows that this has not changed over the last years: https://theprint.in/opinion/mianmithu-the-extremist-cleric-whom-hindu-families-dread-in-pakistans-sindh/292617/

8 This promise, however, was never kept. The reason given was that she was busy being a mother and that she had married into a very conservative Muslim family. Our request to receive her number for contacting her at a later point from Karachi was ignored. Compare here TiH, 22:40–25:48.

not talk to us. The segment described in detail below is the result of this suggestion.

The journey from Mitho's guest house to Bharchundi Sharif resulted in the scene at 19:28. After stepping out of the car, I film Mitho entering into the dargah (TiH, 20:50). Between 21:22 and 21:31 the camera records a group of young Quran students standing on the left side of the courtyard. From the film material it is clear that, upon seeing us, they start moving towards Mitho and encircle him in the middle of the square. After re-watching the recorded material in the post-production, it became obvious that the students had been put there and were directed to move right at the moment when Mitho enters the Bharchundi Sharif. The scene, thus, shows him as a philanthropist, a narrative that he did not tire to repeat. The segment, however, has much more to offer. It not only shows how the film sets Mitho in a scene but also how he and his team set the scene *for us*. Admittedly minor in the narrative structure and easily overlooked, this *mise en scéne*, however, introduces the disposition for the later interviews with Sherbano and Aliya.

The Scene

The interviews with Sherbano and Aliya start when one of Mian Mitho's men suggests also talking to two newly converted women (28:00). The scene's framing, however, begins a bit earlier (at 26:10), when the distribution of people present in the room is visible. We, i.e. Sameer, Daaver and I, are seated towards the right side of the room. Mian Mitho and his associates (amongst them a few of his family members) sit down on the left side of the room, thus almost forming a circle. Sherbano and Aliya will take their seats in the middle of this circle of men. My camera is hand-held throughout and tells the segment's main narrative. The second camera first takes the scene's establishing shot of the room and later provides the B-roll close-ups of the speakers. The interviews start after a group of people (whom we had not met before) are ushered into the room.

At 28:48 Sherbano, a young, newly converted woman is told to come forward to sit down in front of the camera. The scene shows Mitho and three of his men sitting right behind her. Mitho's gaze is recorded as it wanders from the young woman to the camera and back. Sherbano speaks confidently into the camera; her words, however, do not tell much about her situation. She repeats how she wanted to become a Muslim because she likes how women are treated in Islam. She is asked by one of Mitho's family members how she likes the people at Bharchundi Sharif, to which she responds,

they are like parents to her. Sherbano says that there were no troubles at her home but adds that she will not miss anyone from her family.[9] She smiles a lot when she speaks; her smile, however, disappears after each of her sentences. She recites the *shahada* (profession of faith in Islam) and asks if she is done.

At 30:10 Aliya comes in front of the camera. Aliya appears to be less confident. She often lowers her eyes when she speaks and her every gaze wanders through the room. Aliyah says she converted a month ago and that it was her wish to become a Muslim. She adds that Islam respects women. When Aliyah is asked if she does *namaz* (Muslim prayer), she says no and adds that she never learned it.[10] She says that she likes Islam because Muslims recite the *shahada*. Her interview ends with Mian Mitho telling her that she can go.

Scenes of Ambiguity and Degradation

The two women's scarce knowledge about Islam, their way of expressing the reasons for their decisions as well as how they were presented to a foreign camera team surrounded by a group of men produces a degrading scene. Sherbano and Aliyah say very little about their situation and their words are commented upon or explained by the men around them (including how they eventually have been represented in *Thrust into Heaven's* final cut). The men sitting behind the women provide the segment with an ominous atmosphere, which becomes amplified when paying close attention to Mian Mitho's facial expressions throughout the scene.

My interview with the women contributes to the situation's ambiguity and degradation. My questions—and the circumstances under which they were asked—fail to elucidate the circumstances that led them to Bharchundi Sharif and instead add to a crude representation of Sherbano and Aliyah. At this moment, *Thrust into Heaven* repeats what it set out to criticize in the various media representations of FCM: the lack of voice and agency given to the women involved. The scene performatively explicates the obscurity of incidents of forced conversion as even in situations where women speak about their choices, the audience is left in doubt about who is 'actually' talking. The segment performs and reproduces the discourse of forced conversion and

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9 Due to social pressure, new converts to Islam cannot go back to live with their non-Muslim families. Furthermore, because of understandings of piety, young unmarried women cannot live on their own and, thus, need to be married off to a Muslim man.

10 In this situation I misheard Aliyah saying that she never prayed, leading to the brief confusion.

marriage, which is constituted on questioning and even excluding the involved women's agencies. This double-bind—on the one hand hearing the women speak, but on the other having to doubt their words—is one of the main characteristics of cases of FCM.

Starting with 2012, especially in the aftermath of the Rinkle Kumari case, it became increasingly clear that such ambiguity is not a byproduct, but rather the *modus operandi* of FCM. This opacity and the impossibility of claiming any objective standpoint on the issue without making a political decision have a variety of reasons, and I have spoken about them at length (Schaflechner 2017). A film about such a topic, thus, needed to reflect the ambiguity and the degradation as central parts of how such cases are represented.

Mediating this in *Thrust into Heaven's* filmic form was one of the driving forces behind the editing of the above-mentioned scene (and others). The interviews, of course, needed to be shortened and subtitled. Sarah and I needed to provide the segment with a narrative framework, with protagonists, and a timeline. Nonetheless, we attempted to produce a final cut which not only reflects the ambiguity intrinsic to FCM cases but also hints at the degradation often at play when such incidents are represented today. Here the filmic montage provided the means to supply the segment with an open and ambivalent affective charge, which subsequently leaves it up to the audience how to *feel* about this scene. The absence of a narrating voice, as well as the intentionally short wording of the text introducing and finishing the segment, furthermore, contributes to the production of such ambivalent affects. This ability to perform parts of my experiences while researching FCM in the film is one important addition of audio-visual representations to the academic prose.

Text and Film

Multi-mediated results yield advantages over representing ethnography through one medium only—be that film or text. This is obvious. In this section, I want to look more closely at how my research on FCM gained from its multi-mediated results.[11]

The academic prose provided the study of FCM with a comprehensive history, an

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11 Including this essay, the results of the project have been made public on four platforms: as an academic paper, as a film, as a short online essay which included filmed interviews (https://theconversation.com/forced- conversions-of-hindu-women-to-islam-in-pakistan-another-perspective-102726), and finally, this text which aims to establish the relationship between all of them.

analysis of its media representations, and a variety of case-studies. Academia's rules demand meticulous details, dates, and attestable evidence from research. In my written description of the aforementioned scene, however, I struggled and ultimately failed to provide the situation's 'affective charge.' My thick description of the segment was lacking in its ability to establish the ambiguity of the moment. The illustration of too many details produced tedious and loquacious prose, often unfit for the standards of peer-reviewed publication. A simplification of the writing, however, supplied the segment with an unwarranted narrative consistency which led me to abandon a written representation of the scene altogether.[12] In hindsight I can say that the filmic vmontage made it possible to produce a segment with generous space for interpretation. The camera's eye, combined with a certain style of editing, gave the people's facial expressions, gestures, and looks the central stage. This produced new, non-verbal expressions of the study's results.

Filming had also helped to depict the distribution of actors in space and the affective charge that such an arrangement entails. For some scenes, it was important to not only focus on the interviewee but also show how the speaker is positioned and who else is present without being shown in the mainframe. Some of the B-rolls not only serve an aesthetic purpose, therefore, but contribute to understanding how interviews were conducted and which spatial distributions have yielded the words said. This is particularly important for the above-mentioned segment but also for other moments in the film (see also 37:38 and 49:04).

Finally, reflecting on *Thrust into Heaven* in writing provides another plane from which one can engage with the material. Without intending to produce an additional (maybe superfluous) metanarrative at this point, I nevertheless want to emphasize how this circular process, unfolding from multi-mediated research results, foregrounds seemingly minor details in the study of FCM. But one example is Mitho's grand entrance into Bharchundi Sharif. The scene records how our host orchestrated a *mise en scéne* for our visit, thus contributing an air of ambiguity to the subsequent interview segments. The numerous Q&A sessions following the film's screenings at universities all over the world indicate that most viewers would not pay much attention to this minor part. Pointing it out during the discussions—or now in this essay—provides additional insights that may retroactively change the perception of the film (and the paper).

Conclusion

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12 In my short synopsis of the scene above, I intentionally left out descriptions such as nervously, shyly, or cautiously which, to my taste, would have qualified the situation with more certainty than appropriate at this moment.

As already stated in the introduction to this issue, Max Kramer and I lay emphasis on film and its potentialities for slow-paced and multi-mediated research results as a reaction to the hegemony of textual productions in ethnography. Our approach does not aim to privilege one medium over the other, however. As this essay has shown, the production of film in combination with academic prose not only supplies the implied audience/reader with a broader picture of cases of FCM. Its recursive reflection also produces novel planes of engagement that may retroactively change the perception of both film and text. Taking this particular case study as an example, I have shown how multi-mediated research results yield a large number of potentialities and synergies for the social sciences.

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Shahbaz Qalandar

Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal-Naqvi

Abstract

The film Shahbaz Qalandar explores the vital role played by the Qalandariyya Sufi Order in the spiritual life of the town of Sehwan in Sindh, Pakistan, the last remaining centre of Qalandari dervishes in the world, and a major hub of intersectional piety in the wider region. Shahbaz Qalandar is a scholarly intervention into popular discourse, deploying the audio-visual impact and accessibility of film, with the aim of highlighting the religious coherence and historical continuity of the Islamic spiritual center at Sehwan. This paper is a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal Naqvi: it reflects on the film-making process as experienced by academic scholars.

Keywords: Sufism, Sehwan Sharif, Islam

Filming 'Shahbaz Qalandar': From Spectacle to Meaning

Introduction

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the 'Red Falcon,' God's beloved friend, is the pulsing heart of Sehwan, a small town in Sindh, 300 km north of Karachi. Known in common parlance as Sehwan Sharif ('Revered Sehwan'), the life of the town revolves around the shrine of the *Qalandari* Sufi Saint Syed Muhammad Usman Marwandi (d. 1274) or Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Sehwan is the last remaining center of the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order in the world today. Attracting over 5 million pilgrims a year, Sehwan is not only one of the most visited and venerated sacred geographies in South Asia, but it is also arguably one of the most uniquely vibrant. Often characterized in popular discourse as 'the greatest party on earth,'[1] the shrine culture's very uniqueness and vibrancy have served to obscure the core realities of the *Qalandariyya* spiritual path integral to the ritual at Sehwan.

The shrine welcomes all to partake of the saint's *barakah* (holy blessing), and a motley crowd visits for a variety of reasons and motivations: Sunnis, Shi'as, Hindus, women, transgenders, aristocrats, beggars – and, some spectators. There are no set prescriptions, no preaching; thus neither spectators nor many devotees are fully aware of the history and theology underlying the sacred space of Shahbaz Qalandar. The vibrant spectacle, and the impressive numbers attracted to the saint, especially at the annual *'urs* celebrations, have generated numerous visual and print media pieces on shrine culture at Sehwan, including some documentaries,[2] but not one is interested in the question of what the rituals at Sehwan *mean*, what they signify, and have signified for centuries, to the initiated inner circle who safeguard the space.

Our film *Shahbaz Qalandar* (from now on: *SQ*) was made to root the devotional rites – epitomized by the electrifying drumming and dance called *dhamal* – in their historical and theological context. The film seeks to capture the sensory experience of *being* in the midst of 'the greatest party on earth,' whilst simultaneously understanding the multi-layered meanings that sanctify the ritual practices at the heart of this chaotic pageantry. Letting pictures and voices at Sehwan speak for themselves, *SQ* demonstrates how the rituals of the *Qalandariyya* are built largely around the Islamic

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1 The title of a famous piece on Sehwan by celebrity journalist Declan Walsh published in the Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/04/pakistan.travel

2 The two feature-length documentaries released before *SQ* are: *Mast Qalandar* (2005) by Till Passow; and *The Qalandar Code: The Rise of the Divine Feminine* (2018) by Atiya Khan

symbolism of Imam Husain, and the sacred history of the events of Kerbala. Using the mass medium of film allows us to make this critical contribution to both academic knowledge *and* public discourse.

Hasan Ali Khan's extensive research on the *Qalandariyya* and Sehwan served as the blueprint for the film *SQ,* and he directed all investigations at the site. *SQ* was shot by film-makers Shabbir Siraj, Nofil Naqvi, Talha Muneer, and Umair Bilal, supported by technical assistants Aamir Khadim and Nadeem Abbas, and by line- producer Hamza Arif. The editing was completed, at various stages, by Talha Muneer, Shabbir Siraj, and Owais Khan. The final script was a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and his fellow academic, Aliya Iqbal Naqvi, who is also the narrator for the film.

This essay is a collaboration between Hasan Ali Khan and Aliya Iqbal Naqvi, reflecting on the film-making process. It explores the heuristic value of the experience, the reflections, the challenges, and rewards of making this film for all those involved. Given the self-reflexive nature and auto-ethnographic lens of this writing, we will henceforth refer to members of the film team by the first name. Key members of the team, Shabbir and Hamza, were interviewed for this essay.

Hasan: How This Film was Made

I initially conceived of *SQ* as a medium for ethnography and the historical documentation of Sehwan's religious landscape. The wider vision was to make a film with scholarly depth which would appeal to both academic and lay audiences.

For several years, I have been researching the history, beliefs, and practices of the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order, previously an Asia-wide phenomenon now existing only in Sehwan (and its satellites). My association with the location goes back to 2009 when I was introduced to Sehwan as part of the research team working with the French Interdisciplinary Mission in Sindh (MIFS) under Professor Michel Boivin. Once MIFS quit Pakistan in 2012, I continued my work independently, expanding my base of contacts, and producing a series of research papers on the *Qalandariyya* and Sehwan. I realized that for one of the most important and religiously diverse Sufi shrines in the region, works of academic prose would simply not do justice to its reality, or to the role it plays in the lives of its adherents. It was then that I thought seriously about attempting a visual ethnography, a film that would be more for teaching than commercial use.

In April 2015, the project commenced with my old colleague Shabbir, an independent

filmmaker, and his D7 camera, for fun, without a budget. Like every other visitor to Sehwan, our initial focus was on the *dhamal*, the dramatic ritual dance of the Qalandars. As Shabbir says, 'the first trip was just meant to be a survey, but we ended up shooting very effectively, especially the *naqqaras* (drums) and *dhamal.'* Shabbir also noted that some of the best footage in the final film was captured without a plan, 'just because we happened to be at the right place at the right time,' including the iconic shot of the never-ending red *chadar* with which the film opens (0:00:37). Such serendipitous shots were among the happiest consequences of being forced, for more frustrating reasons, to make multiple trips.

Based on the initial footage captured with Shabbir, I proposed the idea of a feature-length documentary on the *Qalandariyya* to my employer, Habib University (from now on: HU). A small budget of 84,000 Pakistani rupees, at the time nearly 1000 USD, was allocated for the film, which only covered logistical costs; while equipment, technical resources, and most of the manpower were loaned from the HU Film Studio. The process of filming continued with Nofil until he left HU, followed by new HU faculty Talha and Umair, who went to Sehwan with me to capture some critical final footage. Both Aamir and Nadeem, the technical assistants for the film, also left HU. The film was eventually edited by Talha and the final tweaking was done by Owais, also at HU. For the sound and voice-over work, done by Shabbir in 2016, we ran into difficulties at HU but were granted use of the Journalism Center's studios at IBA, courtesy of the director.

For a historian like me, work generally means the solitary activity of producing academic papers. A film, however, is, by necessity, a group enterprise and contingent on external factors not in the control of the scholar. The difficulties in making the film were manifold. There was the sheer heat, the crowds, and the odd timings at which we had to shoot the film. As Shabbir reminds us, the scorching temperatures would heat the cameras which would then refuse to switch on until cooled for at least half an hour. For me, as a non-technical producer-director, the technical challenges were the greatest obstacle. There was very little money, we worked with borrowed equipment, different sorts for each visit, and everyone worked for free. Employee turnover at Habib University is high, which resulted in several different people shooting different portions of the film. We thus ended up with critical inconsistencies in the quality of footage: several key scenes had to be shot multiple times. The use of different grades of cameras and other equipment made the color-grading and sound correction especially difficult for Talha and Owais who nevertheless managed to produce a polished final

cut. I learned all this on the job, initially dependent on the expertise of whoever was available.

Despite the challenges, the film came together because of the goodwill of individual colleagues. This is a representative illustration of how things often happen in Pakistan: excellent work is done, but the impetus usually comes from individuals who choose to collaborate, rather than through any driving institutional vision. The great advantage, however, of being based at a university in Karachi was that I always had ready access to both Sehwan and technical resources. It was more or less possible to hop into a car with someone from the HU film studio and go off on a shoot without much prior planning.

Aliya: Why Such a Film Should be Made

Hasan's determination to make this film, despite all odds, sprang from a variety of concerns. I would like to focus, however, on one major concern that affected all of us who worked with him. We worked on *SQ*, without compensation and with a sense of ownership, because something about the importance, the urgency, of what Hasan wanted to convey, resonated with us. The film team constituted *SQ's* first audience, even before it was made. The process of making the film taught us what the film sets out to say: that there is a deep-rooted, coherent, and very *Islamic* context underlying the spectacle at Sehwan.

As Pakistanis, as Muslims, the journey of making this film, of seeing the *Qalandariyya* through the lens of Hasan's research, whilst simultaneously experiencing the sensory overload of Sehwan itself, was transformative. I am especially interested in this aspect of *SQ* – what it means for urban Muslim Pakistanis to have made this film, and what it might mean for them to view and experience this film, especially our students. Hasan writes that he 'conceived of attempting ... a film made more for teaching...' For me, as the other local academic, this potential student audience is paramount. Hasan and I teach in newly minted 'Liberal Arts' programs that have created a special space for critical engagement with Pakistani orthodoxies, by Pakistanis with Pakistanis. It is tricky, of course, but *SQ* adds a new dimension to this ongoing creation of a nascent post-nationalist discourse within Pakistan.

In cities, where the pressures of modern Islamic reformism (including the state version) is stronger, one is constantly forced to negotiate the public identity of being Muslim,

no matter where one might fall, personally, on the spectrum of belief. Despite the debates and enmities that abound, modern Islamic discourses (whether they be Wahabi, Tablighi, Deobandi, westernized, nationalist, even Shi'a) are mediated by a 19th century British Protestant conception of what proper religion *should* be: a rationally delineable, legalist orthopraxy.[3] On the other side is the thing widely labeled 'Sufism,' associated with tolerance, color, music, irrationality, backwardness, heresy, and Coke Studio (prioritized according to one's modernist orthodoxy of choice).

'It wasn't the first time at Sehwan for many of us,' reports Hamza, 'but it was the first time any of us went beyond the idea that all Sehwan is, is a party town where you can smoke hash on the streets without being bothered.' None of us meant any harm: we came in peace, attracted to the exhilarating music, the transgressive freedoms. But we came without any understanding of what it was actually about, nor, in the unconscious hubris of our modern educated-ness, even the awareness that such an understanding may be important and lacking in us. In Karachi, from where the film team hails, we are all differentiated by the particularities of our backgrounds; but in Sehwan, our common distance from the Qalandar mode of being lumped us together into the category of white-collar city-slickers, products of colonial modernity, viewing the locus of Shahbaz Qalandar as a weird and wonderful place of otherness.

Before *SQ*, the name Sehwan conjured for me vague images of a joyous rustic devotionalism, a dumbed-down, incoherent relic of what was once a tradition rooted in the high Sufi philosophy of a long-gone Islamic golden age. I was no different to Hamza, then an HU student from a fairly typical urban middle-class Wahabi-esque family: before visiting Sehwan with Hasan, Hamza thought of Shahbaz Qalandar's ethos as 'idiot grave-worshippers' indulging in '*kufr.*' We drew a line, not quite consciously, between 'us-who-know-better' and the curious 'native' spectacle at Sehwan. And in this, we constituted a microcosm representative of the many urbanites like us who would form one of the major audiences of this film – especially our younger facsimiles in this attitude, inhabiting the classrooms to which some of us would return: the Pakistani students who know only the narrow continuum of Islam visible in the middle-class city. For all of them, *SQ* bottles something essential of our experience of being Muslim in Sehwan, something that cannot be conveyed only in words.

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3 Whilst Islam developed strong legal and rational traditions throughout its history, a particular legalistic containment of public religion and identity took place in colonial times, especially in British India. For further reading on this, look at Cohn, Bernard, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997; Jalal, Ayesha, Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001; Zaman, M. Qasim, 'Religious Education and The Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan,' Comparative Studies in Society and History, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 294-323.

One's starting point, then, was that of a colonial anthropologist studying the primitive in his native environment. One began as a visitor, observer, scholar, as the eye directing the camera's gaze. One thought one could not be a participant. But the energy of the space renders it impossible to remain on the sidelines. One is drawn, inevitably, into participation. It is a space of chaos, a space of possibility, in which familiar modes and boundaries may be transcended. It sounds trite to repeat the oft-cited truism that a major Sufi shrine like Shahbaz Qalandar attracts devotees from all backgrounds and religious denominations. It does. But the profundity of this only hits when one is there, experiencing the collapse of more intimate boundaries: when a skeptic finds himself unexpectedly moved by spiritual forces; when a woman suddenly understands that she can shed respectability, invade and own a space that ought to be the purview of men; when a city *sahib* finds himself in a meaningful exchange with a filthy *faqir*, finds his normal inhibitions, the defenses of his class, absent without leave.

The film thus becomes a means to convey, viscerally, some of what we learned about the relationality of one's body to this sacred space, where the lines between observer, participant, devotee, performer, and audience are in constant flux. Seduced and subjugated by the power of the *dhamal*, by the collective energy of the variegated crowd, one's self is marinated and reconstituted – engendering a bone-deep realization of the need to be respectful beyond lip service, to acknowledge that the 'party' *means* something (even if one can't quite rationalize it). The film can *show* this dynamic while simultaneously *telling* the viewer about the coherent history and beliefs behind the show. This multi-pronged strategy is how *SQ* mounts an effective intervention in global and local public discourse about Islam in Pakistan.

Hasan: The Audio-Visual Foci of the Film

The blueprint of the film had formed in my mind during the latter years of my research visits to Sehwan, as I got to know both locals and visitors to the shrine. The main subjects of the film are the salient elements, which, taken together, reveal a coherent theological framework at Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, as I had argued in the three papers before beginning work on *SQ*. Like everyone, we focused first on filming the *dhamal*, the dramatic ritual dance of the Qalandars, and the central practice at Sehwan. But, unlike others, my purpose was to reveal the religious symbolism underlying the *dhamal*, otherwise familiar to audiences as nothing more than an

expression of wild Sufi ecstasy. The remaining foci of the film are all connected to the symbolism of the *dhamal*, which gravitates around two holy relics: the *tauq-i gireban* and the *'alam* (explained below).[4]

The *dhamal* is performed at the shrine by the initiated as well as lay devotees every single day of the year after the *maghrib* prayer – *except* for the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram. It was this juxtaposition of the central importance of daily *dhamal* against the ceasing of *dhamal* for all but ten days of the Muslim lunar calendar that became the main plot for the film. These two points define *SQ*: after the intro, the door of the shrine opens (time: 10.02); the *dhamal* is showcased with its various aspects (starting at 11.32); followed by the ceasing of the *dhamal* in Muharram and the door closing (time: 33.13).

The *dhamal* was a comparatively easier section to shoot, as it happens throughout the year. On every Thursday and the 1st, 21st and 29th of the Islamic lunar months, a 'big' *dhamal* performance takes place, when the population of Sehwan at times quadruples. The three largest *dhamals* in Sehwan, in which thousands participate, occur on the main days of Shahbaz Qalandar's *'urs* or death commemoration but are very difficult to film due to the crowds. Hence, the *dhamals* on the main lunar-month dates were used for *SQ* (time: 18.27 to 18.43).

During the first 10 days of Muharram, the *dhamal* falls ritually silent; the shrine keepers and devotees enact special ceremonies to commemorate the martyrs of Kerbala.[5] There is a traditional self-flagellation (*matam*) in a form unique to Sehwan: the penitents strike their upper arms with their hands in a rhythmic fashion to remember 'Abbas's severed limbs (time: 28.29 onwards).[6] Other penitents at the shrine also practice the more common Shi'a flagellation with bloodletting (time: 8.38-8.46). In Muharram the skin of the *dhamal* drums is changed ritually for the year, and on the 11th, the *dhamal* starts again and continues uninterrupted for the rest of the year, the conclusion of the narrative arc of *SQ* (time: 34.58).

Most closely associated with the performance of *dhamal* as a religious ceremony are the dervishes or faqirs of Bodla Bahar, located at a different space within Sehwan.

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4 There are other extant relics associated with Shahbaz Qalandar, such as his dagger, his personal Quran, and his begging bowl, but none of these play a pivotal public role in shrine ritual as do the tauq and the 'alam.

5 These ceremonies occur only for the 10 days, some just once, so if one misses a shot, one has to wait an entire year for it on occasion.

6 'Abbas was Husain's half-brother and is second only to Husain amongst the martyrs of Kerbala. 'Abbas was the standard-bearer and his arms were cut off before he was finally killed.

Bodla Bahar was Shahbaz Qalandar's disciple who, according to oral tradition, was a Hindu, had proceeded to Sehwan before the Qalandar, and was killed in an act of ritual sacrifice. He is considered a martyr and is the central intermediary figure between the *Qalandariyya* dervishes and Shahbaz in Sehwan today. Bodla Bahar's shrine is one of the few in the country not controlled by the state, and is hence religiously 'free.' It is run by its *sajjada nashin*, Pirzada Akhtar, head of the *Qalandariyya* order.

If one were to ask the initiated dervishes at Bodla Bahar whether the *dhamal* has any symbolic religious value, they would reply that it surely does. According to them, the word *dhamal* is made up of two words which have become corrupted, '*dam*' or breath, and '*hal*' or state. Together they make '*dam-hal,*' the 'breath state', or the state of transcendence for which Sufism is known.[7] And, according to Sayyid Mehdi Raza Shah, the *sajjada nashin* ('inheritor of the seat') or lineal caretaker of Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, the *dhamal* of the Qalandariyya dervishes is the symbolic representation of Imam Zain al-'Abidin's walk[8] on the hot desert sands during his journey as a prisoner from Kerbala to Damascus. The film allowed one to show the rhythmic movements of the *dhamal* whilst Mehdi narrated the symbolism passed down to him through his father (time: 12.16-13.31).

As visible in the film after the shrine's door opens, there is a noticeable difference between the personalized *dhamal* performed by uninitiated devotees at Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine, and the ritual *dhamal* at Bodla Bahar, depicting Zain al-'Abidin's actual walk from Kerbala. On major lunar dates, the Bodla Bahar faqirs perform the *dhamal* first at their shrine, in their characteristic red robes, and then move in a procession to Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine (time: 17.52-18.09). These are the only occasions when the initiated *Qalandariyya* dervishes perform the 'real' *dhamal* at the great Qalandar's shrine, which they otherwise perform at the shrine of Bodla Bahar every day. They end the *dhamal* at Bodla Bahar with their characteristic *Namaz-i tariqat,* or 'prayer of the order' (time: 14.57-15.33), considered heretical, as it replaces the obligatory Islamic evening prayer, and is partly delivered in the vernacular.[9]

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7 Many medieval Sufi orders had similar ceremonies which differed in content, but which were, in their symbolism, rooted in 'Ali's cult of personality. Unfortunately, due to the absence of an informant saying this on camera, such an explanation could not be included in the film.

8 The son of Husain (son of Ali, grandson of Muhammad) and the 4th Imam in the Shi'a Muslim tradition. Young Zain al-'Abidin was captured after the slaughter of Husain and all the other men at the battle of Kerbala; he was force-marched across the desert from Kerbala in Iraq to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid's palace in Damascus.

9 Namaz-i tariqat, or 'prayer of the order' is very similar to other ceremonies in non-Shar'ia adhering Sufi groups, mostly lost to history, except in certain lodges of the Alevi community, when they perform their evening Cem in the same manner.

The story of the daily *dhamal* and its ten-day silence at Sehwan unfolds further in *SQ* through the two holy relics mentioned earlier. One is the *tauq-i gireban*, or the 'fetter of the neck,' now encased in silver, which hangs all year next to Shahbaz Qalandar's sarcophagus, and was reportedly worn by him around his neck until he died (time: 17.18). According to tradition, Shahbaz received the stone after attaining his spiritual flight in the *Qalandariyya* Order; but first ownership of the stone is ascribed to Zain al-'Abidin, who is said to have borne the stone around his neck for months during his forced walk from Kerbala to Damascus. In this, the symbolism of the *tauq-i gireban*, like that of the *dhamal* itself, radiates directly back to Zain al-'Abidin and Kerbala. In the film, the ritual closing of the Shrine's door is preceded by a young man kissing the *tauq-i gireban* stone (time: 32.58).

The other holy relic is the 800-year old *'alam* of Shahbaz Qalandar, known in Sehwan as the *gajgah*, brought out only in Muharram to lead the mourning processions (time: 3.00 and 25.33). The *'alam*, a religious icon or standard attributed to Husain's brother 'Abbas, is familiar today as a common feature in mainstream Shi'a Muharram rituals. Contrary to common knowledge, however, the Qalandars were one of the first groups in Islam to have used the *'alam* as a symbol of religious identity.

Showing the centrality of the *'alam* at Shahbaz Qalandar was critical to my vision for *SQ* but it turned out to be the most difficult footage to shoot. The scene when the *'alam* enters the shrine door (time: 32.14-32.18) was filmed over three years with two different crews. The first attempt was discarded due to technical errors. Then Umair and Talha went back with us the third year and finally captured the moment. To shoot the procession led by the *'alam* on 10th Muharram as it returns from the graveyard of the Sehwan Sayyids to the shrine, Nofil had to sprint after the *'alam* (time: 31.14), trying to keep his camera steady, and somersaulted (31.19) midway to get the full shot!

Aliya: The 'Show and Tell' of Shahbaz Qalandar

We live in a time when the pressure to make Islam concrete and stable is greater and wider than ever before. As a historian of Islamic ideas, I know that there has been a shocking profusion of times and places where Islam has been lived, greatly and widely, as a thing that 'agrees at variance with itself'; where the Qalandar's *namaz-i-tariqat*, the Sunni *maghrib salat*, and the Shi'a *maghrib namaz* 12½ minutes later, would all be

accepted as meaningfully *Islamic*. The reality of lived Islam probably remains shockingly profuse in its variance, but, as Shahab Ahmed posits, the colonial reconstitution of our hermeneutical toolkit – which teaches us 'to conceptualize and categorize by the elimination of difference'[10] – has left the makers of Pakistani and Muslim public discourse without the means to conceptualize all the seeming differences as variations on a single theme.

Thus, the counter-history posited in *SQ* is also a history of the present, a history of what is *not* in the film: the unspoken reality that the very survival of a space like Sehwan owes much to its 'otherization' in public discourse; it is safe because it is accorded, informally, the colonial status of a 'minority' culture. Personal approval or disapproval notwithstanding, contributors to public discourse employ a special vocabulary to talk about it. The likes of Hasan and I will call Sehwan a 'hub of intersectional piety,' because we do not wish to limit the openness of such spaces,[11] making us complicit in the unspoken agreement that Sufi culture is not quite Islamic. Somewhat more insidious are news reports on mainstream Urdu TV channels[12]: these employ a particular language to talk about 'Sufi' culture, categorically different to the language they use to talk about *Hajj*, Sunni '*Eid* Prayers or 'Ramadan.'[13] To check my impressions, I did a preliminary survey of Urdu TV news scripts for this essay. Some part of me wanted to be wrong, but there it was – the token annual news report on a

Sufi '*urs* in Pakistan is much the same as the token news report on events like Christmas and *Diwali*. There is total avoidance of words like Islam, *Musalman*/Muslim, *mazhab/i* (religion/ous) *du'a* (free prayer)*, namaz* (ritual prayer) and, of course, Allah, including common-speech rhetorical exclamations invoking Allah – no *inshallahs, mashallahs,* s*ubhanallah*s, and *alhamdolillahs,* are to be heard – as though Allah required protection from the unfettered enthusiasm, *josh o kharosh*, of the *za'ireen* (a term used for all non-Sunni pilgrims to anywhere). One of my favorites was the carefully chosen description of a Muslim Sufi saint as '*khuda-parast,*' a non-denominational

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[10] Ahmed, Shahab. What Is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic, Princeton, 2016, Chapter-Five.

[11] Friendly academics tend to avoid using the word 'Islamic,' with its current-day connotations of narrow and exclusionary legalism.

[12] I am indebted to the editors of Dastavezi for pointing out that Urdu 'language publics' are not always the same as other language publics in Pakistan. Urdu, the national language, is also the language of modern Islamic reform movements as well as the language of colonial administration. If we were to examine the Sindhi language public, for instance, one would find a different valuation and judgment of Sufi culture. The lexical divide in Urdu, however, is significant, because Urdu is the hegemonic language of public discourse across the country.

[13] 'Ramadan' is in quotation marks because normally, in South Asia, one would say and write 'Ramzan,' but recent global trends towards seeking greater Islamic authenticity through Arabization have resulted in many Pakistanis making a point to say 'Ramadan.'

worshipper of 'god' with a little *g*.[14] Unlike the many public speakers who actively denounce Sufi culture in Pakistan (without fear of repercussions), the examples given here reveal the ambivalent attitudes of those who are supposed to be accepting of Pakistan's Sufi heritage.

This was my challenge with the voice-over, or the 'telling,' in *SQ*: to use language in a way that would make *meaningful* this place that is very visible, audible, outright legendary, and yet so marginalized. I do not feel we entirely succeeded. What I would like to be able to say is that the Islamic ethos that lives on at Shahbaz Qalandar reminds us of the erasure from our lives of imagination (*khayal*) and experiential knowledge as valid modes of human learning, of the dismissal of the once careful cultivation of our emotional, aesthetic and sensory faculties – all of which was central, for centuries, to pre-colonial Islamic tradition, allowing Muslims to travel back and forth along a continuum of meaningful Islamic possibilities.

My first introduction to the *SQ* project was through an early cut of the film. I was quite unprepared for the strong case it made about Shi'a beliefs at Sehwan, and my knee-jerk reaction was to question this narrative – surely, there must be some Shi'a bias at work? Subsequently, I visited Sehwan with Hasan during Muharram and came back feeling that the film was, in fact, rather too equivocal about the Shi'a-ness of the shrine's culture. I have come to believe, for the moment, that the recognizable Shi'a iconography and symbolism of Sehwan is key to demonstrating the inherent Islamic-ness of *Qalandariyya* piety.

What do I even mean when I say *recognizable Shi'a* symbols and iconography? Though we have two sizeable or Ismaili or 'Sevener' Shi'a communities in Pakistan (Aga-Khanis and Bohris), and Sufi piety across Sindh and Punjab is heavily colored with a Shi'a reverence for Ali, none of this is really thought of as 'Shi'a.' Only the majority, mainstream, Twelver Shi'a community owns the generic and *Islamic* label of 'Shi'a.' Despite the history of violent sectarian clashes between Shi'as and Sunnis, Twelvers are more or less accepted as Islamic in South Asia.[15] The Pakistani state provides a legal validation of Twelver Shi'ism by giving it the status of a fifth legal school,

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14 This is from a long report on the 2019 'urs at Sehwan aired on a major news channel, Samaa TV: it takes the typical attitudes seen in public discourse to an almost comic extreme. The imperative to make and air such a report is to be politically correct and respectful of diversity, to which the narrator pays lip service, whilst managing to skilfully undermine and delegitimize the entire tradition; not merely by deploying a vocabulary that is carefully not 'Islamic,' but also by highlighting, in a mocking tone, the economic activity around the 'urs, implying clearly that money-making is the 'real' reason behind all the hullabaloo. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqJIrY6mpns&t=684s

15 A current trend amongst some extremist Sunni elements to attack Twelver Shi'as as unbelievers does seem to be slowly influencing popular perceptions, but, for now, Twelver Shi'ism is very much part of the Islamic fold.

alongside the four Sunni legal schools, as the *fiqh-i-Ja'fariyya*. This legalistic definition, the name *fiqh-i-Ja'fariyya* itself, is in effect a modern sunnification of Twelver Shi'ism, a camouflaging of the doctrinal difference on which Shi'ism rests, but it serves to keep the Twelver Shi'as on the acceptably Islamic side of the divide.[16]

Sunni Pakistanis grow up familiar with the very public, nation-wide Twelver Shi'a commemoration of the martyrdom of Ali's family at Kerbala during the first ten days of Muharram. Music is banned on all TV and Radio stations. The 9th and 10th of Muharram, the days of martyrdom, are public holidays for everyone across Pakistan. TV channels run ten days of special programming, made by and for Twelver Shi'as. Muharram and Kerbala are the chief symbols of identity for the large Twelver Shi'a community and are not associated with Shi'a minorities (like Aga-Khanis) nor with Ali-reverence at Sufi centers. So when Hasan says that *Qalandariyya* piety at Sehwan is firmly rooted in the events of Kerbala, it causes some serious cognitive dissonance – Kerbala is way too mainstream, too *recognizably Shi'a* and Islamic, for the weird and wonderful world of Sehwan.

Shabbir, from a Twelver Shi'a background, was the first one of the crew to take Shahbaz Qalandar seriously. 'At first,' he said, 'all you see is … *dhamal* as trance … drugs and dancing for no reason.' But then he read Hasan's paper about the sacred relics: the *tauq* of Imam Zain al-'Abidin that is believed to have been at Kerbala; and the *alam*, Shahbaz's most important possession, and also a symbol central to Twelver Shi'a piety. In Shabbir's mind, there is little doubt that 'the most important relic of Kerbala' is at Sehwan; and this resonance with his Shi'a Muslim beliefs is what made the project personally important to him.

It is through these recognizable symbols of mainstream Shi'ism, of Kerbala, that the film *SQ* pulls Sehwan out from its otherness and imbues it with meanings that are familiarly Islamic to audiences who, consciously or unconsciously, regard Sufi culture as marginal to Islam. One of the traveling Qalandars shown in the film, Ali Haidar, walking from Lahore carrying an '*alam* with '*Ya 'Ali Madad*' emblazoned across it, employs words that I would have liked to highlight more in the film: *jo safar aal-i-Nabi ne kiya uss safar ki sunnat ada kar raha hun* ('I am following the Holy *Sunna*, and traveling the path of the Prophet and his family'). Ali Haider's '*alam* is recognizably Shi'a, and his words, '*Nabi ki sunnat,*' are universally Islamic.

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16 Shi'a communities like the Aga-Khanis, nominally acknowledged as Muslim, are relegated, in popular perception, to a space in no-mans-land, rather closer to non-Muslim minorities than to the Sunni Muslim majority.

Conclusion

The film *Shahbaz Qalandar* was conceived of as a historical and ethnographic document, which it certainly is; but, as a Pakistani product watched by Pakistani audiences, the film is also a political statement. Born Muslim in Pakistan, it is difficult to dodge the loud presence of a modern, reformist Islamic morality in public spheres. And yet, all of us, the dodgers, the state, and the Mullahs at the pulpit, have something in common: we are all looking to different 'pasts' to envision our futures, and these pasts constantly interrupt the present. We hope that *SQ* will be one means to interrupt and broaden the present development of the public discourses that are shaping a post-nationalist Pakistani identity for younger generations who do not remember and do not care about Partition and its ideologies.

That said, it is not our intention to conceptually limit a vibrant sacred space like Shahbaz Qalandar's Sehwan. In *SQ*, we have attempted to encapsulate the experience of being present in the saint's courtyard, which had to be done through an audio-visual medium because the engine driving everything is the live *dhammal*. The bodily affect induced by the rhythmic drumming is difficult to resist: it sucks everyone in and acts as an equalizer – in a very *Islamic* way – opening up broader conceptual possibilities through sensory experience.

Hasan chose to focus *SQ* on the *Qalandariyya* Sufi order, whose beliefs, rituals, and very existence are evidence of the historical continuity of a centuries-old Islamic tradition at Sehwan. Beyond the *Qalandariyya*, however, the shrine is also the locus of very contemporary popular piety. A bewildering variety of beliefs, practices, and communities gravitate around Shahbaz Qalandar. We are now working on a series of films to document other important aspects of the shrine's life, notably: the musicians, whose live performances are central to the *dhamal*; the many women who flock to the shrine and step out of conventional restrictions; exorcism ceremonies conducted at or near the shrine; the transgender communities who congregate at Sehwan on special dates; and the local Hindu community who have a long association with the Qalandar. Much of this has already been shot by Umair and Talha, and work has commenced on editing a second film.

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Ghungroo

Ali Rizvi

Abstract

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

Keywords: Gender, Karachi, Kathak, dance

Why and How I Came to Make this Film

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

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

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

What is *Kathak?*

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

Dawood: A Rebel Dancer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pakistani) culture.

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

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

Dawood: A Trainer

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

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

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

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

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

The Impact of a Public Dance Performance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Glossary

Bharatnatyam   A major form of Indian classical dance performed in a team

Ghungroo   Musical anklet adorned by classical Indian dancers

Kathak   A type of northern Indian classical dance used for storytelling

Kathakar   *Kathak* dancer

Kurta   Loose collarless shirt worn by people mainly in South Asia

Ustaad   Teacher or mentor

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