Issue 3 | 2021

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL SOUTH ASIA

eISSN 2628-9113

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Editors in Chief
Jürgen Schaflechner
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Max Kramer
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Layout
Christoph Marx
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Editors
Abir Bazaz
(Ashoka University)

Antony Pattathu
(Tübingen University)

Erin Kelso
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Salma Siddique
(LMU München)

About Dastavezi | The Audio–Visual South Asia

Dastavezi is an international peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal which seeks to reposition film 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 filmic practices.

The journal is committed to promoting various modes of knowing by offering a platform for knowledge production and research on South Asia in both audio-visual and textual 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 both scholars and filmmakers, to evolve new theoretical and practical epistemologies in their engagement with South Asia.

The journal incorporates both 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 film practitioners but also provides an interested public with access to audio-visual productions on South Asia and corresponding discussions.

Contact

Website:
https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/index

E-Mail:
dastavezi@gmail.com

ISSN (online):
2628-9113

All material–written and audio-visual–is licensed under the Creative Commons license
CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

Table of Contents

Film, Photo, and Text:
Relation–making, Intensive Genres, and Realism 4-14
Jürgen Schaflechner and Max Kramer

Kashmir Cultural Memory through the Lens of Film:
Paradise on a River of Hell Revisited 15-21
Abir Bazaz

Birthday Party in Saffron–Pune's Śivājī Jayantī
Celebration in 2020 22-39
Borayin Larios

For My Country: Nationalism and Female Empowerment
in Pakistan Women's Cricket 40-54
Sadia Quraeshi Shepard

Traveling Tariqa–Ten Years Down the Road into
Sufis Entangled 55-67
Eliane Ettmüller, Sarah Ewald, and Max Kramer

On Stale Images 68-81
Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil

Schaflechner, Jürgen and Max Kramer.
2021. "Film, Photo, and Text: Relation-Making, Intensive Genres, and Realism."
Dastavezi (3): 4-14

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Film, Photo, and Text: Relation–Making, Intensive Genres, and Realism

Jürgen Schaflechner and Max Kramer

Throughout *Dastavezi's* brief existence, this introduction has become a train of thought and a conversation for both of us, where we reflect on the ever-changing landscape of multi-mediated forms of knowledge production in and from South Asia. This reflection—which we called Slow Theory—emerges from two of our fundamental convictions:

1.) New ways of theorizing the world demand thinking with and through new forms of art and media. 2.) Phenomena from the Global South help to "air out" (Viveiros de Castro 2003) a form of theory that has become accustomed to utilizing mainly North American and European case studies and philosophers.

In this issue, we, therefore, increase *Dastavezi's* range of contributed media to include photo essays reflecting on the potentialities of image and text regarding labor migration in Kerala (Karinkurayil) and religious nationalism in Pune (Larios).

In the last two issues, we argued that multi-mediated research challenges and extends the textual focus of social sciences. This challenge leads us to ask various new questions: How does social science research benefit from incorporating new media? How does time matter in academic and audio-visual cognitive labor? And, crucially, which novel criticisms become urgent at the crossroads of these processes? These three moments—relation-making, time, and critique—are a heuristic key for our attempt to theorize the connection between audio-visual and textual contributions. While these three are mutually interdependent and productive, in this issue, we will mainly focus on one of them: relation-making.

Furthermore, we will put two theoretical approaches in conversation with our contributions. First, Rosi Braidotti's (2017) reading of critical neo-Spinozism—which she puts forward in her work on feminism—will be helpful to think intensive genres through contributions by Bazaz, Larios, and Shepard. Second, Karen Barad's agential realism

(2012) will help us to conceptualize the epistemic stakes of the joint work of Ettmüller, Ewald, and Kramer as well as Karinkurayil's essay on memory and stale images.

Relation-making and the postcolonial

In its most basic meaning, relation-making implies a creative dynamic connecting heterogeneous fields, methods, and discourses. This central objective of bringing audio-visual and textual knowledge "into relation" is expressed by the journal's name: *dastāvez* implying "a 'bond,' an 'instrument,' and an 'action' pointing towards a variety of potentialities linking various forms of knowing, perceiving, and creating" (Schaflechner and Kramer 2019, 1). In the last issue (2020), we focused on different forms of relation-making. Saeed, for example, demonstrated how it is a strategy for becoming public, and Schaflechner showed how relation-making might yield novel questions through multi-mediated research.

What do we mean when we speak about making relation and its critical or emancipatory potential for Slow Theory? As a heuristic device for *Dastavezi*, relation-making needs to respond to what we consider central to our work in and from South Asia: a critical view on power-relations, epistemic forms of violence, and conceptualization. Relation-making needs to have a firm base in post- and decolonial critique and strive for novel ways of engagement through the interactions between text, audio, and the visual. In this sense, relation-making is a part of Slow Theory's methodology and its ethical trajectory to overcome sedimented representations of South Asia. Relation-making's critical potential for *Dastavezi* lies in the combination of various media which produce our research in intensified genres (see below). We develop *Dastavezi's* ethical trajectory by drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti and her engagement with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. To situate her approach with respect to *Dastavezi's* decolonial aspirations, we need to take a closer look at Gayatri Spivak. Her influential text, "Can the subaltern speak," has made the critique against Deleuze one foundation of postcolonial theory (Spivak 1993).

Spivak argues that the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, supposedly critical of European traditions, had little interest in the postcolonial situation and mainly understood resistance based on the European subject. For Spivak, the subaltern needs to have access to the Eurocentric episteme in order to speak and resist. Subtle forms of hegemony and epistemic violence, she argues, are lost in Deleuzian theory. Spivak is not alone in this criticism. Others, too, have pointed out that while Deleuze and Guattari have experimented with anthropological cases, they never directly engaged with the life-worlds of colonized people (Bignall and Patton 2010). For Kaplan, their interest in Anthropology is part of a long tradition of using the Global South as a "metaphorical margin" and not as a site of "theory production" (quoted in Bignall and Patton 2010). Such and similar criticisms have thwarted postcolonial scholars intense engagement with theories emerging from the Spinoza-Nietzsche-Bergson-Deleuze trajectory. Following the work of Robinson (2004) and Robinson and Thompson (2010) this rejection is grounded in the two theories' fundamentally different understanding of desire. One states that desire is produced through a constitutive lack, and the other that desire is multiple and revolutionary. While the exact nuances of this difference are far beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important to sketch the outlines of this difference.

In a nutshell, Lacan states that both individual and social identities are founded on the idea of a constitutive lack (Stavrakakis 1999). This ontological principle has become the foundation of a variety of concepts, such as "antagonism" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), "dislocation" (Laclau 2005), "the Real" (Žižek 2008), or the "political difference" (Marchart 2013). As the main matrix to understand forms of representation, repression, and othering, the concept of lack has also entered much of the postcolonial literature. Thinkers that have been widely cited in the postcolonial context include (amongst others) Lacan (appropriated by Homi Bhabha, 2000), Laclau (used by Partha Chatterjee, 2004), or Derrida and Althusser (both in Spivak above, 1993).

Desire in Deleuze and Guattari does not have a lack at its core. On the contrary, similar to the *conatus* (Spinoza) or the *will to power* (Nietzsche), it is productive and revolutionary. Deleuze and Guattari's first joint work, *Anti-Oedipus,* had a variety of targets but at many times was a polemic against Lacanian psychoanalysis and its obsession with the idea of a constitutive lack (2004). Here we come back to Spivak's arguments above. Robinson and Thompson argue that her dismissal of Deleuze builds on a misunderstanding of desire as something other than a deterritorializing force, which cannot be captured under one structure. Their refusal to accept lack (or antagonism) as constitutive has sidelined Deleuze and Guattari's influence on postcolonial theory. Recently, however, their critical neo-Spinozist approach has been championed as a missed opportunity to think emancipation beyond the dialectic put forward in much of postcolonial theory (Bignall and Patton 2010).

To sum up: relation-making is not only *Dastavezi's* methodological but also ethical foundation. By ethics, we mean a critical and creative dynamic. It is critical as a way to encounter power structures, and it is creative by striving to go beyond these structures.

Intensive genres

This approach becomes vital for imagining the coming together of various media in *Dastavezi* and the forces triggered between them. Close exchanges of multi-mediated forms of research produce an affective and discursive surplus beyond the boundaries of these respective media. In other words, something that is neither textual, visual, nor auditory emerges from the relation between all of these. Braidotti's notion of the "intensive genre" might be helpful to approach this process through our contributions.

Writing on Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Virginia Woolf, Braidotti speaks of the intensive genre, which "cuts transversally across a number of established literary forms" (2008, 45). Using the literary relationship of Virginia Woolf and her companion Vita Sackville-West, Braidotti shows how their connection is much more complicated than the term "same-sex" suggests. Their being together, she writes, is not "modelled on the dialectics of masculinity and femininity [but rather is] an active space of becoming" (Braidotti 2008, 55). Out of their correspondences emerges for Braidotti an intensive genre: a form of skillful writing which displaces sedimented categories.[1]

Bazaz and Gaur's film pushes our understanding of intensive genres further when read together with the interview featured in this issue. *Paradise on a River of Hell* unfolds in a limbo where the narrative creates layers of meaning in progressively complex ways so that it often becomes difficult for non-Kashmiri audiences to understand. The appropriation of the tourist gaze, however, draws the film closer to desires nourished by the Hindi film industry. It makes us wonder about the lacunae between the available narratives on the region, the conflict, and its religions. In other words, the filmic address includes a South Asian longing for the Valley of Kashmir while simultaneously its alienation—through the fisheye lens—keeps this desire at a distance. Here the filmic thinking pries open a paradox: to repeat affects coded in South Asian visual culture may create some genuine openings, however, always under the threat of misappropriation.

---

[1] Inspired by her work, we adopt the term to address an assembly of text and audio-visual production. In this process, formerly independent media are now taking part in an affectively charged new milieu which, most importantly, aims for its potentia instead of potestas. This crucial separation goes back to Spinoza, who distinguishes between joyous and sad affects. Affects are relations where "the body's power of acting is increased or diminished" (de Spinoza 1996). For example, some bodies may encounter others and compose with them, which leads to new possibilities and agencies. These relations are joyous. Other relations, however trigger forms of decomposition, i.e., limiting their field of acting and thus are called sad affects (Deleuze 1988). In this sense Deleuze and Guattari also speak of active desire (schizophrenic) and reactive desire (paranoiac; see Robinson and Thompson 2010). Desire as power can have various expressions, such as power over (potestas) and power of the people (potentia). Relation-making as potestas makes hierarchical distinctions and builds empires. As potentia, however, it means power to do something, i.e. the realm of capacity, ability, and agency. As an intensive genre, relation-making opens doors, connects with people, and produces new subjectivities. Only affirmative relation-making has the power to produce qualitative change, as it aims to go beyond already established and sedimented structures of power.

This paradox materializes in the conversation with Bazaz. The allegorical form enables as much as prevents what his film can do. Bazaz is caught between the desire to make a "Kashmiri film" and the impossibility of making the film forceful under the current conditions, which are determined by the hyper-representation of the Valley of Kashmir in nationalist discourse and South Asian visual culture. But with the interview alongside the film, we can encounter the film *again* as non-representative beyond questions of Kashmiri and Indian identity that may hinder its reception. Bazaz's words on his (and Gaur's) film are quite conscious about this shift towards the non-representational; what we above called the intensive genre:

> *[…] film is a constant search for that which remains hidden in the seen, the visible. It is thinking in the sense that it seeks revelation. Film is thinking in as much as thinking is a form of awareness that reveals the care that is always involved in the human condition. It is a form of touch.*

This is not merely the addition of a filmic gaze to the human eye, but, in this case, relation-making producing a film-thought.

In his photo-essay on the festival of Shivaji Jayanti, Borayin Larios describes his images as "tools" that enable him to engage with research subjects in ways that go beyond textual production. With McDougall he speaks of the image as a "reflection of thought" which excludes the potential infinity of frames within the visual field for the one chosen in a snap. The moment in which a picture is taken is one of thought: faster than words could ever express. In a way, we are back at the question Kramer asked Bazaz on "filmic thought:" there is a particular way of thinking through the camera—a thinking that is neither linguistic, textual, nor abstract but within the aesthetic potentialities of the camera. This capture, however, also establishes a "barrier between the subject and the photographer." Larios calls the photographer a "thief," taking something without giving it back: a question of power as well as rhythm. He points out that his subjects often demand this capture, mistaking him for a journalist. The ethical issue needs to be counterbalanced by the ethical-political demands of research. After all, these movements are not harmless, colorful portrayals of a religious tradition but participant forces of Hindu nationalist hegemony. The aesthetic investment of these nationalist processions is captured through the camera. This makes the drive behind these celebrations palpable and effectively links them to nationalist and regionalist desires. Larios skillfully analyzes the various layers of meaning hidden in plain sight—the textual interpretation yields an understanding of the "hidden in the seen" to use the words of Bazaz. If we did not read the text together with the photographs, some of Larios' images could uncritically reproduce a color-saturated spectacle. The photo essay is an intensive genre produced between text and images. With the text, we reread the images as allegorical, conflictual, representative of ideal citizenship, gendered, and shot through by power asymmetries. The Indo-anthropologist contextualizes the photographs. What remains beyond this is the lingering beauty of the photographs, their technical *rafinesse,* and, finally, the singular expressivity of their subjects captured in the moment—resisting text and context.

Another interesting contribution is Shepard's work on women's spaces in Pakistan. *For my Country* is one part of a series entitled *The Other Half of Tomorrow* on Pakistani female cricket players set in a country obsessed with the sport. For Shepard, Pakistan's close relationship with cricket is a form of continuous "myth-making" where heroes are born. Even the country's current prime minister, Imran Khan, is still celebrated for leading the national cricket team to victory in the World Cup some 30 years ago. Such is the stage for her portrayal of Pakistani female cricketers who are motivated by their love for the sport and an urgent sense of patriotism.

Similar to how Virginia and Vita's relationship goes beyond the category "same-sex," the cricket player's affirmative practice is not merely a way to find a place for women within Pakistan's patriarchy but rather an active restructuring of it. The intensive genre produced between Shepard's essay and film allows us to see cricket's potential as it creates stages and publics for women in Pakistan. The intensive genre shows the affirmative (and in itself intensive) power of cricket: film and essay produce a space allowing us to understand how cricket has its own intensities between and above notions of masculinity and femininity. Sana Mir, the former team captain, and other players show how their roles as athletes and their lives after *The Other Half of Tomorrow* have made them into role models for Pakistani girls *and* boys.

Entanglement, realism, relation-making

When talking about relation-making, we imply a connective process spanning over a large variety of planes. This includes academic fields (anthropology and film studies), materialities (actor-networks between human and non-human actors), as well as human to human relationships (filmmakers, ethnographers and their interlocuters, protagonists). A realist approach to relation-making, for example, is found in the production and conceptualization of *Sufis Entangled.*

The essay as well as the film *Sufis Entangled* is co-authored by Eliane Ettmüller, Sarah Ewald, and Max Kramer. While Ettmüller and Ewald portray multiple conflicts emerging around the term "Sufism," Kramer ponders the film's form. Their essay provides us with the production context where we get a sense of how different motivations, frustrations, and cultural understandings drive the most conflictual situations captured in the film. What emerges is a picture of what is at stake in making a film that doesn't try to fix the meaning of Sufism to one tradition or even the mental image of religious traditions. Here "entanglement" can be appropriated to rethink documentary realism itself. The writing as well as the film *Sufis Entangled* sheds light on documentary realism and the epistemological stakes of the filmic medium. For this, we briefly need to rehearse the broadest contours of the realism debates in philosophy and film.

The classical realism from Aristotle to modern day scientism starts with mind-independent, individuated objects or material entities (e.g., the laptop you have in front of you, the atoms that make up your bones, and so on). Such approaches are called "correspondence theory" as they are primarily concerned with representation as a correct or incorrect mirror of reality. Another approach could be called the realism of the sublime: the terror of the real breaks into our world, disturbing the precarious order that humans tried to establish through always fragile symbolizations (a rather influential genealogy here links Lacan, Heidegger, and Kant). Many of the epistemological debates in documentary film studies can be traced to some variants of the positions given above (see Nichols 2002). Instead, *Sufis Entangled* radicalizes some assumptions within this scholarly trajectory and traces a *performative tradition* of theorizing documentary film.

Documentary scholar Stella Bruzzi (2006) is an important contrarian to more classical realist approaches to documentary film. She appropriates Judith Butler's theory of performativity to claim that documentary audiences are not primarily concerned with the cognitive reality status of the image. Instead, within the performance of the film audiences negotiate multiple realities. By this she means that viewers do not exhaust their understanding of reality by its link to the technical recordings of light (Nichols 2002; 2016). Bruzzi, instead, focuses on how the documentary status of the images initiates multiple negotiations between audiences' expectations and the possible worlds evoked by the film. Bruzzi's perspective puts emphasizes on human agency in the meaning making of a documentary film. This constructivist view of the documentary film centers on the performance of representations as somewhat cut off from the becoming of matter. *Dastavezi*, however, puts forward a critical posthumanist approach to multi-mediated research that decenters the representational in the production of knowledge.

Physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad's work is crucial in this regard (Barad 2012). Her concept of "entanglement" addresses how matter and discourse establish a phenomenon through cuts within a performative becoming. This means that the phenomenon—in our case a documentary film—does not mirror some reality "out there" but that a certain performative arrangement of discourse and matter "cuts" materiality in such a way that the phenomenon emerges. Barad develops this concept by referring to physicist Niels Bohr who investigated the way an apparatus establishes a field of objectivity that is not external to the phenomenon but constitutive of it. If you measure something through an instrument, the instrument itself is co-constitutive of the objective reality. This new causal intervention becomes possible through what Barad calls the "cut." For Barad, everything in this process is active: the measured, the measuring device, and the measuring humans. What "matters" is how these cuts produce a phenomenon through their relations and how they increase agency. She calls this ontology "agential realism," a form of realism that is action-oriented and does not claim the individual existence of pre-cut matter.

Sufis Entangled could be seen as the result of an apparatus that provides these "intra-actions." The film's form brings Barad's agential realism to life. The documentary genre is frequently geared towards questions of reality. *Sufis Entangled* produces a particular way in which the real is claimed and formally transformed through its material-discursive apparatus. The Sufi traditions encountered in the film are always performed in contested ways, as parts of material-discursive cuts. These involve filmmakers, cameras, cultural expectations of what interviews are, what others may think of "Islam" and "Sufism." Of course, these lists are never exhaustive. To speak about entanglement shouldn't extend a sense of causality to some incomprehensible notion of complexity. Understood with the heuristic of relation-making, complexity enables us to trace the internal cuts within these material-discursive arrangements that make new forms of knowledge possible.

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil's contribution about withering memories in Kerala can also be read in a realistic fashion. Following the wilted traces of a "lost generation," his stale images provide a sensorium for us to enter one of the largest migration flows in Kerala's history. While these laborers were the beginning of crucial cultural shifts in Kerala, their voice has often been muffled in local (Kerala) and translocal (Malayali) mainstream culture. Absent and simultaneously represented as “the other” of innocent and meek rural existence, the stale images of their struggle remind us of the materiality of memory. Karinkurayil’s essay produces a relation between the particular conditions in Kerala, the heat, the humidity, and the way in which objects are packed away. His images thus do not *represent* a history of forgetting, they are also not the reason for it, but they have a part in performing it.

Karinkurayil’s writing, too, performs these withering dynamics. His essay starts out with clearly marked edges, revealing bits and pieces of this otherwise ignored part of history. Recreating the layers underneath the stale surfaces, his text becomes a witness of “Gulf biographies”—or better, a witness to their absence. Increasingly, however, his writing, too, performs the oblivion of lower class labor migration. While semantics unearth solid forms of memory initially, they increasingly wither in the course of writing, producing more and more loosely associated and fractured structures. Just as stale images only allow us to surmise the whole picture through partially visible objects, so the progressively elusive style of writing makes the reader glean completeness of meaning by investing into partial structures, sentences, and word-clusters. Documenting “absence” as a way to reveal migrants in popular culture is one powerful way to point at collective amnesia. Karinkurayil’s digital snapshots as well as his text, however, have something more to add: they capture a dynamic of withering.

Bibliography

Barad, Karen. 2012. *Agentieller Realismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Bhabha, Homi K, Michael Schiffmann, and Jürgen Freudl. 2000. *Die Verortung der Kultur*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Bignall, Simone and Paul Patton. 2010. *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2017. *Politik der Affirmation*. Berlin: Merve Verlag.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2008. "Intensive Genre and the Demise of Gender." *Angelaki.* 13 (2): 45-57.

Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. *New Documentary*. London: Routledge.

Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed*. New York: Columbia University Press.

de Spinoza, Benedictus. 1996. *Ethics*. London: Penguin Classics.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Spinoza*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 2004. *Anti-Oedipus*. A&C Black.

Dölemeyer, Anne and Mathias Rodatz. 2010. "Diskurse und die Welt der Ameisen. Foucault mit Latour Lesen (und umgekehrt)." *Zwischen Sprachspiel und Methode. Perspektiven der Diskursanalyse*, edited by R. Feustel and M. Schochow. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 2001. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marchart, Oliver. 2013. *Das unmögliche Objekt: Eine postfundamentalistische Theorie der Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Nichols, Bill. 2002. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, Bill. 2016. *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Robinson, Andrew. 2004. "The Political Theory of Constitutive Lack: a Critique." *Theory & Event* 8 (1).

Robinson, Andrew and Simon Thompson. 2010. "Living in Smooth Space: Deleuze, Postcolonialism and the Subaltern." *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, edited by Simone Bignall and Paul Patton. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Slaby, Jan and Christian von Scheve. 2019. *Affective Societies*. London: Routledge.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1993. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Stavrakakis, Yannis. 1999. *Lacan and the Political*. London: Routledge.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2003. "(Anthropology) and (Science)." *Manchester Papers of Social Anthropology* 7. Manchester: University of Manchester.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

Bazaz, Abir in conversation with Max Kramer. 2021. "Kashmir Cultural Memory through the Lens of Film: *Paradise on a River of Hell* revisited." *Dastavezi* (3): 15-21

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

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

Abir Bazaz in conversation with Max Kramer

Abstract

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

Keywords: Kashmir, cultural memory, Sufism

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

Introduction [Max Kramer]

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

Production

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

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

Visual style

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

A.B.: The film does not outrightly reject the tourist aesthetic. It seems to be suggesting that this too has shaped Kashmiri self-images. The sheer beauty of the Kashmiri landscape is not shunned, but the distortion that is built into our perspective is hinted at through the lensing. The film was trying to put Kashmir's beauty into brackets without trying to discard it as one of the many ways of thinking about Kashmir. The elegiac tone, it is true, had to do with our own despair about the situation. We decided to go with our cameraperson's instinctive urge to capture the beauty of images and then chose to problematize it through editing by making it appear more dreamlike and unreal, almost fantastic. Our music director, Madan Gopal Singh Ji, is an eminent Sufi singer and film theorist. He intuited this elegiac tone of the film and combined different musical influences to evolve the music and the soundscape. His music, in some sense, shapes the thinking of the film.

Belonging

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

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

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

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

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

A.B.: Yes, I think she is right in certain ways. The idea of singularity as we encounter it in contemporary French thought is somewhat of use in thinking about Kashmir. In a sense, it is a question of the connection between singularity and sovereignty which is at stake in Kashmir. We often fail to understand what "belonging" is and that this belonging has nothing to do with "identities." It might be easy for people to connect the struggle in Kashmir to questions of identity such as the question of the "resurgence of Islam," or the question of a unique struggle as in the discourse of "nationalist liberation," but to me these are all inadequacies of thought in addressing the singular history of Kashmir. What has been at stake in this history is the desire to envision a democratic political community, which is much more imaginative, much more open, much more—I don't have the right words, I'm struggling with language here—but "open" *is* the right word, "democracy" in a certain sense is also the right word.

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

Memory, history, and temporality

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

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

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

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

Thinking through film

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

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

Contributor's Biography

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

Bibliography

Bazaz, Abir und Meenu Gaur. 2002. *Paradise on a River of Hell* (film).

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. 2009. *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Raina, Ajay. 2001. *Tell them the Tree they had Planted has now Grown* (film).

Syeed, Musa. 2012. *Valley of Saints* (film).

Larios, Borayin. 2021. "Birthday Party in Saffron–Pune's Śivājī Jayantī Celebration in 2020." *Dastavezi* (3): 22-39

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Birthday Party in Saffron–Pune's Śivājī Jayantī Celebration in 2020

A Photo Essay

Borayin Larios

Abstract

This photo essay on the public festival that celebrates the Maratha king-hero Śivājī was performed in the city of Pune, India, in 2020. The essay reflects upon the practice of photography as a research tool that not only provides the researcher with the opportunity to capture that which is not possible to convey with words alone, but also "frames" an aesthetic moment that serves as a visual commentary. During such public festivals, parts of the city become stages saturated with symbols and the theatricality of performing one's Hindu identity. The creative manipulation of symbols facilitates the construction of this practice with Hindu pride at its center: a habitus that potentially leads to collective activism and, if needed, violence. Public festivals are understood by the author as *Schaufenster* (shop windows) that allow him to observe and experience social rhythms firsthand and, at the same time, reflect on the role of the images and their circulation for the participants' construction of their identity. Primarily young men and increasingly young women are inexorably drawn into the mythicized Śivājī stories on social media, television, and cinema, developing a reactionary vision of themselves and the nation as proudly Hindu.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Maharashtra, Pune, religious festivals

On the morning of February 19, 2020, on a makeshift stage erected in one of the lanes adjacent to the K.E.M. Hospital in the neighborhood of Rāstā Peṭh in the city of Pune, a miniature wooden cradle saturated with marigolds stands next to a medium-sized statue of Śivājī Mahārāj. He is seated on his throne adorned with two peacocks placed on sculpted lions flanking him on each side. Garlanded with roses, daisies, and *bilva*-leaves, the king's sculpture cast in plaster of Paris holds a large sword surrounded by even more marigolds. At his feet lays a container with sweets for the passersby who stop to pay their respects. People who bow to the king and touch the flame burning in

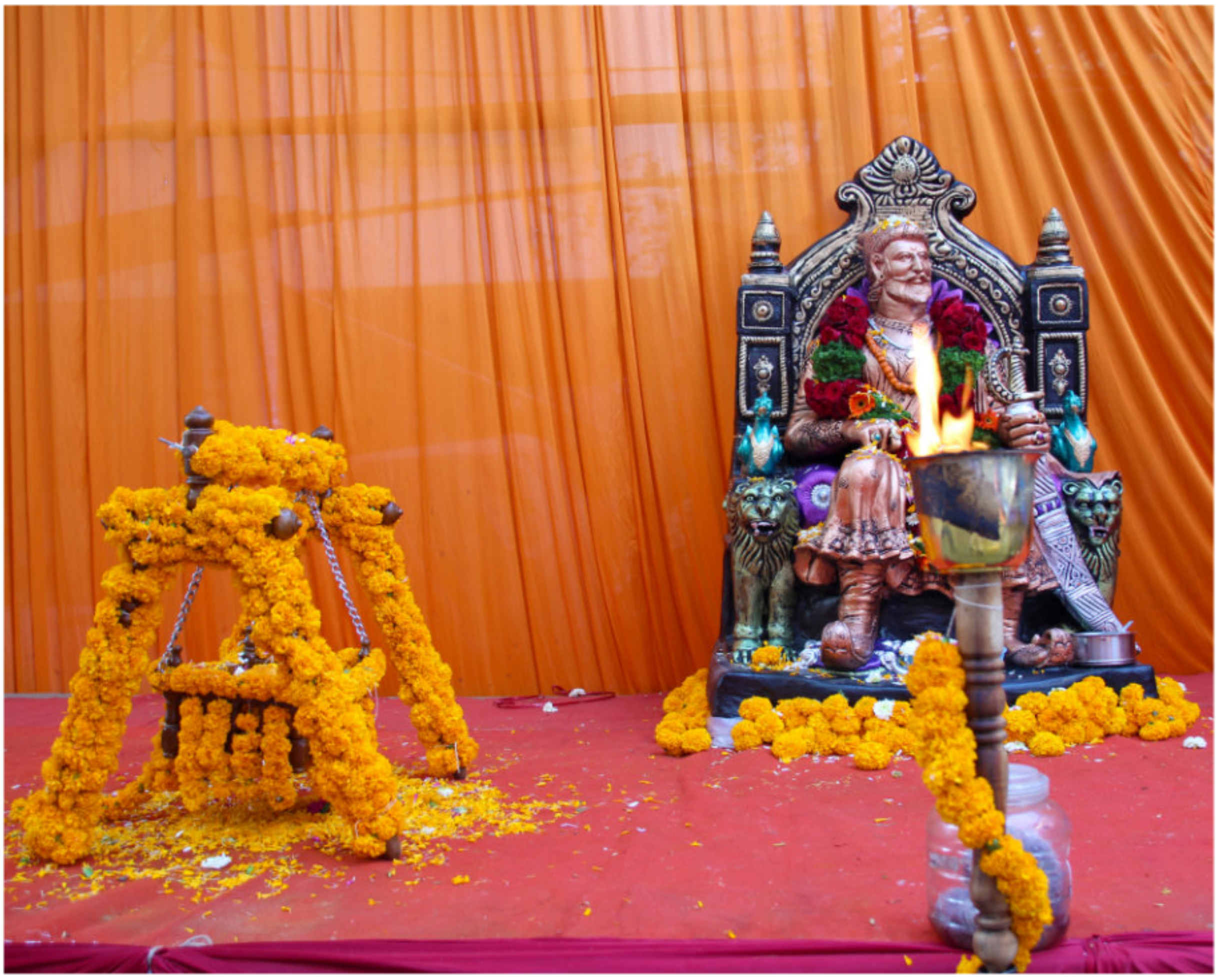


Figure 1: Śivājī Mahārāj's cradle and statue on a makeshift altar in the neighborhood of Rāstā Peṭh.

front of him swing the flowery cradle as a sign of respect. The edible blessing is distributed by one of the boys, who is still finishing the final touches to the stage and setting up the sound system for the evening parade. It is the birthday celebration of the seventeenth–century founder of the Maratha Empire Śivājī Bhonsale “Mahārāj” (the great king).

He is probably one of the most politicized icons of India. As the Chhatrapati or “lord of the parasol,” a royal title used by the Maratha rulers for the paramount monarch, he is omnipresent in today’s Maharashtra and beyond. His name is found on schools, parks, streets, official buildings, comics, soap operas, and bumper stickers. The renaming of many vital landmarks into “Chhatrapati Shivaji” in Mumbai (from the Victoria train station in Colaba to the international airport) and the most recent plan to erect the largest statue ever built of him are examples of his iconic power and the success of the Shiv Sena[1] who use him as an identitarian fetish.

Within the grand public festivals of Maharashtra, one dedicated to the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa in the month *bhādrapada* (around August-September) is the most famous. It was popularized by the 19th century freedom fighter and activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak who used the ten-day festival as a neo-traditionalist platform for organizing speeches, cultural performances, and anti-British agitprop in an attempt to unify Indian society. Many also credit Tilak for establishing the public festival known as *Śivājī Jayantī* (also known as *Śiv Jayantī*) that commemorates Śivājī Mahārāj's birthday as a way to politically mobilize around a more inclusive and approachable hero than Gaṇeśa, who was seen as the patron God of Brahmins. Attempting to end a long controversy surrounding the date to celebrate the birth of the Maratha king, Maharashtra officially declared in 2001 that the state celebrations of Śivājī's birth should follow the Gregorian calendar.[2] Since then, the *Jayantī* is formally celebrated on February 19 across India each year.

By paying close attention to forms of popular religion in the public space and in particular to wayside shrines, my current research project looks at how specific biological, psychological, and social rhythms (Lefebvre 2004) orchestrate and produce everyday religion and how religion becomes visible and is experienced in the streets of old Pune.[3] Public festivals such as the celebration of Śivājī Mahārāj's birthday are *Schaufenster* (shop windows) that allow us to observe and experience some of these rhythms first hand. During such festivals, parts of the city become stages saturated with symbols and the theatricality of performing one's identity.

My research on everyday religion uses the camera as an ethnographic research tool. Shrines and other "sacred" sites, as well as public events such as this festival, are captured through my photographic practice. These images are an indispensable tool which not only provide the researcher with the opportunity to capture that which is not possible to convey only with words, but also “frame” an aesthetic moment. These aesthetic moments are both produced by the subjects as well as by the photographer. On the one hand, the still image is a commentary on the event. As McDougall argues, the image “[...] also becomes, through the denial of all other possible images, a reflection of thought” (MacDougall 2012, 123-124). On the other hand, the camera is a barrier between the subject and the photographer. The act of photographing turns the photographer into a thief who, by taking a still image without giving anything back, puts him or herself in a position of power. It is the researcher who, by choosing the moment of the capture, the subject matter, the angles, focal length and so on, executes power over those photographed, even in photographs in which the subjects decide to pose or present themselves in a particular way. During festivals such as Śivājī Jayantī people expect to be photographed, either by journalists, amateur photographers, or themselves via the now common practice of the “selfie.”

---

[1] The Shiv Sena ("Army of Śivājī"), a nationalist Hindu party, was founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray in Bombay to defend Maharashtrian interests against immigrants from South India, the Parsi and Gujarati elites, and Muslims at large. The Shiv Sena was an important partner of the BJP in Maharashtra with whom they ruled the state from roughly 1989 onwards and, most recently, through their National Democratic Alliance (1998–2019). However, after the Maharashtra elections in October 2019, Shiv Sena broke ties with the BJP. Despite a long history of schisms, temporal bans, and other controversies, the party has managed to remain in power. On November 28th, 2019 the current president of the Shiv Sena, Uddhay Thackeray, became the current Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

[2] Śivājī was arguably born on the third day of the month *Phālguna* in 1551 according to the Hindu lunar calendar, which corresponds to February 19, 1630. However, due to recent political schisms within the party, the Shiv Sena and other ultranationalist groups celebrate his birthday according to the lunar Hindu calendar which thus varies each year.

[3] https://urbanrel.hypotheses.org/about last accessed on 05.08.2020.

As a foreigner carrying an exciting piece of technology around my neck, I have also learned to navigate being a spectacle myself. While during Śivājī Jayantī I was certainly not a main protagonist, I become a supporting participant among other professionals documenting the event. Individuals or small groups often requested to be photographed either by queuing the photographer, by striking a pose, or by verbally asking to be portrayed. These individuals hope for more visibility, especially if they think the photographer is a journalist or has an otherwise large or prestigious audience. I often tried explaining that I was not a journalist but a scholar at the university, which was of little concern for those photographed. However, they often approved of the images shown in the image finder on the camera and even asked if I could send them a copy or if I was “going to post them on Facebook?” The sense of importance of one’s digital visibility has long reached urban Pune where most people have access to a mobile device. Nowadays, many measure their self-worth by the amount of looks and “likes” one is able to collect on social media.

In 2020, the public celebration of *Śivājī Jayantī* consisted of a procession in which several organizations paraded 85 allegorical carts (*ratha*) through an established route sanctioned by Pune’s municipal corporation (P.M.C.) in the old part of the city. These organizations can be either local neighborhood associations known as *mitra maṇḍaḷ*s (friends’ circles), local or regional branches of political parties, Maratha family/caste

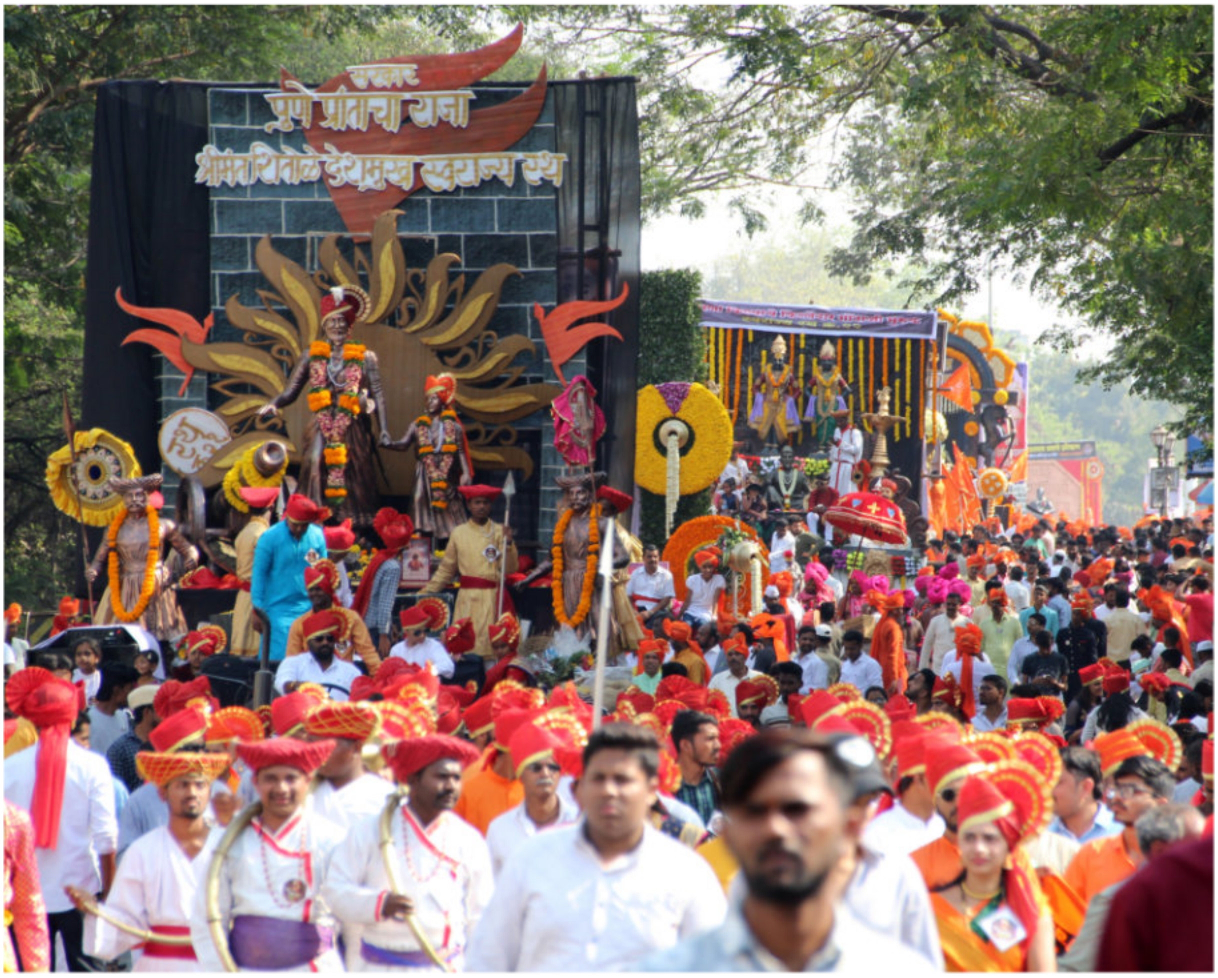

सरकार
पुणे प्रांताचा राजा
श्रीमंत शितोळे देशमुख स्वराज्य रथ

Figure 2: The "chariots" or themed allegorical carts during the parade celebrate Śivājī and his family. The themes revolve mainly around his military prowess.

associations, and in some cases even schools and other institutions. This spectacle is attended and enhanced by thousands of people of all ages and political affiliations dressing up for the occasion. Many wear saffron turbans (both men and women), the red half-moon *tilaka* on the forehead symbolically marking one's affiliation to the Marathas, colorful Maharashtrian 9-yard *nauvārī sāṛīs*, real and fantasy jewelry, plastic and iron swords and daggers, fake and real beards and mustaches, saffron flags and banners of all sizes, aviator sunglasses, and more. Many are personifying the king of kings himself, Maratha generals, soldiers and other heroes, while women embody the wife or mother of Śivājī. However, most women dress up as female heroes carrying weapons and a turban traditionally reserved for men. However, this almost androgenous costume, which incorporates both the traditional feminine attire and what many consider "masculine" elements such as aviator glasses, motorcycles, and weapons, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

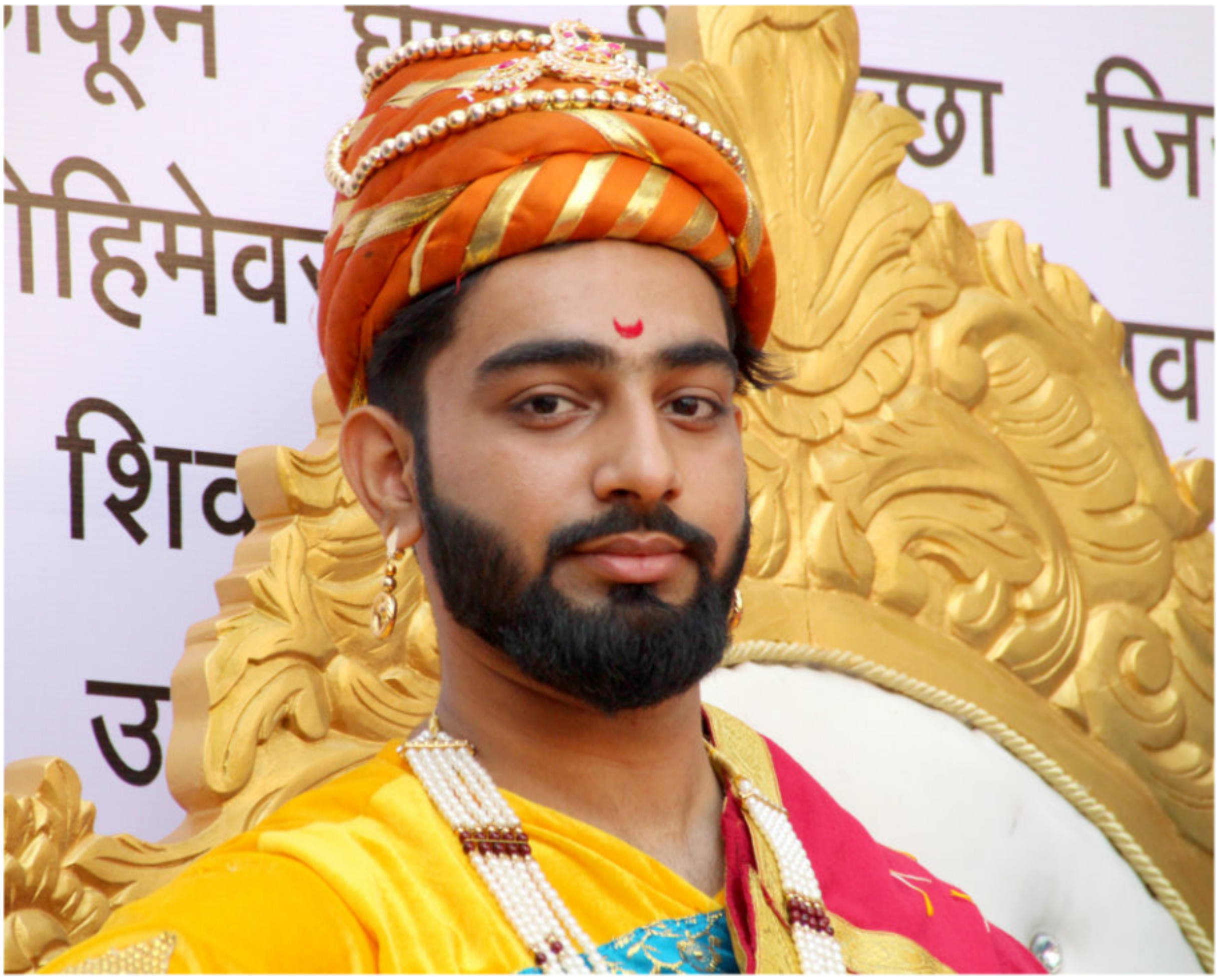


Figure 3: Man dressed up as Śivājī enthroned on one of the procession chariots

Such costumes exploded in popularity in recent years with the rise of the "dashing ladies" of the Shiv Sena (Bedi 2016) but also of militarized training camps for girls such as those organized by the Sangh Parivar called Durgā Vāhinī (Durga's Army) where discipline, physical strength, and self-control are emphasized (Mehta 2015). Menon also argues that in the case of Śivājī's mother, many women "[...] deify Jijabai as an enlightened mother worthy of emulation, who fought for the Hindu nation through her son, Shivaji, by inculcating in him the values, ideology, strength and patriotism that the Hindu nation lacked" (Menon 2005, 105). Here we have, on the one hand, the familiar trope of motherhood and womanhood in service of men and the nation, and on the other, a reimagined ideal of women as embodying the primordial strength of the goddess as just, fierce, and violent, drawing from the figure of Bhavānī of Tuḷjāpur. Both women and men use symbols such as the emblematic sword of the hero-king.

For the few spontaneous and unprepared spectators, hawkers sell turbans, saffron flags, imprinted orange shawls, plastic swords for children, and other paraphernalia and souvenirs.

Ever since the festival was established in the city in 1870, it has been the subject of communal and caste tensions. However, one of the first significant outbreaks of violence was when the Shiv Sena orchestrated the Bhiwandi riots of 1970 during the celebrations of Śivājī Jayantī, which resulted in the deaths of over 250 people, mostly Muslims, and the arson and vandalism of Muslim-owned properties in that town (see Hansen 2001, 75).

> *The commission's findings paint a clear picture of the riots as the outcome of a long-standing complex of economic contradictions between Muslim weavers and Hindu traders, interwoven with escalating competition over public space and identity in conjunction with the annual religious processions from Moharram to Shivaji Jayanti, a competition fueled and organized by communal organizations throughout the 1960s*
> *(Hansen 2001, 75).*

Over the following decades, communal violence erupted and was mobilized by the Shiv Sena on several occasions, peaking during the riots of 1992-1993 in Bombay, when over a thousand people were killed and several thousand were wounded (Human Rights Watch 1995;Masselos 1996).

Political parties from a broad political spectrum—but especially the Shiv Sena and BJP—have continued to mobilize Śivājī's heroism for political gains. With Hindu nationalism defining the mainstream narrative across India, their political aspirations have increasingly become sacralized and ritualized into spectacles of Hindu majoritarianism. Primarily young men and increasingly young women are inexorably drawn into the mythicized Śivājī stories on social media, television, and cinema, weaving a reactionary vision of themselves and the nation as proudly Hindu.

Complex caste politics surrounding Śivājī seem to have turned the hero into a different kind of "untouchable:" one whose dignity and heroism should be left unquestioned, particularly by the diverging narratives produced by academia and secular forces. Case in point are the acts of violence carried out 2003-2004 by both members of the Pune branch of the Shiv Sena against the scholar S. Bahulkar and a few days later by the Sambhaji Brigade against the local Bhandarkar Research Institute and its staff. This violence followed the publication and public censure of a controversial book by the

American scholar James Laine (2003). The accusation was that Laine slandered both Śivājī and his mother Jījābāī for insinuating that either the spiritual teacher of Śivājī, the saint Samārtha Rāmdās, or his guardian Dādājī Koṇḍadeo could have been Śivājī's biological father, thereby portraying Jījābāī as an immoral wife and Śivājī an illegitimate child.

The Laine controversy, in some ways, was the beginning of a new chapter in the continuous censorship and pressure that right-wing groups are exercising on those who disrupt their core narratives. To name a recent example, in Goa in 2020, the right-wing Hindutva organization Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (H.J.S.) demanded the withdrawal of a Class XI textbook, which allegedly portrays King Śivājī as a plunderer.[5] A spokesperson for the H.J.S. said: "No Hindu will tolerate such distorted history of the great kings of our motherland. The Goa government should immediately withdraw this history textbook, or else all *Shivpremis* (followers of Shivaji Maharaj) will come out on the streets to protest against it."[6] While Marathas have had a long and complex history of identity disputes with other castes and of resentment against Brahmins, when it comes to mobilizing sentiments against non-Hindus, they can quickly become allies of Hindutva groups with a translocal agenda.

Given the presence of people of all ages, but particularly of schoolchildren (figures 4 and 5) and youngsters, one is tempted to read this event, at least in part, as an educational project in which a particular habitus is inscribed in them and reinforced every year. The creative manipulation of symbols facilitates the construction of this practice with Hindu pride at its center: a habitus that potentially leads to collective activism and, if needed, violence. Here the aesthetic and political representations collide. The aesthetic expression of ideal citizenship is projected onto the ruler Śivājī, thereby securing the political relationship between the representative and the represented.

Appealing to violence and "manliness" as a means for coping with the imagined threat from the Muslim minority is prominent in the many cities and urban centers in inland Maharashtra. Śivājī's militaristic aesthetic is perhaps most iconically represented by the

---

[5] Historians have documented Śivājī's guerrilla warfare tactics, which involved among others, the raiding of villages, ports, and other strategic points. (See Gordon, 1993, 59–90.)

[6] https://thewire.in/politics/goa-chhatrapati-shivaji-history-hindu-janajagruti-samiti last accessed on 07.08.2020.

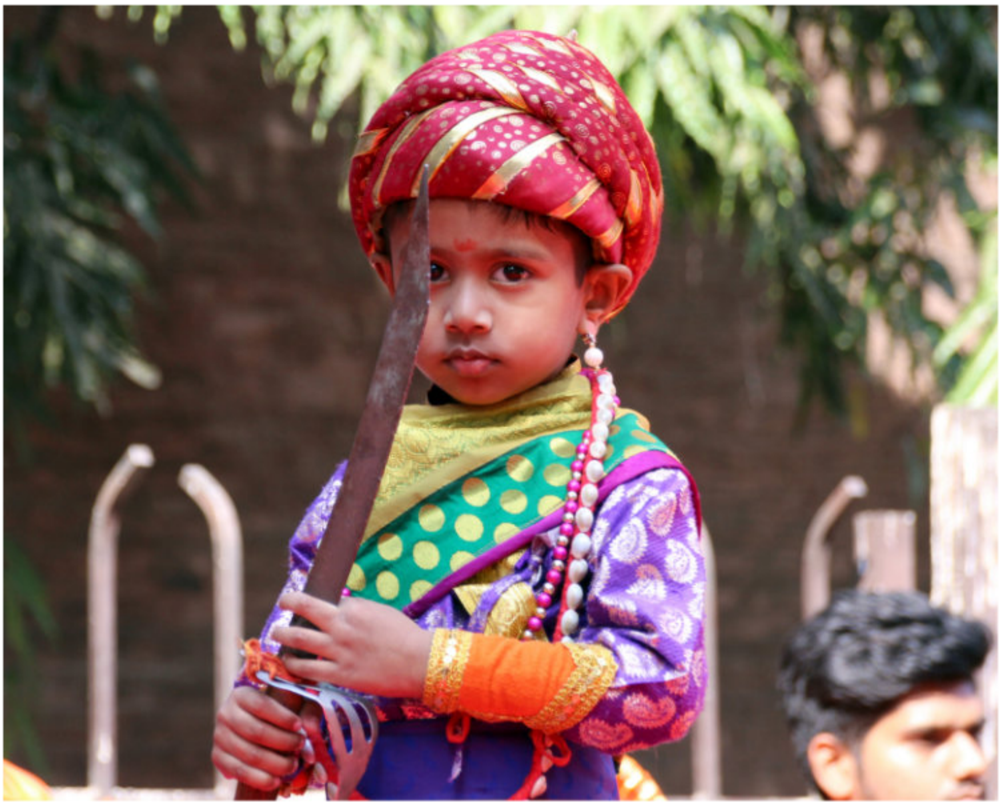


Figure 4: Child dressed up as Śivājī holding a sword.

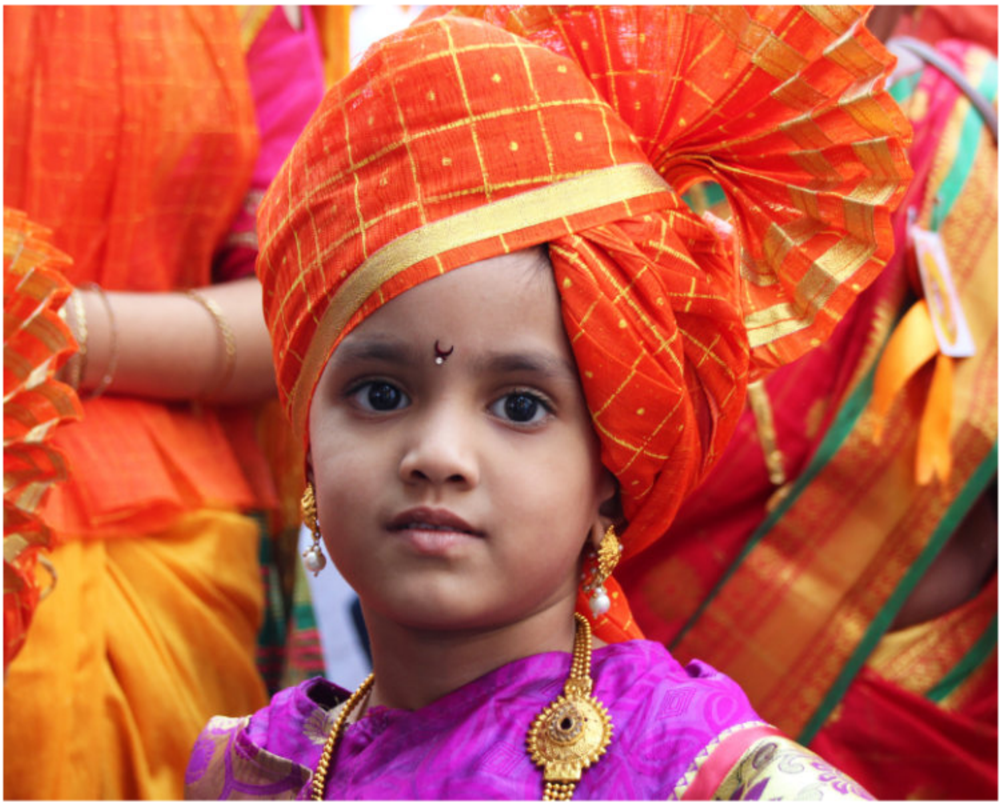


Figure 5: Adorned girl wearing a Maratha turban and a half-moon tika on her forehead.

Bhavānī Talvār or the mythical sword that, according to legend, was given to the hero Śivājī by the goddess Tuḷjā Bhavānī, who is also the "family deity" (*kuldaivat* or *kulsvāminī*) of the Maratha caste (figure 6). Not unlike Arthur's Excalibur, this icon is powerful because the sword represents divine justice. Śivājī allegedly also slayed the Bijapur general Afzal Khan with it, and thus, for many, the sword stands for the victory of *dharma* over *adharma* (and Hinduism over Islam).

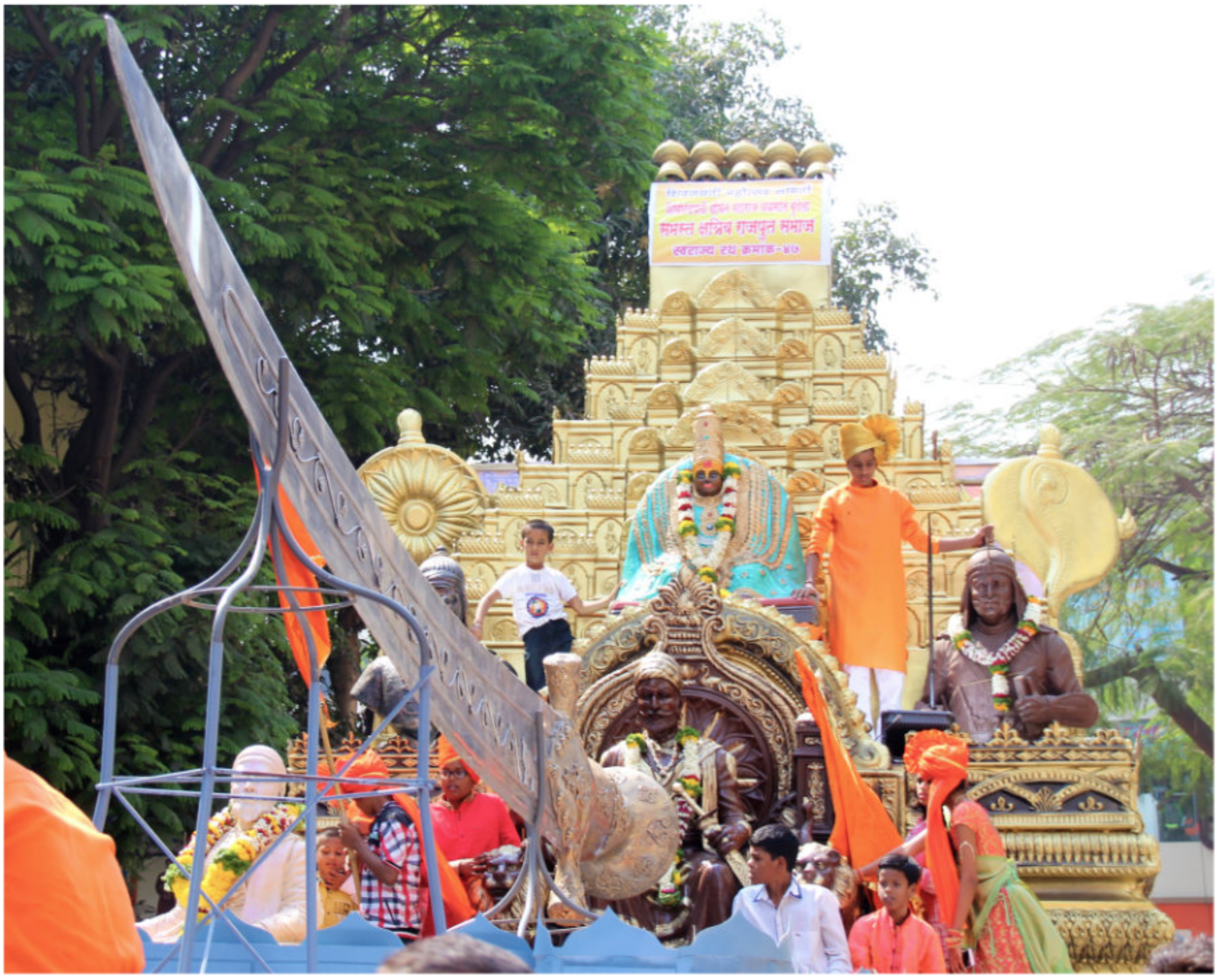


Figure 6:
A representation of the Bhavānī Talvār or the mythical sword given to Śivājī by the goddess Tuḷjā Bhavānī weighing 500 kg seen at the top of the chariot of the Samasta Kṣatrīya Rājput Samāj.

For believers, the blade is the material embodiment of the Goddess Bhavānī (Jansen 1995, 15). During the Śivājī Jayantī celebration in 2020, the goddess and the sword's presence was ubiquitous. The most dramatic cart installation was the massive sword on the chariot number 47 belonging to the Samasta Kṣatrīya Rājput Samāj, which weighed 500 kg and measured six and a half meters.

However, the number of competing groups and their allegorical carts ironically destabilize the different accounts of identity by depicting clashing truth-claims about the Maratha hero. While the dominant narrative is indeed one colored by Hindutva, there are also other groups that see in Śivājī a symbol of unity between different religions (notably Muslims and Hindus), or an ideal leader and protector of the lower peasant castes beyond Brahmanical hegemony. Navigating through the different truth-

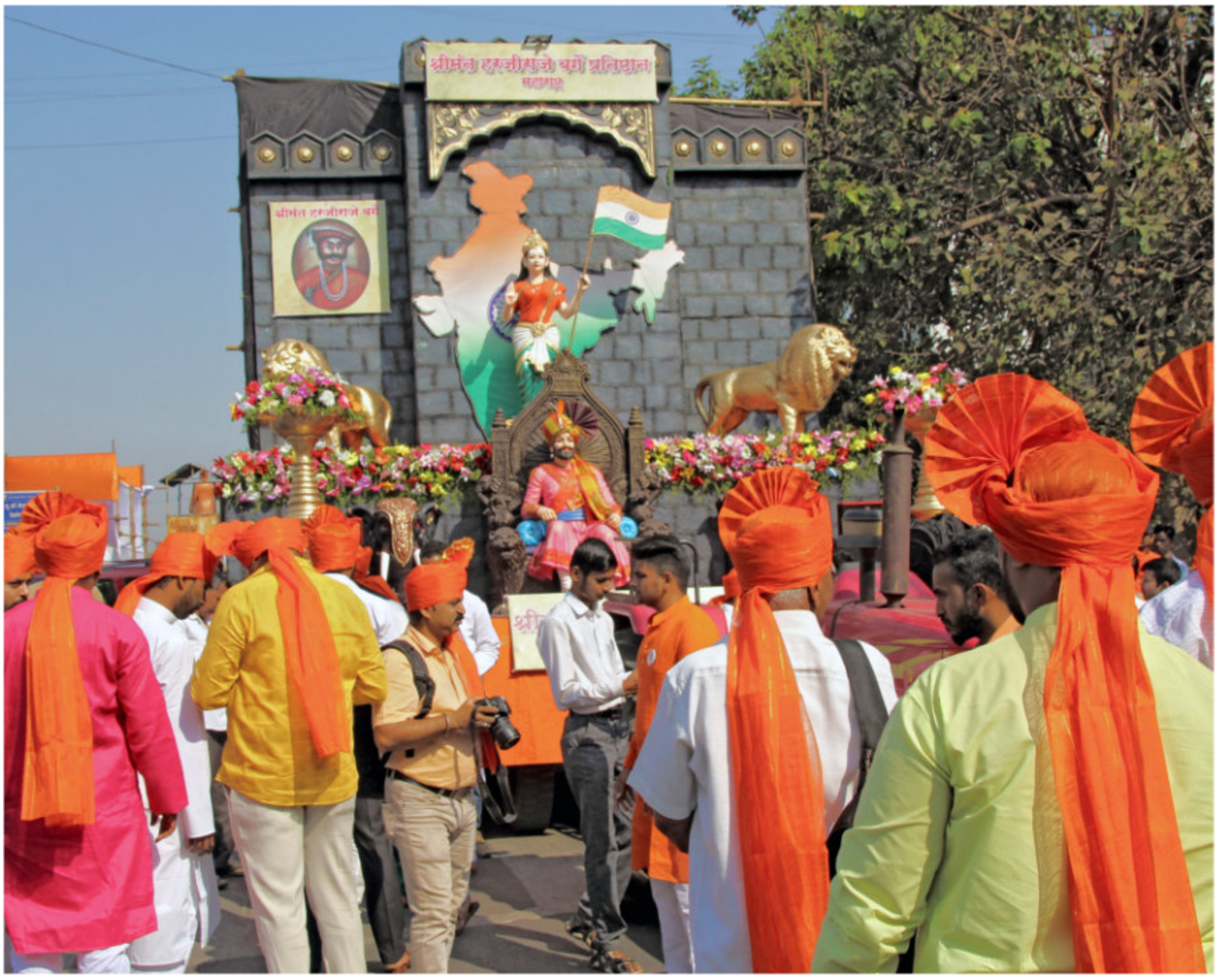


Figure 7:
A Paṇḍaḷ of the Śrīmant Harjīraje Barge Pratiṣṭhan pulled by a tractor. Śivājī with the background of the map of India and a two-handed goddess dressed in a tricolor sāṛī also holding an Indian flag flanked by two golden lions.

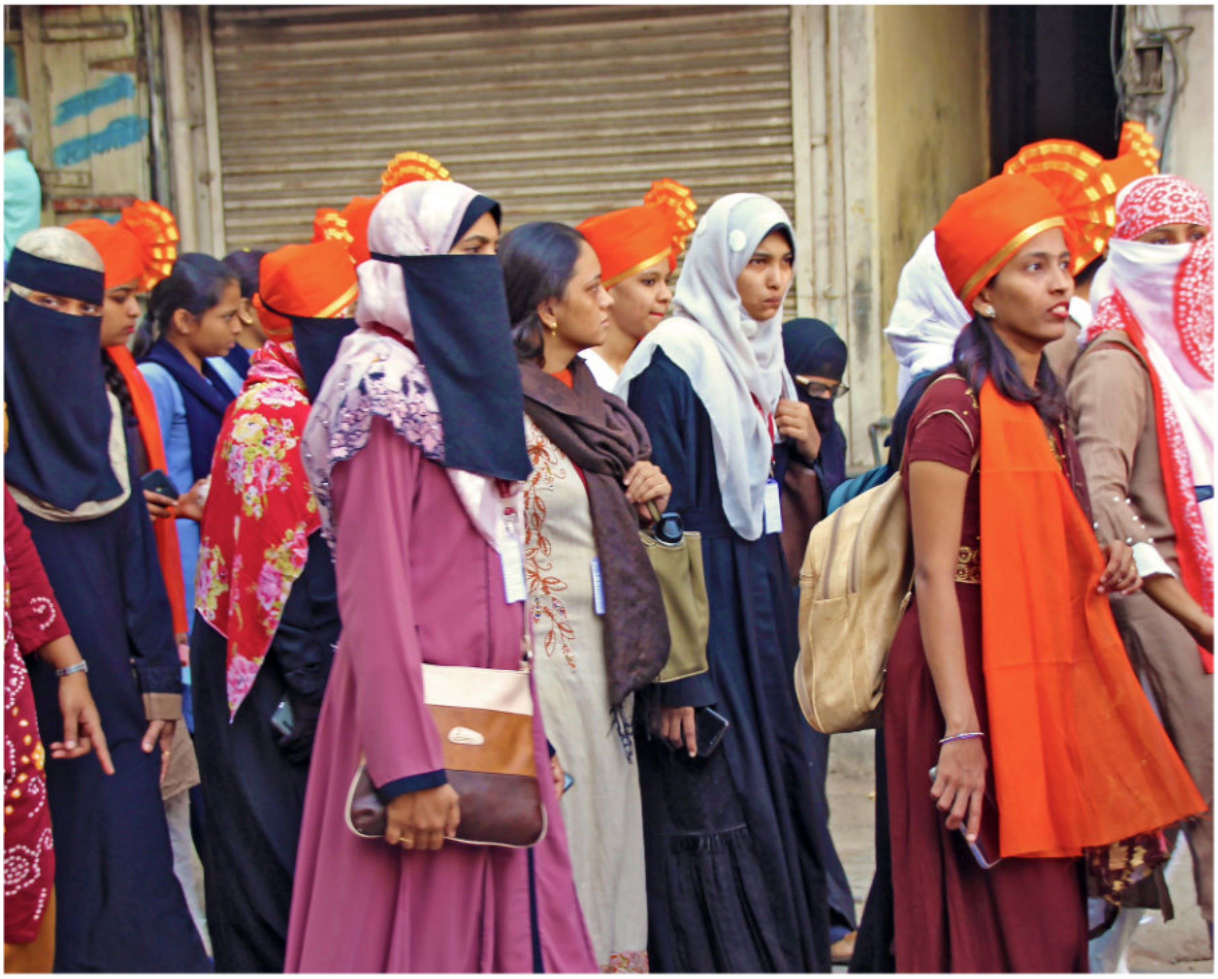


Figure 8 (Top): Muslim women of all ages march along the parade of the Maharashtra Cosmopolitan Education Society (MCES) a predominantly Muslim school.

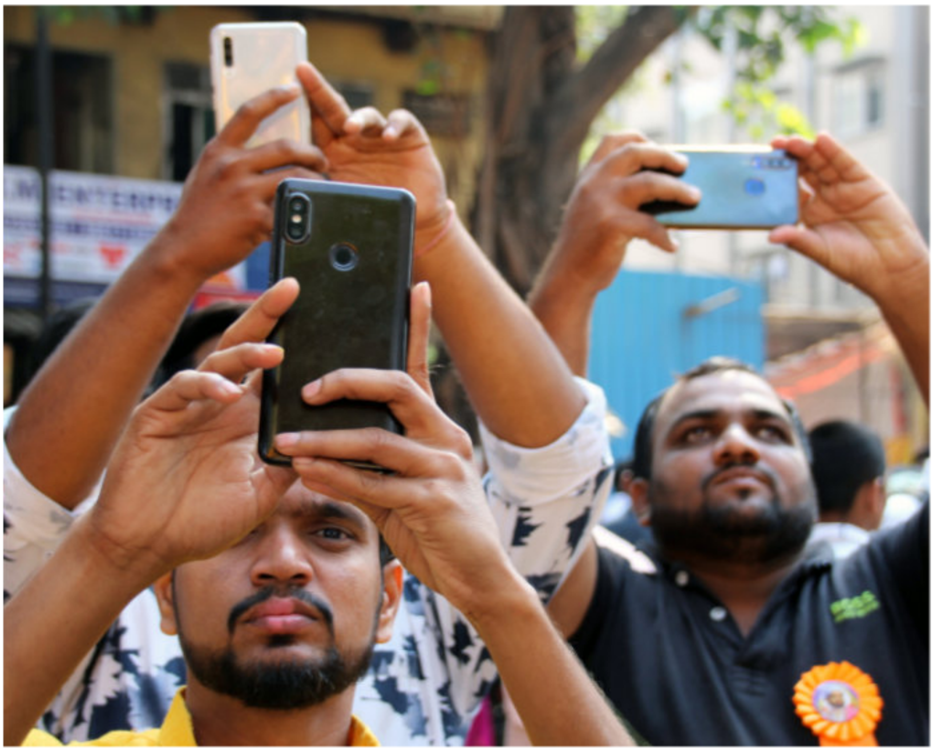


Figure 9 (right): Young men taking photographs with their smartphones.

claims projected onto such an empty signifier becomes confusing for the external observer. One may not be able to read the conflicting sociopolitical allegiances.

At first glance, the Śivājī Jayantī is a well-orchestrated spectacle and seems coherent and homogeneous. The fetishized aesthetics and the uniform color palette that saturate the streets disguise competing narratives of different actors and organizations. Both the thousands of bodies that participate in the celebration and the streets of Pune are socially produced spaces that carry relations, subjectivities, and power hierarchies. Some groups, like the Muslims (figure 7) or left-leaning organizations, consciously try to subvert and reclaim Śivājī to gain more visibility in the streets. These groups, however, parade at different moments and along different routes than the more extensive allegorical carts, distancing themselves from the dominant narrative at a very physical level. However, in the context of the Śivājī Jayantī celebrations, they generally find a sympathetic public to perform a distinct identity that tries to disrupt the narrative of a *Hindu Rashtra* as conceived by Hindutva ideologues by calling for a more inclusive and secular understanding of the Maratha hero king. Despite this, the success of disrupting the dominant narrative of Śivājī as “the Hindu king who drove away the Muslim threat and the protector of cows and Brahmins” seems limited at best and instead appears to drown in the sea of Hindutva majoritarianism. The groups that try to counter the Hindutva narrative are perhaps tolerated or even ignored by dominant groups because they unwillingly camouflage themselves in the crowd, amplifying Śivājī’s glory for the benefit of his saffronized persona.

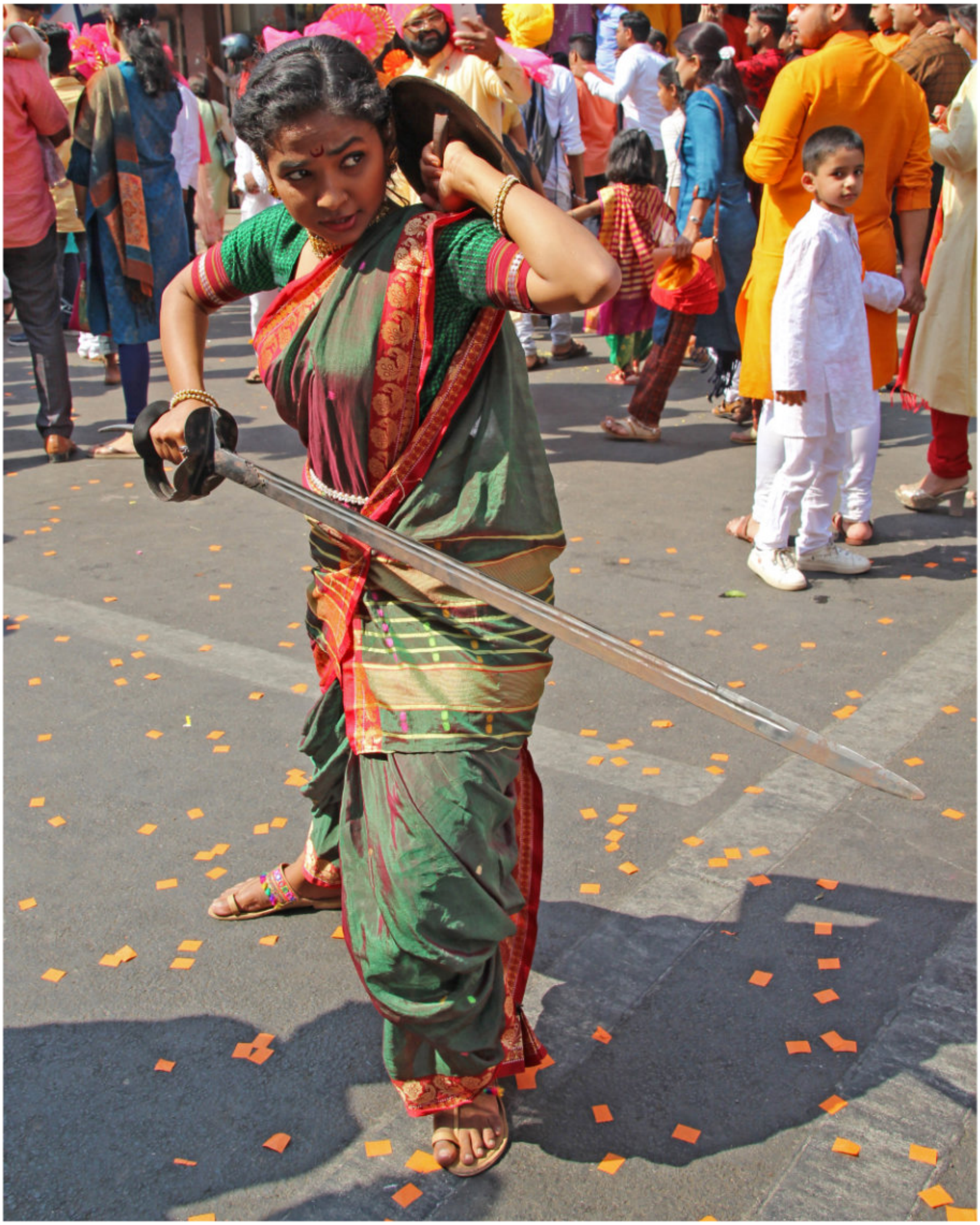


Figure 10:
Young woman in a traditional nine-yard Sāṛī holding a sword and a shield posing to be photographed.

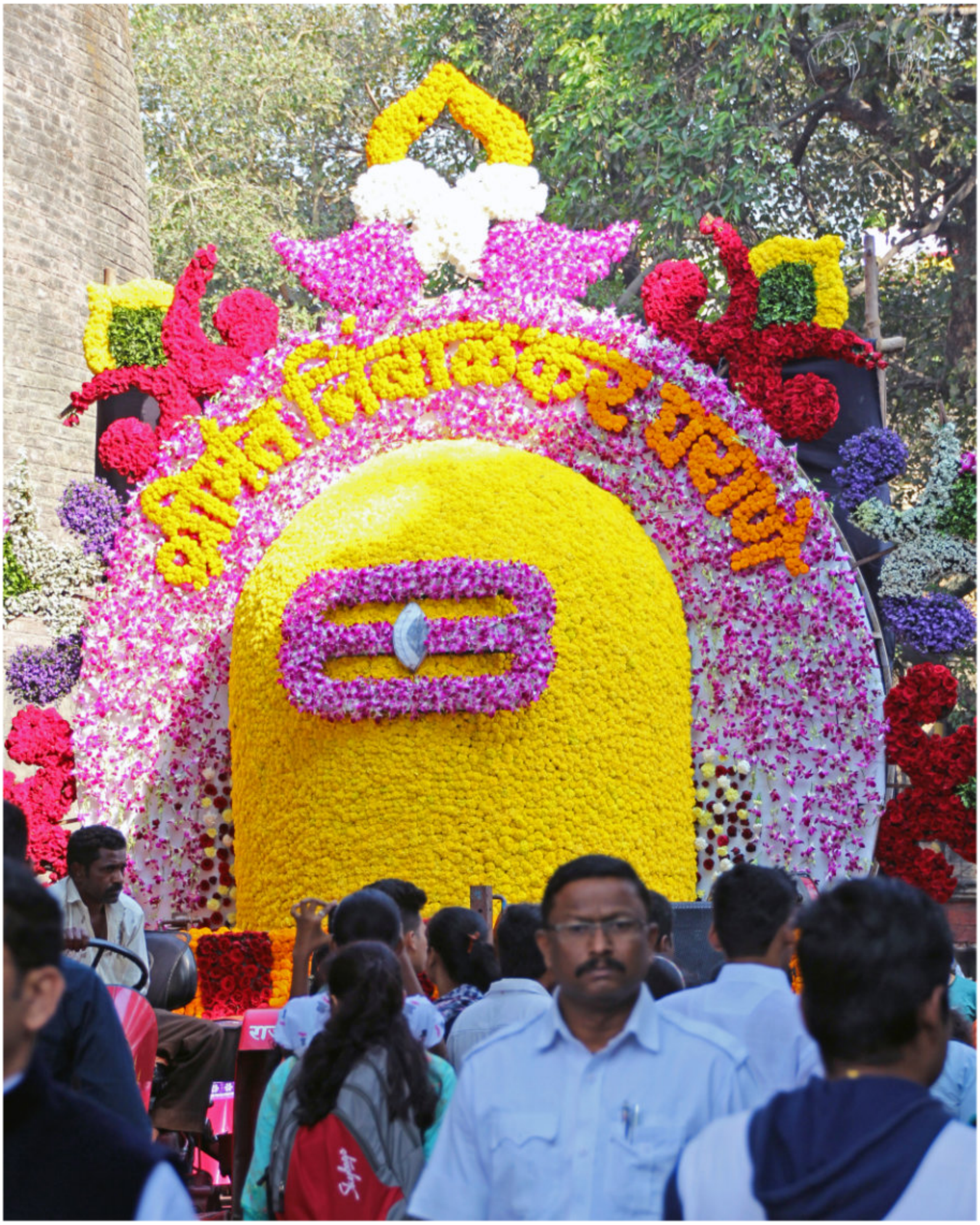


Figure 11: Śivaliṅgam made of flowers by members of the Nimbāḷkar family who are one of the 96 traditional Maratha clans.

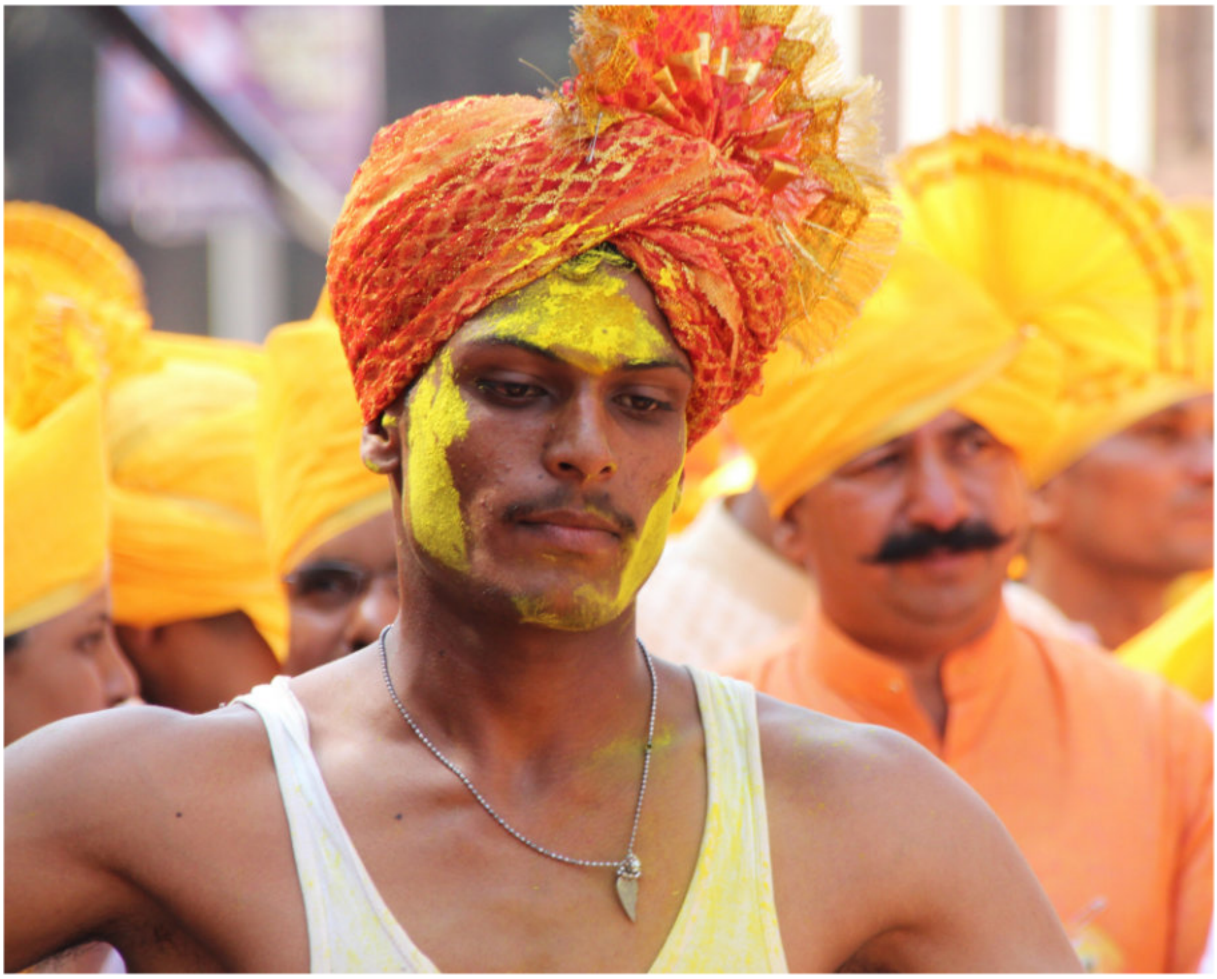


Figure 12: Drummer of a Dhal-Tahs group accompanying one of the allegorical carts.

Contributor’s biography

Borayin Larios teaches at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies of the University of Vienna and is Assistant to the Chair of South Asian Studies. He authored *Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra* published by DeGruyter Open Access in 2017. Dr. Larios uses an interdisciplinary methodological approach, combining cultural anthropology, religious studies, and historical philology to understand the contemporary religious traditions of India. His current research project focuses on sacred space and popular religion in the city of Pune, Maharashtra. Together with Raphaël Voix he put together the special issue: “Wayside Shrines: Everyday Religion in Urban India,” co-edited by SAMAJ and the European Association for South Asian Studies (EASAS).

Bibliography

Bedi, Tarini. 2016. *The Dashing Ladies of Shiv Sena*. *Political Matronage in Urbanizing India.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Cashman, Richard Ian. 1975. *The Myth of the Lokamanya*. *Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Date, Vidyadhar. 2007. “Politics of Shivaji: the James Laine Affair.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(20): 1812-1814.

Gordon, Stewart. 1993. *The Marathas, 1600-1818.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hansen, Thomas Blom. 1996. “The Vernacularisation of Hindutva: the BJP and Shiv Sena in rural Maharashtra.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 30(2): 177-214.

Human Rights Watch. 1995. *Playing the “Communal Card”*. *Communal Violence and Human Rights.* New York.

Jansen, Roland. 1995. *Die Bhavani von Tuljapur*. *Religionsgeschichtliche Studie des Kultes einer Göttin der indischen Volksreligion*. Beiträge zur Südasienforschung. Stuttgart: Steiner.

MacDougall, David. 2012. “Beyond Observational Cinema.” *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. edited by Paul Hockings, 115-132. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter Mouton.

Mehta, Akanksha. 2015. “The Aesthetics of “Everyday” Violence: Narratives of Violence and Hindu Right-wing Women.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8(3): 416-438.

Menon, Kalyani Devaki. 2005. “‘We Will Become Jijabai’: Historical Tales of Hindu Nationalist Women in India.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64(1): 103-126.

Novetzke, Christian Lee. 2004. “The Laine Controversy and the Study of Hinduism.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 8(1-3): 183-201.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 2007. *The Clash Within. Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

O'Hanlon, Rosalind. 1983. “Maratha History as Polemic: Low Caste Ideology and Political Debate in Late Nineteenth-Century Western India.” *Modern Asian Studies* 17(1): 1-33.

Shepard, Sadia Quraeshi. 2021. "*For My Country*: Nationalism and Female Empowerment in Pakistan Women's Cricket." *Dastavezi* (3): 40-54

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

For My Country: Nationalism and Female Empowerment in Pakistan Women's Cricket

Sadia Quraeshi Shepard

Abstract

Drawing on interviews and scenes from *For My Country*, a documentary film about Pakistan's women's cricket team directed by Sadia Quraeshi Shepard and Samina Quraeshi, as well as interviews with former women's team captain Sana Mir conducted between 2012 and 2021, this paper demonstrates the patriotism and interest in subverting dominant gender norms that motivate many of Pakistan's professional female cricketers as well as the integral role that supportive male family members play in their careers.

Keywords: Pakistan, women's cricket, gender, female empowerment

Film: https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/15243/14857

Introduction

In Pakistan, cricket is a national obsession. From the mountains of the Swat Valley to the port city of Karachi, the sight of children playing impromptu cricket games on any available road or field is a familiar, ubiquitous sight. Yet cricket's omnipresence in Pakistan's public spaces only begins to suggest the fundamental role that the sport plays in daily life. In the national media landscape, there is a seemingly insatiable hunger for cricket; games and commentary are broadcast on multiple news channels featuring former players as commentators, members of the national team are dominant entities in the branding and advertising industries, and Prime Minister Imran Khan is still considered a national hero for captaining the Pakistan team to their 1992 World Cup title. Trading stories of packed stadiums, stunning victories, and heartbreaking defeats is a form of national mythmaking central to the project of what it means to be Pakistani.

However, until recently, women's participation in Pakistan's cricket culture—in informal games, in club sports at the school and college level, in popular media representation, and as professional athletes—has existed largely outside of the national spotlight. Research into this phenomenon must critically engage with the politics and representations of women in Pakistan today. While the issue of whether or not independent documentary film practice adequately addresses the need for increased media representation of women working for social change in Pakistan remains an open question, in the case of women's cricket, documentary film provides a crucial method of preserving the personal narratives of Pakistan's first generation of professional female cricket players. In addition, documentary film visually demonstrates female cricket players' agency, physical prowess, and how they are changing dominant ideas about women's roles in Pakistani society and in Pakistan's public spaces.

Sana Mir with teammates, Islamabad 2012.
From left to right: Sadia Yousuf, Batol Fatima, Sana Mir, Asmavia Iqbal, Qanita Jalil ©Andreas Burgess

For My Country, a documentary portrait of Pakistan's women's cricket team and then-team captain Sana Mir, negotiates the distance between the common misconception that cricket is the exclusive purview of Pakistani men and an increased awareness and appreciation for women's participation in the sport as a form of civic engagement and feminist advocacy. Drawing on interviews and scenes from *For My Country*, as well as interviews with Sana Mir conducted between 2012 and 2021, this paper demonstrates the strong sense of patriotism and interest in subverting dominant gender norms that motivates many of Pakistan's professional female cricketers. In addition to their determination to represent Pakistan on the world stage, they demonstrate the belief that cricket, and their emergent national visibility as female role models, can empower future generations of women.

Project background 2010-2012

In 2010 I began developing *The Other Half of Tomorrow: Women Changing Pakistan*, a series of ten short documentaries about women working for grassroots social change across Pakistan in collaboration with my co-director, artist, author, and arts advocate Samina Quraeshi[1] and cinematographer Andreas Burgess[2]. At a critical point in US-Pakistan relations, our goal was to highlight unheralded change makers—educators, athletes, musicians, and activists—in order to bring more female voices into a vital conversation about Pakistan's future[3]. This project was both a professional and deeply personal assignment; in it, we drew upon our disparate skills as producers, directors, cinematographers, editors, and our overlapping identities as family members and artists with ties to Pakistan and the United States.

We designed *The Other Half of Tomorrow* as a project which could be screened either as a single, linked feature-length program or as shorter clusters of one to three individual short films ranging in length between five and twenty minutes. Intended as individual, stackable elements that fit together in order to add up to the project as a whole, the films are conceived as portraits rather than long-form story arcs, where individual cogs create a dialogue between the separate protagonists. While as filmmakers, we were acutely aware that no film series would be able to represent the breadth and complexity of Pakistan or its dynamic female population, our intention in creating a project comprised of discrete units was one where multiple film protagonists would coexist laterally instead of placing disparate narratives into a single, feature-length documentary with a central narrative thesis.

---

[1] As a vigorous proponent for initiatives that help build a civil society, artist and author Samina Quraeshi (1944-2013) served as Director of Design Arts for the National Endowment for the Arts, Assistant Director of the Carpenter Center at Harvard University, Henry Luce Professor in Family and Community at the University of Miami, and President and Creative Director of SQ Design Associates. Her book Sacred Spaces: A Journey with the Sufis of the Indus (Harvard University Press, 2009) explores Sufi Muslim culture in South Asia. She was also the author of three previous award-winning books on Pakistan: Legacy of the *Indus* (1978), *Lahore: The City Within* (1988), and *Legends of the Indus* (2004 and 2014).

[2] Andreas Burgess is a two-time Emmy Award-winning cinematographer whose work has been screened at Sundance, Cannes, TriBeCa, SXSW, and Full Frame and on ABC, PBS, ESPN, FX, Showtime & Hulu. His narrative credits include eight feature films, including Lisa Robinson and Annie J. Howell's *Claire in Motion*, Liz W. Garcia's *One Percent More Humid*, and Mehreen Jabbar's *Dobara Phir Se*. Television credits include ABC's *Final Witness*, Discovery's *A Crime to Remember*, The New York Times' series *The Weekly*, Showtime's *Love Fraud* and ABC's *The Last Defense*. Documentary credits include Elisabeth James' In *So Many Words* and Purcell Carson's *La Vida No Termina*.

[3] This project was made possible thanks to project partners Asia Society and New England Foundation for the Arts and grants from Asian Cultural Council, Henry Luce Foundation, Germeshausen Foundation, G. Barrie Landry, Nancy Klavans, Betty Saks and Bart Kavanaugh.

Each film in the project portrays an individual woman, her day-to-day activities, her context, and her ideas for the future in her voice. Slowly moving dolly shots and shallow-depth of field imagery complement on-camera interviews and intimate, observational scenes in the domestic sphere. Instead of voiceover narration, each protagonist tells her story in her own words, prioritizing personal narratives over on-camera interviews with experts in the field. The films and their protagonists seek to provide answers and, sometimes more importantly, to ask the questions: what are the social and cultural factors that determine women's lives in Pakistan, and what steps are women taking to reframe the conversation, improve the circumstances of their lives and advocate for women's advancement in their communities?

In addition, we felt that this project needed to demonstrate Pakistan's vast ethnic and linguistic diversity by showcasing stories from a range of regions, languages, and groups instead of prioritizing Pakistan's urban centers, as is common in mainstream Western media. In this effort, we were fortunate to collaborate with translators in Pakistan, the United States, and Germany who transcribed and translated footage in six languages: Urdu, Sindhi, Balochi, Punjabi, Pashto, and English.

In Pakistan, two women's organizations, All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) and Shirkat Gah, served as advisors on the project and introduced us to potential subjects, including educators and community organizers who had received training or participated in conferences associated with each organization. In addition to this material, our team spent three months identifying protagonists outside of non-governmental organizations with the goal of expanding public perceptions of how female empowerment is traditionally understood in Pakistan. To this end, via an introduction to then Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Women's Wing Chairwoman Bushra Aitzaz, in early 2012 we were enthusiastic to meet Sana Mir and explore the idea of making a documentary film.

Sana Mir: women and public space

As the child of a Pakistan Army officer, Sana Mir frequently moved between different cities and towns in Pakistan. In each home, as she and her siblings adjusted to new routines, she noticed with interest how the informal games of cricket she saw unfolding in the streets served as a locus of unity and camaraderie, and how her natural talent for the game acted as a kind of social passport (00:14). By opening the film with a scene of boys playing street cricket intercut with an interview segment of Mir describing her childhood, our intention was to orient the viewer to the primacy and ubiquity of street cricket in Pakistan as well as to introduce Mir's lifelong interest in the sport. As she describes in *For My County* (04:37), her elder brother Humayun took her with him to the streets to play and insisted that she be included and taken seriously as a player. As she grew in skill and confidence as a player, Mir observed that the game of cricket had the potential to flatten social hierarchies and divisions based on faith and gender. As Mir told me in an interview in 2019,

> I learned how to quickly forge connections with local children and adults through a shared love of the game. On the cricket field, I noticed that our family backgrounds, religious beliefs, and genders did not define us, despite their outsize influences off the field. In cricket, we were all equal.

Mir's anecdote echoes similar narratives shared by nearly every player we interviewed. Since for most Pakistanis, cricket is not played in a stadium, but in the traditionally male-dominated world of Pakistan's street life, many young women who have become professional players got their start in cricket breaking gender barriers in the lanes outside their homes. Mir's origin story as a street player unites her with the childhood experience of a vast majority of Pakistanis and demonstrates her early interest in cricket's ability to collapse class and gender barriers.

When Mir turned fifteen years old, her parents asked her to stop playing coeducational cricket, fearing repercussions for her behavior that might be read as flouting dominant social norms in Pakistan. After a brief hiatus from cricket while she attended college and pursued other sports, Mir learned about the existence of a women's cricket team taking shape in Karachi and tried out for the team.

Origins of the Pakistan women's cricket team

In 1996, two sisters based in Karachi who had attended boarding school in the United Kingdom, Shaiza and Sharmeen Khan, founded the first professional team of female cricket players in Pakistan. With financial support from the Khan family, the team toured Australia and New Zealand and went on to play the World Cup in India in 1997. The Khan family managed the team until 2004. During this period, the International Women Cricket Council (IWCC) merged with the International Cricket Council (ICC), and the women's boards merged with male cricket boards. After Sana Mir, at that time an engineering student and avid cricket player based in Karachi, wrote a letter to then-President Musharraf to request that neutral selectors give a fair chance to all prospective players, she was given an opportunity to audition for a team organized by the PCB. Mir was one of nine players who made their professional debuts in the Asia Cup in Karachi in 2005 against Sri Lanka. As Mir recollects:

> I got a chance to give trials to the Khan sisters when I was eighteen and in Karachi, as my father changed jobs…There was no formal team operating at that point due to conflicts with the system, so I had to take a decision to leave university without having any idea what the future in cricket holds for girls in Pakistan.

Due to internal conflict between the board and players, the Khan sisters did not join the team that PCB established in 2005. Once PCB took over management of the women's team, Mir played an active role in recruiting and professionalizing the group. "I left engineering university and started building the team by arranging practices, motivating myself and other girls."

Cricket as female empowerment and embodied patriotism

Mir saw the opportunity to join the nascent Pakistan women's team not only as a chance to return to a game she loved, but a chance to demonstrate her strong sense of national pride and bring positive attention to Pakistan.

> What if, I wondered, I was allowed to represent my country in sports? What if bringing glory to our country as international athletes was as possible for women as it is for men? Finally, confronted with my unwavering commitment to the sport, my parents relented, and I have never looked back.

The idea of cricket as means of transforming society and as a form of service to one's country emerged as a dominant theme in our conversations with female cricket players during the production of our film in 2012. In fact, this concept proved so central that it inspired the title of the documentary, *For My Country* or *Meray Mulk ke Liye.* Whereas Pakistan's men's team players are the most celebrated and highest paid public figures in the country, female cricket players frequently cite their interest in being role models for other women and in subverting gender norms as important reasons for their involvement in the sport, despite the comparatively lower salaries and smaller audiences associated with women's cricket.

What did you learn from today's match?

Still from recorded footage of Sana Mir and Nashra Sundhu, Lahore 2012 ©Andreas Burgess

Between international matches, Mir and her teammates based in Lahore occasionally practiced with local teams. On our first day of filming in February of 2012, we observed and filmed Mir and members of her team practicing drills with their coach and the members of the all-male Paragon Cricket Club. In a society where many activities are typically segregated along gender and class lines, it was immediately clear that women's involvement in cricket provided an unexpected vantage from which to observe a rapidly changing Pakistan. Mir's skill as a leader on the field as well as her passion for cricket as a platform for women's empowerment was instantly apparent in our first meeting. In between drills, Mir noticed Nashra Sundhu, a fifteen-year old fan sitting on the sidelines patiently waiting to speak with her. Sundhu had traveled that day from Batapur, a small town outside of Lahore in the hopes of meeting Mir. When she got the chance to speak to Mir, Sundhu asked her advice on how she might prepare for a career in cricket. We filmed the conversation between Mir and Sundhu, documenting Mir's suggestions for what Sundhu might do to prepare herself, encouraging her to focus on her fielding skills, asking her if anyone in her family had ever forbidden her to play and whom she practiced with at home. When Sundhu told her that she played with her father who supported her interest in cricket, Mir expressed her approval, telling the young woman how important it is for a cricket player to have a supportive family and to balance honing cricket skills with her studies. It was evident that even without the sponsorship deals, nationwide Pepsi campaigns and public attention that would come within the next decade, Mir was already actively inspiring young female players to pursue cricket at the professional level. While we ultimately determined that this scene was outside the scope of our film, this moment was instructive for us as a filmmaking team and provided a template for future observational filming with Mir. It was evident from this initial shoot that Mir was comfortable interacting with others in front of the camera and was interested in serving as a kind of informal ambassador for the idea that families supportive of their

Nashra Sundhu and family, Batapur, Pakistan 2012 ©Andreas Burgess daughters playing cricket were critical to the proliferation of the sport among women in Pakistan. Mir remained passionate about this idea throughout production, reminding us that while Pakistani society was often depicted in monolithic terms as oppressive towards women, this had not been her experience or the experience of many of her teammates, who came from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, regions and religious sects. At a film shoot the following day at the home of Nashra Sundhu in Batapur, we filmed a scene of Sundhu playing cricket in the backyard of her modest home with her father, younger brother and sister as well as an interview with her parents in which they expressed their pride in their daughter's ability and their fervent wish that she might become a professional cricket player.

As we filmed the women's team over the next several months as they played for a domestic team sponsored by Zarai Taraqiati Bank Limited, or ZTBL, players often described their cricket careers to us as a means of transforming Pakistani society and frequently highlighted the ways that their male family members had encouraged them to defy gender norms. In a sequence that appears early in the film, we intercut players practicing at the National Cricket Academy and at the National Stadium in Karachi, where we see the physical power and high skill of the players with on-camera interviews where they describe their cricket careers as a means of changing Pakistani society. Right-handed batsman Nain Abidi says: "Cricket was something different…My brothers always told me 'Do something different in this society.' But they would never think of cricket" (2:07). All-rounder Qanita Jalil described the sense of awe and pride she feels representing Pakistan on the world stage. "It's a huge achievement to wear the Pakistan star on our uniforms. Not many people, let alone girls, come into this field" (2:19). By demonstrating the hard work and expertise that goes into the players' preparations as cricketers, we aimed to link the physical demands of cricket with the notion of the sport as a form of patriotism or national service for female cricketers. While some players shared that they initially saw their interest in cricket as a diversion, several described experiencing a personal transformation through their involvement in the sport. In our interviews, players articulated that their goals for the team, and for their individual careers, were rooted in the idea of cricket as a means of empowering women and in serving their country by advancing gender equality. As all-rounder Javeria Khan Wadoud shares, "In the beginning, I was playing just for fun. But at a certain stage, I thought about Pakistan. That I could do something for my country through cricket" (2:32).

Given existing gender norms in Pakistan there are unquestionably young women who play cricket despite family objections, as well as those who are discouraged or prevented from pursuing the sport. With that said, in our discussions of family involvement with Sana Mir and her teammates stories of familial harmony surrounding women and cricket remained paramount. When we asked Mir in her on-camera interview in Qaddafi Stadium in Lahore about instances of families who did not support their daughters in playing cricket, she offered this response:

> These girls have struggled a lot to come here. From their families, from cultural difficulties…But the best part is that people in their own families who were supportive. And I would say that those should be the ones we should be talking about (09:34).

As a filmmaking team, we made a choice to root our film in Mir's experience as the product of a supportive family and to follow Mir's example. We decided that our film, like Sana Mir, would, in her words, "salute all those families who are supporting their girls to play cricket." With this in mind, we simultaneously looked for ways that we might visually depict the cricket team as a unit with alliances that cross sectarian and class lines in ways that are atypical in Pakistan. In a scene on a bus while the ZTBL team is on tour (07:44), young women encourage one another to sing. After some initial teasing, wicket keeper Batool Fatima begins to sing a plaintive love song, and the bus goes quiet, held in the thrall of her haunting voice. In this scene, which intercuts shots of Fatima singing with reaction shots of women listening and reflecting, our aim was to depict the sense of closeness, simultaneous longing, and the collapsing of public and private spaces that life as a cricketer on the road makes possible.

Rising ascendancy of the team

Between 2005 and 2019, Mir represented the Pakistan Women's Cricket Team as a player for six years and as captain for eight years. Perhaps more than any other female player in Pakistan, Mir has played a vital role in developing women's cricket, working on and off the field to recruit and mentor athletes and to transform an informal group of players into an internationally ranked team. As captain, her job was to strategize on the field and utilize her teammates to their best abilities but also to serve as a bridge between her players, who hail from disparate regions and socio-economic backgrounds, and the Pakistan Cricket Board Women's Wing's mostly male officials, who largely come from Pakistan's urban centers. As a leader, she learned how to balance cultural sensitivities regarding women's roles in Pakistani society with her desire to increase female participation nationwide.

As captain, she rose to national prominence as she led the women's team to win two gold medals at the Asian Games, in 2010 and 2014. One of the contributions to cricket Mir is most proud of is the moment in her captaincy when eight players from the Pakistan women's team were placed in the top twenty ICC world ranking. In 2018, after a dedicated period of intense training, she was named the top One Day International female bowler in the world and became Pakistan's first bona fide female cricket star (Shamsie 2020). In 2019, Mir received an Asia Games Changer Award from the Asia Society and was invited to join Prime Minister Imran Khan's Youth Council.

Sana Mir, Islamabad 2012 ©Andreas Burgess

With the help of two observational scenes in *For My Country* I will demonstrate how Mir uses cricket and her public profile as a platform to advocate for greater gender equity in Pakistan.

Using these scenes as the basis of analysis, I will demonstrate the potentials that documentary film practice provides for the study of women's empowerment in Pakistan and ethnographic research in general. In order to do this, I will provide context on how these scenes were produced.

Observational film and the private sphere

In addition to filming scenes of women cricketers during practices and matches, we filmed interviews with cricket officials, coaches and mentors as well as observational scenes with players at their colleges, gyms, in hotels while traveling for matches, and in social settings on their nights off. In addition to this material we felt that it was important that our film portray the dynamic family lives and supportive male relatives that so many players described as central to their identities as Pakistani women and cricketers. While several players seemed initially enthusiastic about our team filming them in their private spaces, a pattern began to emerge where our plans to shoot in a player’s home would often be abruptly cancelled before or on the day of the shoot. While players appeared comfortable being filmed in the public spaces of their professional lives, gaining access to their private spheres seemed likely to remain a continuous challenge. The notable exception to this rule was Sana Mir, who invited our team to spend several days filming her daily routines in Lahore, from her trainer sessions and bowling and nets practices to scenes in her family home with her mother, father, and elder brother. While Mir had not granted access to her home to a documentary film crew like ours previously, it was clear that her goal to demonstrate the power of a supportive family in the life of a female cricket player overlapped with our goal to expand our documentary to include more material from the private sphere. Access to Mir’s daily life allowed our team to gain a much stronger sense of Mir not only as a leader and as an emerging national figure but also as a daughter and a sister. Through extended observation of Mir in her home environment and interviews with each of her family members living at home, it was clear that our film offered an opportunity to complicate dominant ideas about Pakistani men as repressive of their female family members and instead portray the supportive role that many brothers and fathers play in the lives of female cricket players. In a scene we filmed in the Mir’s parlor (04:35), Mir’s father tells Sana that she has been invited to a family friend’s engagement and wedding, and she reminds him that she won’t be able to attend because the events conflict with her upcoming training camp. Sana’s mother appears taken aback while Sana’s father reflects that playing cricket requires frequent sacrifices; Sana and her elder brother smile slightly as they register their parents’ different reactions. Mir’s father talks about their upcoming plans to attend her tournament matches, and it is evident that her family is accustomed to traveling to cheer on Sana and her team. How the camera's presence affects human behavior in observational cinema is a matter of ongoing debate, and how the Mir family might have reacted had there not been an international camera crew in their home is not certain.

With that said, we felt it was essential to include this scene to illustrate the apparent closeness of Mir's family and how her father plays a pivotal role in her career.

One afternoon following practice, Mir suggested we accompany her to a local cricket club where she occasionally mentored children in her neighborhood (02:59). With the camera following Mir as she enters the cricket club, several boys greeted her and then joined her in an informal conversation about girls playing cricket. As she casually interviews a group of young boys, she asks them if any of their sisters play the sport. Only one reveals that he has a cricket-playing sister, and when Mir asks him if he lets her bat or if he only lets her bowl, he sheepishly admits that his sister bowls while he bats. Mir smiles, gently chiding the boy and telling him that from now on, he must let his sister bat as well as bowl. In this sequence, which is filmed with a handheld camera and intercuts Mir's questions with reaction shots of the boys, we were interested in displaying how cricket can upend traditional gender hierarchies in Pakistan and how Mir's role as an emerging public figure gives her authority with the young boys which she uses to advocate for the boy's sisters, presumably at home.

Throughout the film, we felt that it was vital to visually represent the growing audience for women's cricket and the diverse audiences that attend women's cricket matches. Our strategy was to intercut observational footage of cricket players on the field and their daily life on the road with footage that shows how female cricket players are perceived in Pakistan, watched with curiosity and interest by spectators that include families, local children, and public figures. We also felt it was important to convey that Sana Mir was well known enough that young female fans were requesting to have their photographs taken with her. For this reason, throughout the film we weave in reaction shots of scorekeepers, groundskeepers, local street children, groups of men, visiting groups of schoolgirls, local media, and dignitaries, including Fahmida Mirza, a member of the national assembly. In a scene we filmed where Mirza addresses a group of journalists after a ZTBL match (11:31), she takes the opportunity to compliment the female players, saying, "I was very happy to see the passion and the dedication showed in their performance. And I think whenever they get an opportunity, our Pakistani women always perform." Rather than include an on-camera interview with Mirza, we chose to include this observational scene of her interaction with the media to demonstrate how female politicians see female cricket players as indicative of female potential in Pakistan.

"That's where the change is going to be": life after cricket

In 2020 Sana Mir retired from the Pakistan Women's Cricket Team and is now a professional cricket commenter and a mentor to younger players as a players' representative for the ICC Women's Committee. In addition, Mir meets with international teams seeking leadership advice, including, most recently, teams in Hong Kong and Scotland. In 2022, Mir is scheduled to return to playing cricket in Fairbreak, Australia as the captain of a new international team with players from multiple cricket-playing countries.

As a leader off the field, one of her goals is to create innovative educational programs that engage with what sports can teach women about the value of grace in defeat and humility in success. "I have seen the power of sports to unite people," she says. "My objective is to use sports as a tool to integrate different communities within Pakistan to fight racism, prejudice, and hate. Women and children in Pakistan are too often denied access to participate fully in public space, and I believe that the programs I want to create can generate opportunities for much needed social change."

Now, nearly a decade after filming was completed, Mir sees her former teammates applying the lessons they learned as professional athletes to their current realities. In the conclusion of our film, Sana shares her belief that cricket is a "platform where you can touch the lives of different kinds of people and bring a change in them. After ten years, fifteen years, they'll have their own families, and what cricket has taught them they can teach to their families…that is where the change is going to be" (12:45). In 2021, this prediction is coming true. Mir observes her former teammates using the negotiation and leadership skills they learned as cricketers as they advocate for themselves in what kinds of marriages they choose to enter, school choices for their children, playing cricket for teams outside of Pakistan, and, in the case of current team captain Bismah Maroof, procuring the first ever maternity contract for a female cricketer in Pakistan.

As I reflect on the production of *For My Country*, I note with interest that Nashra Sundhu, the young player we met on our first day of filming when she asked Sana Mir for career advice, is a current member of the Pakistan women's team and scored four wickets against India in the 2017 World Cup in the U.K. As a new generation of female cricketers comes of age, Sana Mir is now a frequent media presence, commands a large Twitter following, recently launched a clothing line of athletic apparel and is a prominent voice on topics including body shaming and women's empowerment. Mir is now a household name in Pakistan, a figure that every girl who aspires to play cricket can look up to.

Contributor's biography

Sadia Quraeshi Shepard is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Wesleyan University. The author of *The Girl from Foreign: A Memoir* (The Penguin Press), Shepard's writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Guernica, The Margins, The Forward, Vogue India* and *The Indian Express.* Her credits as a documentary film producer include *The September Issue* (A&E Films) and *The Education of Mohammad Hussein* (HBO). Her work as a director includes the independent documentary films *In Search of the Bene Israel* (New York Jewish Film Festival), *The Other Half of Tomorrow* (Margaret Mead Film Festival, Opening Night Selection), and *Reinvention* (Sundance Film Festival). The recipient of fellowships from Fulbright, Kundiman, and Yaddo, Shepard's research and teaching is primarily concerned with observational documentary filmmaking, the craft of literature to film adaptations, and autobiographical storytelling.

Bibliography

Shamsie, Kamilla. 2020. "Strong Arms: The Story of Pakistan Women's Cricket." Accessed October 2020. https://www.thecricketmonthly.com/story/1202296/strong-arms--the-story-of-pakistan-women-s-cricket

Ettmüller, Eliane, Sarah Ewald and Max
Kramer. 2021. "Traveling Tariqa–Ten Years
Down the Road into *Sufis Entangled*."
Dastavezi (3): 55-67

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Traveling Tariqa–Ten Years Down the Road into *Sufis Entangled*

Eliane Ettmüller, Sarah Ewald, and Max Kramer

Abstract

While revisiting the film *Sufis Entangled* ten years after its release, the three filmmakers engage in questions of production, form, and historical context. The essays that constitute this piece flesh out the intricate ways how cultural-religious conflicts are enmeshed in the material realities of the filmmaking process.

Keywords: Sufism, India, Kashmir, entanglement, new materialities

Film: https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/15090/14858

Introduction

A decade after making the documentary *Sufis Entangled*, we look back at its "revolutionary" beginning in Egypt, its conflicts while filming in India, and its audience responses after semi-public screenings. This film was produced, filmed, and edited by the three of us and resulted from true teamwork. In this spirit, each of us will talk about certain aspects of *Sufis Entangled*, its editing process (Ewald), its production context (Ettmüller), and its form (Kramer). Without a script and with the sole idea of just following *the way* inspired by the term *tariqa* (lit. way, also Sufi order), we set off on a journey to capture different understandings of music, art, and religion in various Sufi settings. The outcome was a polyphonic composition of multiple frames. People spoke for themselves without off-voice guidance or formal introduction in our attempt to show the multiplicity of Sufi practice. This style captured details untethered by preconceived notions of Sufism, Islam, and the places we traveled. Ten years down the road, the film still discloses these contexts and has itself almost become a historical object considering the speed of socio-political change in the volatile regions we have visited.

1. Entangled: Heidelberg - Ajmer - Srinagar (Sarah Ewald)

The idea for the film title came up at the end of a long night. After returning home from filming in India the three of us had made round the clock shifts in a little house close to Heidelberg where we had retreated for a week to edit, translate, and search for red threads in our footage, hoping we could meet the submission deadline of a German ethnographic film festival.

Looking at the film and its title, "entangled," I would say the word's possible meanings, ranging from "intertwined" to the more loaded "imbroglio," do not only correspond with the negotiations between our protagonists concerning the meaning of Sufism; in some way, they also connect to the film team itself, with our different personal backgrounds and professional training in Political and Islamic Studies, Linguistics, and Social Anthropology, and how this played out in the filmmaking process. On yet another level, one could even argue that the film project did weave, for each of us differently, its way into our lives in the years to follow. In my case, it meant spending several months a year in Kashmir between 2013 and summer 2019, the year the Indian government decided to imprison several thousand politicians and civil society members from Kashmir, silently scrapping the region's constitutional autonomy. Closing off more than 8 million people from the rest of the world, India imposed a several months long curfew in Kashmir and shut down all communication from August 5, 2019 onward. This lockdown seamlessly merged into the restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, the following paragraph wants to briefly dive into the idea of the filmmaker as a viewer and commentator of his or her film. This will provide the opportunity to speak not only about the film's visible surface but also about how it relates to internal negotiations and dynamics that happened during the more extensive production process. What were the entanglements of different scenes? How did the individual specific stories of the localities play into the development of the film? What became invisible during the filming and editing process?

Let us start where things around the film project began to take shape and then look more closely at a few scenes. The three of us had already been working together on some short films in the past. We had organized a car at the beginning of 2011 and had a tentative plan to travel by road towards South Asia and document our journey in the second half of the year. Then, however, Eliane wanted to return to Egypt to observe the developments of the ongoing revolution there. Max went off to explore the American

South's music scene, and I stayed put in Heidelberg for a film editing job. Our idea seemed to fizzle out. It was the end of August when, on the stairs of the university library, Eliane's call reached me: "I met the leader of a Sufi music group here in Cairo. They are invited to join a couple of events in India. Wouldn't it be a good thing to document their journey?" Twenty minutes later, I stepped out of the library with a small pile of books on Sufism. After less than three weeks, we were at Jaipur airport and waited for the Egyptian group to arrive. And from there, the journey began.

During these initial days in Rajasthan, one topic, running as one of the main threads through the film later, became apparent: the tension between the authenticity of Sufi veneration and the alleged (in)compatibility of religious belief with perceived economic interests. Disagreement in this regard has become evident in some of the comments made by members of the Egyptian group and the *khadim* (caretaker) at the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti (1141-1230), an Islamic mystic originally from Iran and founder of one of the oldest Sufi *tariqas* in India (see section 2). While the argument resulted mainly from the participants' interactions, we encountered, traced, and actively pursued this tension several times in the filming and later in the editing process.

During the movie's introduction, the camera follows two performances by the young Sufi dancers from Egypt (00:48-01:55). Here we cross-cut between two different settings, an actual stage scene at the Ajmer Sufi festival and an outside rehearsal in an old fort, a performance we had arranged ourselves. The parallel montage's effect indicates the blurriness of the boundary between these two dance performances. This begs the question: When does such an act of veneration feel "true" for the person performing it? In a rehearsal context, on a festival stage, as part of a performance in a shrine amid a circle of visitors, followed by a camera, or when you are all alone?

Editing a conversation with the dancers recorded during a car drive, we placed statements about their work as clerks and business students next to comments about their spiritual perception of the whirling performance when they feel they are not with people, not from this world anymore (19:56-20:33). At the Nizzamuddin Auliya Dargah in Delhi, we show a conversation with the vendor of devotional objects working outside the shrine. At one point, he agreed to stage how he offers prayers at the shrine for a small payment. His short comment at the end of the scene, accompanied by a shoulder shrug and half-smile is interesting: "When else do I have the opportunity to visit the shrine?" I read this as an example of the intersection between authentic religious performances and economic interests.

Equally, the musical gathering in Kashmir at the little local *Chishtiyya* shrine, which was arranged for a monetary contribution for us, somehow evades such a narrow framing. For the people joining from the more prominent locality, the Sufi music event was perceived as "real" and even became a mourning space. What we found out only later, during the editing, was that despite it being at a *Chishtiyya* shrine, the song the Kashmiri band decided to play for us was based on the work of the Sufi poet Samad Mir. Mir was not connected to traditional forms of Indian Sufism, but rather linked to an autochthonous *tariqa* of Kashmir, called the *Reshi* order. Founded in the 15th century by the Kashmiri mystic and poet Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali or Nund Rishi (1378-1440), the wisdom of this *tariqa* plays an essential role in the spiritual and everyday life of many people in Kashmir even today.

The first thought of visiting Kashmir came up already at the Sufi festival in Ajmer, which was co-organized by the initiative *Kashmir Society International*. After the festival, when traveling with the Egyptians on a chartered bus to Delhi, things became complicated. One day, the head of the group had communicated very clearly that it would make sense to do interviews with him, as the other group members had nothing important to say. When he found us speaking to one of the musicians, a subsequent quarrel led to our split. Soon after, we decided to board the night bus towards Kashmir, two contact addresses from Srinagar in our pockets. Wind blowing through the open windows, we sat with our co-passengers in the crowded vehicle where one would find one's head almost automatically on an unknown neighbor's shoulder when dozing off. In the long night's drive over bumpy roads towards the Himalayan foothills, this became a more and more exciting adventure, though. During a short Jammu stop-over in the early morning hours, we realized that we had lost one of our hard drives with half the footage from the time with the Egyptian group along the way. This loss would later have consequences while editing, as we couldn't include a considerable number of everyday recordings the drive had contained. Via public transport taxi, we went further up the winding roads of the Jammu-Srinagar highway. In the film, our (camera) gaze secretly follows the long chain of Indian army soldiers and trucks on their way to Kashmir. We decided to combine this road scene with an underlying audio, a classical *sufiana* song from Samad Mir's *Insaaf kar* (do justice), which we had recorded during the music gathering in Kashmir. While interweaving the army images with his music in the editing process, we did not yet know that Mir (1893 – 1959), who was forced to work at the palace's construction site in Srinagar during the British-backed rule of Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh, was not only revered by people in Kashmir for his spiritual poetry but also for his critical stance on the harsh conditions prevailing during the Dogra regime and later under the Indian occupation of Kashmir (Rather 2015).

Apart from the shrines we visited in Kashmir, we also tried to depict a spectrum of negotiations about Sufism through two other encounters. As already indicated by the road scene with the Indian army, a few sequences—visually, acoustically, and through montage—work as references for the connection between Sufi thought and the larger political situation in Kashmir. One of the first places we explored after arriving was the main mosque in Srinagar’s old city, the Jamia Masjid, where we met the custodian of the place. Out of this chance meeting a conversation developed, which we later also used for the movie’s initial scene: two voices against the backdrop of a black screen indicate the film’s trajectory through their discussion. Only later, in the Kashmir sequence, we see the people who lend us their voices in the first scene: the caretaker and his friend. They had joined our conversation on Sufism and turned it into an argument. While the one took up an anti-Sufi position, the other not only kept referring to the spiritual authority of Sufi saints; he also pointed out that performing Islamic rituals is only one step towards understanding the real form of religion. He continued that knowing oneself, one’s body and one’s environment are even more essential. Looking closer at the framing of the scene, another person, without our intention, seems to make a silent, though strong comment: a picture frame over the custodian’s desk holds the image of *mirwaiz* Moulvi Farooq, the head priest of the Kashmir valley, who was assassinated in 1990. His son Umar Farooq, the current *mirwaiz*, organized a series of protests together with an alliance of over two dozen political, social, and religious initiatives just a year before we reached Srinagar. He called for the complete demilitarization of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The militarization, however, is still very much an everyday reality which becomes evident in most of the Srinagar street scenes. In editing the pondering of Parvez–a Sufi disciple, whose spiritual alliances lay less with the secular institution of a shrine but rather in immersing into a teacher’s mystical wisdom–under the scenes of bunkers, concertina wire, and army checkpoints his Sufi thoughts permeate the Indian occupation structure: “Neither windows nor doors would be left, if we both would understand reality, why should I put a lock on your door? What should I take from you, and what would you take from me?”

2. A journey from revolutionary Egypt to the world of Indian Dargahs (Eliane Ettmüller)

The year 2011 was revolutionary. The Arab world turned upside down, and decades-long dictatorships fell as young people cheered and felt that they had toppled an oppressive system to create a brave new world. In September 2011, after different clashes with the armed forces, the Cairene Tahrir square was again occupied by the families of the victims who had died or were injured during the revolutionary uprisings. The army had already crushed several sit-ins, and the chants of “the army and the people hand in hand” were replaced by graffiti showing ex-president Mubarak’s face next to Field Marshall Tantawi’s. The people demanded the fall of the “SCAF[1]-regime.” While sitting in a coffee shop and talking to Egyptian artists in this politically tense atmosphere, I met Amer el-Touny, who was introduced to me as a Sufi music performer. I went to see one of his shows which was attended by a large crowd of people. Amer explained that he used to perform with his group at Indian Sufi festivals and that he was about to travel to Ajmer and Delhi to attend two of them. Immediately, I was thrilled about the idea of observing the interaction between Egyptian and Indian Sufi musicians.

In Jaipur, we waited for the Oman Air Flight landing with the Egyptian band on board. They all arrived formally dressed in suit and tie, an attire their leader considered appropriate for his men on tour. From there, we took a bus to Ajmer, where we first stayed at a compound with dorms shared by different participants of the festival. The Egyptians were taken to the Dargah of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, also known as Moinuddin Chishti, where they were welcomed by one of the *khadims*, the caretakers of the shrine. It soon became clear that the Egyptians neither understood the meaning of this Indian sanctuary nor made any effort to be culturally sensitive. When asked to wear a prayer cap, they rolled their eyes and looked desperately at me—as someone familiar with their culture and language—to silently voice their discomfort. Only Amer enjoyed the attention he got as an Arab leader clad in a white *jalabiyya*[2] with a scarf over his head. After he sang, people came to kiss his hands and ask for his blessings.

He even managed to force his band to participate in a ritual where they had to kneel in front of the Sufi saint’s grave. When I showed the sequence in Cairo, my artist friends concluded that Amer would get excommunicated back home if anybody came to know about this sinful behavior, which, for them, had absolutely nothing to do with Islam.

---

[1] Supreme Council of Armed Forces.

[2] Long garment popular in Arab countries.

While many of the spectators at the shrine showed delight and seemed to be touched by Amer's singing and the Dervish boy's turning in white cloths (30:00-33:00), the Egyptians did not make a connection between their performance and their personal religious beliefs in this context. They defined themselves as artists and musicians on tour. In several interviews and off-record conversations, it became clear that they judged the Indian Sufi rituals as a distorted version of Islam, which had more in common with polytheistic Hinduism than their religion. They were convinced that true Islam was found in Egypt or Saudi Arabia but not in India (38:15-38:45). As far as Sufism was concerned, they praised the Egyptian *mawlawiyya* festivals but clearly distinguished them from *istarad tannura*, the *tannura* show, which they had come to perform in India. This attitude could only lead to clashes. Two of them were so noteworthy that we decided to make them parts of the film. At some point off the record, we even had to set up a "translation line" from Urdu to Arabic via German to mediate between the parties.

The first clash happened when an Egyptian artist began to whirl a colorful cloth through the air at the *dargah* instead of performing in white clothes (TC 32:45-33:03). Even though the movements were the same, the use of color was taken as an offense to the holy place by the *khadims*. Traditionally, when Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire, the *tannura* performance—men whirling in colored clothes—was used for festivals or processions when important people walked through the streets. Consequently, the Indian hosts in Ajmer had correctly interpreted this performance as a "secular" art and judged it not fit for this setting. However, the Egyptians interpreted all of their actions in India as detached from their religious beliefs. They knew that their music and dancing originally came from a Sufi tradition, but they felt that they performed a show and not an act of worship. This is the reason why they did not understand the *khadims'* outrage. At the same time, not all the Indians felt the offense. The *dargah's* ordinary worshippers were thrilled and came to greet and kiss Amer while the authorities hastened to get rid of him as soon as possible.

The second clash was about money. For the Indian hosts, it was part of their culture that the people who came to their holy place donated a *chador* (a particular piece of cloth) or flowers for the grave. As the Egyptians were a prominent group invited and guided by local *khadims*, they were expected to make a rather big donation. The Egyptians, on the other hand, did not understand at all why they should pay anything. They considered themselves stars with an international reputation who had already performed for free because the Indian crowd had liked them. At the same time, they told me in a somewhat offended way that when going to the most important mosques in Egypt, they could donate if they pleased, but that they were never asked to do so. These were a couple of cultural misunderstandings which were not easy to mediate. Luckily, the Egyptians left Ajmer and went to Delhi to perform in another more secular surrounding.

Before the big Sufi festival in Delhi started, the band was invited by the ambassador to rehearse in a big hall of the Egyptian embassy (15:58-16:54). They rehearsed with Indian musicians and even a female singer and a female dancer. All of it was as far from their religious sentiments as a rock concert would have been. The boys turned, the woman danced around them in front of the embassy walls covered from the ground to the ceiling in pictures of the, at that point, glorious 25 January Revolution of 2011 in Egypt. Even the ambassador seemed to be a true representative of the common men and women on the streets who had instigated the victorious revolution. He had opened the door himself, shook hands, no suit, no tie. Ten years later, as Egypt is under tight military rule, we know: all of it was just a show.

In Ajmer, we met Zamzam, a German convert and follower of the *Chishtiyya* order. She explained that she had gone through a spiritual experience at the *dargah* of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, which had brought her to Islam. She would never have converted to the version of Islam the Egyptians held for the absolute truth. Near the shrine of Nizzamuddin in Delhi, Sadia Dehlvi told us precisely the same. She insisted that most Muslims in the world followed some Sufi traditions and did not feel attracted to the purist Middle Eastern Arab style of Islam. She felt home near the *dargah* of Nizzamuddin.

Women followers of Sufi *tariqas* like Sadia Dehlvi or Zamzam who lived by themselves and seemed to be respected by their male peers made quite an impression on us. It appeared at first sight that Sufi Islam in India offered gender equality. However, our *dargah* experience at Nizzamuddin soon showed us that this hypothetical equality did not go very far. I was held back at the entry to the grave. Surprised at this refusal, I asked for the reason. At the *dargah* of Moinuddin Chishti, Khadim Nadir had positioned me next to my female Hindu colleague right in front of the grave only a couple of days ago. In order to highlight these differences, the film shows the scene, where I get the explanation that in Ajmer, the grave is underground. This implicitly meant that in this case, we potentially unclean women could not spoil the holy tomb of a dead male saint by our presence. I will never understand this kind of disrespect for the female body and its natural functions. Is it not even self-destructive? All people in the world were born out of female bodies! How can the origin of birth be considered unclean?

In Kashmir at Zaynuddin Wali's shrine in Ashmuqam, women followers were again allowed to approach the saintly tomb. However, this was not the case in all the other Kashmiri *dargahs* that I visited in 2011. It seemed to me that women who wanted to enter the shrine usually had to go through ugly backdoors only to access small rooms with worn-out carpets and walls that needed some painting. Having the "privilege" of a window or wooden grid through which to catch a glimpse of all the beautifully shimmering artwork around the grave on the men's sides felt additionally cynical. Consequently, most of the traditional Sufi Islam we got to see did not look very empowering for women.

While traveling to Kashmir, I checked the news in Egypt. In November 2011, protesters and security forces fought in Muhammad Mahmoud street next to the Tahrir square and in front of the American University in Cairo. Live ammunition was used. Many were killed. I was afraid for my friends. However, Kashmir did not look much better either when we entered by taxi. In Egypt, walls had been put up downtown to ward off demonstrations. However, people came and made big wall paintings mocking the armed forces, referring to the Handala figure from Palestine[3] and the Berlin wall with a Trabi car that burst through the stone. When we entered Srinagar, we saw cemeteries and more cemeteries, then barbed wire and soldiers. Nobody had to say anything. It was more than evident that we had arrived in a region of armed conflict.

3. Entanglement and form (Max Kramer)

Why is there no story in the film? We cannot identify with any of the characters, and eventually, even those we got a little used to disappear towards the end. Where is the thread running through the film?

During test screenings, I heard many questions similar to those above from audience members confused from following the complex negotiations between unnamed characters in constantly changing locations. In what follows, I would like to go deeper into these questions, not to defend the film, but to explore some of its strengths that have been perceived—although in parts negatively expressed—by some audience members.

---

[3] Handala is the Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali's ten-year old alter-ego character, a refugee boy who became a symbol of the Palestinian people.

The film was never meant to be driven by character development. We did not aim for the kind of psychological causation and personal growth or the narrative form of the "journey of the hero" that is often supported in pitching sessions of international funding agencies. In any case, the narrative is woven around different places, their atmospheres, and the performances in the name of Sufism. This could be inferred by our choice to give titles only to sites and never to people. In other words, we dramatize Sufism: where, when, how, and why do people in constellations that involve us, our cameras, personal memories, momentary conflicts, our co-travelers, our budget (and so on) get "entangled" in something "Sufi"?

Entanglement is a buzzword in contemporary theory. It is usually linked to flat-ontologies marked precisely by making lists like the one above: linking the material and the discursive through their performative becoming. This is the approach towards "entanglement" by feminist physicist-philosopher Karen Barad (2003). Such an approach does not ask "What is Sufism?" but rather sees how the human and non-human *perform* the contested signifier "Sufi" in the coming together *and* separation between materiality (the camera, the hard disc, a certain quality of light) and discourse (the word Sufi, the questions asked, the explanations given). Let's look at an example.

The scene where we introduce ourselves as a film crew at the shrine of Haji Ali in Mumbai could be understood as "entangled." The sequence affects through the music played, it shows us and our cameras as intrusive, it may evoke economic interest on the side of the musicians through its editing and their words ("find us on YouTube;" 03:15-03:25), it portrays our interest in framing and creating situations, it points to the misunderstandings and cultural stereotypes that are involved in these encounters ("what will you get from these hippie idiots?;" 03:58-04:20). It shows how materialities have an active pull on how something like a documentary film sequence comes into being, how the affective power of music, human bodies, architecture, the grip and size of a camera, etc., are irreducible to either human intentionality or discursive meaning. Barad would ask "how matter makes itself felt" (Barad 2003, 810). What I assume has triggered unease amongst some members of the audience is a form of documentary that does not represent "Sufism" while making a film which has "Sufi" in the title.

The film makes us think of flat ontologies as an entanglement of cameras, words, atmospheres, people, and so on. It does not explore the phenomena in historical or regional depth. It moves over the surface of the sensible, the sayable, the audible, and the non-sensical with every sequence to being a cut *within* a material-discursive arrangement. The enjoyment that some members of the audience derived from watching may be bound to the collapse of stereotypical concepts of Islam or Sufism. In that sense, our form is neither observational nor is it *vérité*. It is a form of entanglement.

We went along different performances—usually musical—connected to one particular Sufi tradition of the subcontinent: the *chistiyya tariqa*. This tradition is famous for the role music plays within its practice. Thus, the focus on musical performance at different shrines of important saints made sense to us. But by accompanying an Egyptian group of musicians around some of these shrines, audience expectations got tied to these characters, which we *set up* but which we did not *build up*. The focus on the conflict between the Egyptian performers and their Indian hosts may overall be misleading. It induces some false image of character development which we did not pursue. The complexity that emerges from the places and conflicts is linked to images that are open to debate. Hardly any of the film's protagonists attempt to connect a particular understanding of Islam to its discursive history. When, for example, Sadia Dehlvi attempts to do such a contextualization (10:55-12:00), her account is challenged by Arabi, the Oud player, later during our interview on the rooftop of the hotel in Delhi. When Nadir, the *khadim* at the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, questions the intentions of Amer (34:45-35:17), the head of the Egyptian artists, he, in turn, gets challenged again by Arabi on the grounds of Hindu-Muslim *mixtures* being somewhat not real Islam (38:15-38:45; see section 2).

We have shown the film at various academic venues and ethnographic festivals where audiences have often criticized the lack of historical depth concerning Islam. However, our intention was never to make a film about Sufism, but to follow a group of musician who perform in the name of Sufism. The flatness is partly an outcome of our mobility and is fully intentional. This implies looking at the world through an *aesthetic* lens—always bound to the dramatic potentials of the sensual—the minute intensity of perception that can undermine our existing knowledge where it remains in linguistic abstraction. The medium of film thus involves a specific non-discursive learning and—following from the aesthetic investment proper to the documentary form—a possibility of conceptual creation. Entanglement is such a concept that becomes palpable through our film. It can be fairly stated that—*en passant*—we border on something central to much of Sufi traditions in the way that they challenge straightforward knowledge *claims* through the registers of poetry and musical intensity—as part of a journey, a *tariqa.*

Conclusion

Our documentary exerts its force through the depiction of a way (or a *tariqa*) followed by an unknown destiny or ending. It shows highly atmospheric performances that constantly challenge audience expectations of the word “Sufi.” Furthermore, the film preserves many sequences of historical moments, such as the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, as displayed at the Egyptian embassy in Delhi. Simultaneously, it shows different, sometimes conflicting understandings of Sufism by Muslim men and women from different cultural backgrounds. What our writings add to the film is eventually a further increase in its openness. This essay does not attempt to close its potential to speak in atmospheres and images about things where words are bound to fail. While shooting the film we had this running gag on who is the real Sufi. As the story goes, it is always the one who does not claim it for him/herself.

Contributor’s biography

Eliane Ettmüller holds a PhD in Islamic Studies. She focuses on researching, filmmaking, and writing on modern Egypt.

Sarah Ewald works as a film editor and doctoral fellow, with an interest in applied and collaborative research and teaching. At the moment her focus is on civil society practices in Kashmir.

Max Kramer is a postdoctoral researcher who looks at the mediation of religious minorities in India. He has worked on documentary film and conflict zones with a focus on Kashmir.

Bibliography

Barad, Karen. 2003. “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3): 801-31.

Bazaz, Abir. 2020. *Translating Islam.* In: Seminar 726.

Falak, Uzma. 2018. “The Intimate World of Vyestoan Affective Female Alliances and Companionships of Resistance in Kashmir.” *Review of Women Studies* 53(47): 76-82.

Rather, Nayeem. 2013. ”Samad Mir: A Poet Par Excellence.” Accessed March 1st, 2021. https://nayeemkoshur.wordpress.com/2015/04/04/samad-mir-a-poet-par-excellence/

Karinkurayil, Mohamed Shafeeq. 2021.
"On Stale Images." *Dastavezi* (3): 68-81

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

On Stale Images

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil

Abstract
This paper asks what it is to engage with a photograph as an artifact of the quotidian, if the photograph has exited the social sphere. The paper begins with recounting the importance of the labor migration from the South Indian state of Kerala to the countries of the Arab Gulf. Malayalam (predominant language of Kerala) literature and cinema on the Gulf has been unable to forge a new discourse around migration and the laboring body or the fantastic riches that symbolize it. Unburdened by a long tradition, photographs allowed the visual intensities of cinema to be unmoored from the pull of its narrative. In the process, the photographs became a site of communicating the affective intensities of the Gulf. However, these photographs from an earlier era now lay stowed away in forgotten corners of the migrant houses, if not lost completely. This poses questions for the academic who studies the photographs not only for their value as historical records but also as a visual practice–how to engage with this disengagement which wears out the image? How does this closeting affect our understandings of photograph as projects of memorializing? The paper closes with raising this need for a new vocabulary, a glimpse of which is available to us in Benjaminian "distraction."

Keywords: migration, photography, Kerala, Arab Gulf, distraction

This piece is on stale images. In the South Indian state of Kerala, with half a year of monsoons and a quarter of a year with humidity above 80 percent, things go stale–food from a previous day, photographs from an earlier era. Stuck to the covering film, discolored and decaying, a worn photo bears unique witness to the passing of time. Disallowing us to observe time's imprint in its contents, a stale photograph materializes form, that bearer of history, in its most concrete.

I took to photographs as the means of studying a lost generation. An unprecedented number of people from the South Indian state of Kerala made an arduous journey, many of them through undocumented channels, to the Arabian Gulf's shores in the late 1960s to mid-1970s. Many of them were never heard of again. The phenomenal migration, however, wasn't to cower in the face of possible and known dangers and continues unabated to this day, even though the end of the Gulf dream has been predicted ever since the first Gulf War in 1990. By the end of the 1990s, there were more than a million Keralites in the GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), and by 2008 the figure was more than three million. These migrants, mainly young men, transformed the look and feel of Kerala. A poor state in terms of revenue generated through industries or agriculture, Kerala began to score very high, comparable to Western Europe, on human development indices, thanks to the emphasis on service sectors, called the Kerala Model of Development. As remittances began to flow in from the Gulf by those who toiled from dawn to dusk and beyond, slept on bunk beds, eight to twelve people in a room, Kerala witnessed a transformation in day–to–day lives. The rural areas, that locus of statist developmentalist fantasies, whose people had to be educated in citizenship or revolutionary praxis depending on who was looking (the liberal or the communist), now witnessed a short-circuiting of "development"–with gadgets flowing in (radio, tape recorder, camera, TV, VCR, mixer-grinder, whatnot), with houses spacious enough to compensate for the bunk beds in the Gulf, with heavy spending on shopping to life cycle rituals, with bright towns under starry skies–such that the rural soon became the "rurban." English medium schools sprang up in previously "backward" areas, and so did colleges also aided by the state government's creative policy of allowing private players to build the infrastructure while the government pays the salaries of the employees–an infrastructure that could, among other things, provide the foundation for future migrations to the Gulf, the US, and Western Europe, and persist in the tertiary sector-oriented developmental model.

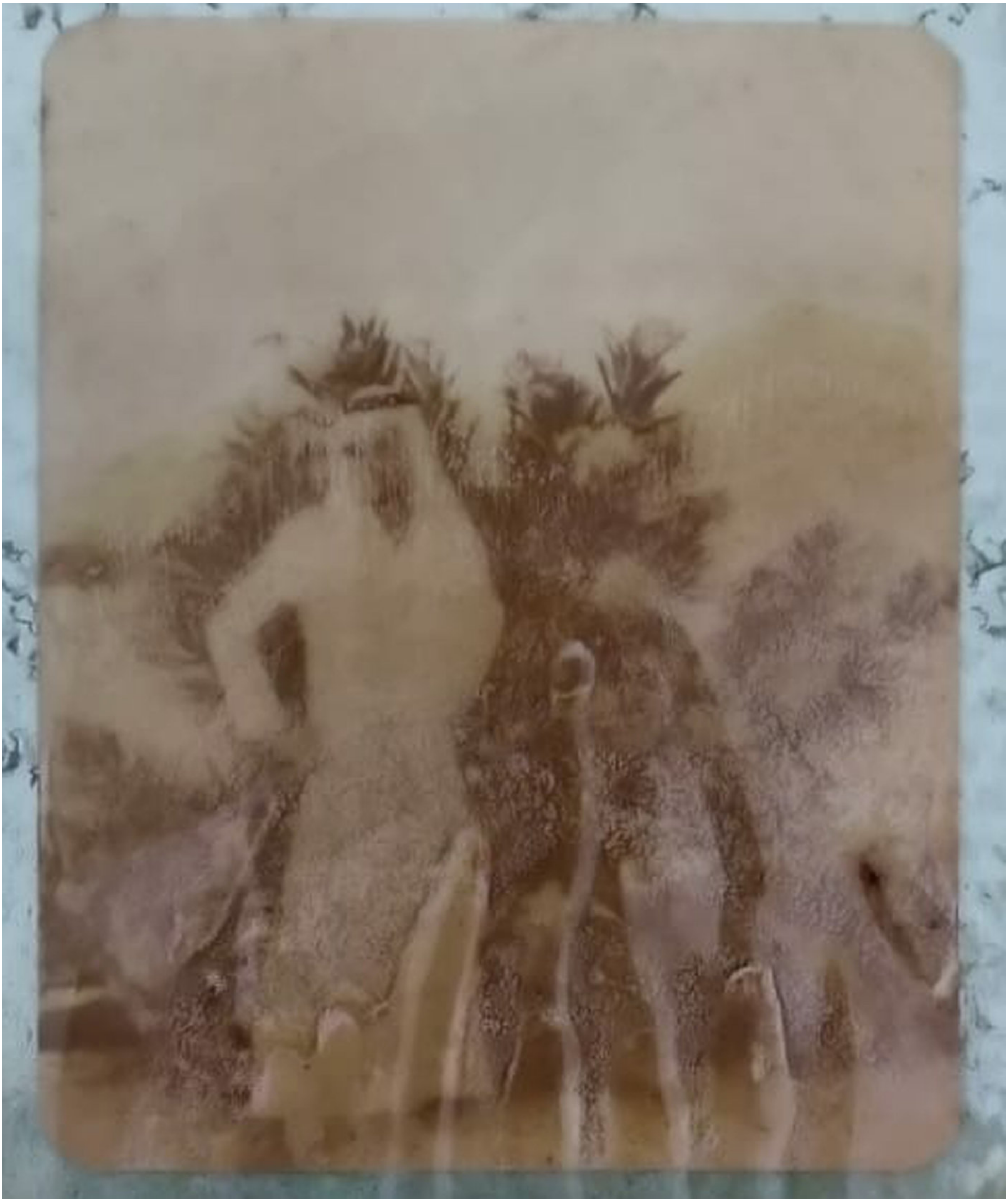
A group of locals pose with an Arab at the foundation stone laying ceremony of a private college in 1984

The weight of the status quo

For all the changes that the migrant brought, s/he was denied a voice in Kerala's mainstream culture. The Malayalam film routinely depicted the migrant as garrulous, distasteful, *nouveau riche*, laughable, and abominable in his attempts to gain respectability. The migrant disturbed the peace of the neighborhood with the cacophony from his imported cassette player (while those who acquired such technologies in the "proper" way, that is, through inherited wealth, listened to western music, like in Padmarajan movies, in the artful quiet of their houses). He tried to prey for cheap real estate on landholding upper-caste families who have fallen on bad times (which he shouldn't have given, his servile caste background, as the common sense of these films goes). He tried to appear fashionable by wearing shorts and hats in the villages, his dark skin unable to carry the white man's touristy attire, coveted (mostly in vain) the protagonist's love interest, or produced films which brought down the good standing of the entire industry. The migrant figure's only shot at being a protagonist was becoming a failed migrant, soaked in melodrama, and ultimately a witness and a warning for the hollow dream that the Gulf is.

In their program of attributing Kerala’s development model to a welfare state, the communist governments that ruled the state, or the community oriented mobilizations in the late nineteenth century, variously or in combination with academics, mostly overlooked the labor undertaken by these migrants. Migrants created an infrastructure through networking and the creation of community capital, which helped raise the standard of living in regions the state found too burdensome to take care of, whether in education, healthcare, or transportation. In academic literature, the figure of the Kerala migrant to the Gulf was mainly a figure of statistics whose influence was often reduced to the confines of his family and domesticity. Framed within the axiom of remittance, the migrant had gender, religion, and age-group, but no self. There have also been some notable works on the transformation brought out by migration in Kerala in terms of self-fashioning. Still, the Gulf was also absent in these studies except as a place of labor elsewhere.

The migrant laborer’s voice was not listened to in the mainstream. It was not even clear if s/he wants to say anything at all. It was only from the late 1990s onwards that some memoirs were written on the Gulf. The memoirs and other written expressions of the Gulf life continue to be few and far between. They also speak in a heavily wrought discourse and mostly had to negotiate their space and say what they had to say within the tradition of celebrated writings in Kerala. Told in a language that romanticizes the rural, the monsoon, the local festivities and practices, the Gulf's depiction in the Malayali memoirs is mostly in a language of hurt and loss. The desert, the heat, the urban space compared poorly to the verdant home left behind. The narrative tradition of an unfolding self in a strange land, and that of the travelogue, impeded the Gulf's narration as a space that had (and has) millions of Malayalis. In its unfolding of an individual self, the written tradition often disregarded the network of kinship relations, language and community-based organizational structures, various get-togethers, visits by litterateurs, artists, and politicians, the frequent to and fro of letters, gifts, and people between Kerala and the Gulf. The grammar of the celebrated Malayalam rural cinemas of the eighties was similarly a tradition that every filmmaker with auteurist aspirations had to contend with. These films presented the migrants as a threat to the prevailing good sense of the rural. When presented within its framework, even films predominantly placed in migrant lives, such as the “home cinema” trend in the Malabar region of Kerala, had to produce the figure of a migrant whose transformation in individual and collective self will have to negotiate with the terms offered by the mainstream cinema.



A young Malayali migrant poses in Arab attire, Bada Zayed, c.1985

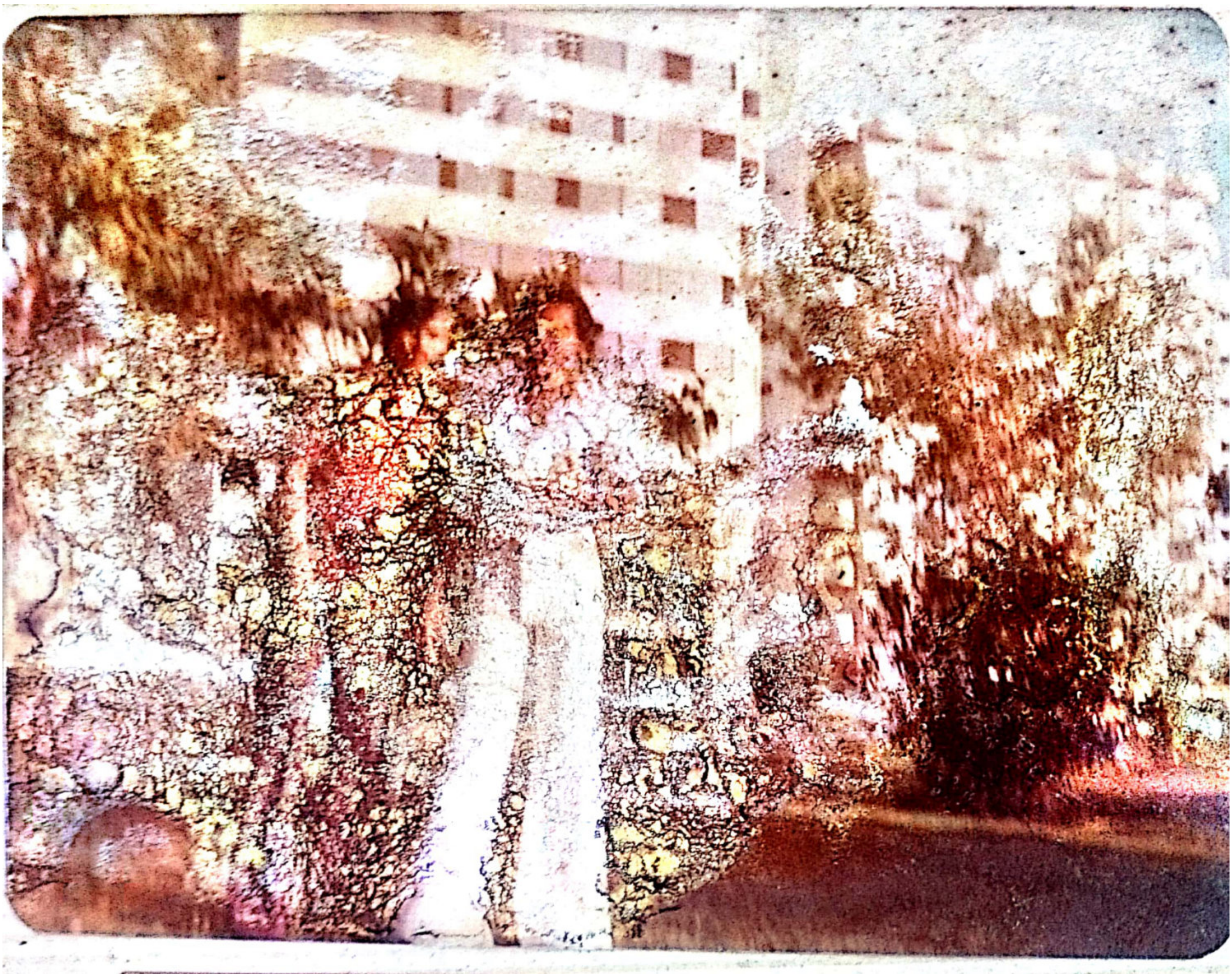
Photographs as counterpoint

In turning to photographs, I had multiple possibilities. Photos were undoubtedly the most prolific of Gulf cultural productions, eclipsed perhaps only by personal letters. Available to the upper classes in Kerala from the 1930s onwards, the camera became popularly available only in the 1970s with the Gulf migration. Unlike literature or later, films, photography did not have to fit a long tradition. There were the journalistic indexical photographs, the stylized photographs of the advertisements, and the stock studio photographs. But as a point of reference, it was the films that photos looked to. The

This worn photograph still manages to show a boy by a car. Bada Zayed, 1990

Gulf was absent as a diegetic space in the Malayalam movies until the late 1990s, even though it had an early appearance in the 1980 movie *Vilkkanundu Swapnangal*. Depicting mostly sparse outdoors, the film nevertheless establishes themes in representing the foreign–fashionable cars, suits and suitcases, rich indoor workspaces, visibly different people, etc. Many of these elements had a tradition of showing the upper-class in Malayalam cinema. The movie thus made a crucial metonymic relation between mobility and the foreign land. Two other Malayalam films of the time, *Love in Singapore* (1980) and *America America* (1983), starring, respectively, Jayan, who was noted for his action roles, and Mammootty, a rising star at the time (and now a “megastar”), also had all these elements while establishing the foreign land as the space of crimes, thrills, and adventures as well. The Indian city par excellence, Bombay, is also a presence in this visual ecosphere through Bombay cinemas and available as the space of glamour, crime, thrill, and mobility. When unmoored from the bounds of the narrative, the pleasures of looking that cinema offers also allows the photographs to be the site of communicating the extraordinary, the fantastic, the punctum of attractions, the intensities of a suspended narrative.

Photographs were a means of recuperating a lost chunk in the migrant life, that of migration itself. One abiding feature of migration to the Gulf from Kerala is that migration is presented, often to the potential migrant, to be a temporary resort to settle financial inadequacies. Like the protagonist in Benyamin’s *Goat Days*, often the migrant himself thinks of the migration as a short-term affair. However, the typical lower-class migrant ends up spending decades in the Gulf (with mixed results in terms of social and financial mobility). The rhetoric of temporariness, as if the migration period was an outlier to the stay in Kerala, often amounts to the invisibilization of these decades from the discourse. The Gulf becomes a site of labor while life has to unfold elsewhere. The Gulf's work becomes convertible to remittance, displayed in houses and lavish ceremonies back in Kerala, and attendant social mobility and respectability, and a migrant is deemed successful or otherwise based on these value conversions. The Gulf becomes lost as a space of life where millions of young men lived years away from home and found their sustenance in those around them. In the Gulf photographs, we see the laughing, bantering migrant selves experimenting with life, in the clothes they wear, in the gadgets they hold and surround themselves with, in the neighborhoods they visit. As an excess not claimed by labor, leisure marks the irrecoverable belongings caught in the shared but non-codified sweet nothings.



Two young men in Abu Dhabi, 1981

In turning to photographs, I am not driven by the desire to capture an authentic migrant voice. Such an agent does not exist except as complex negotiations of a hardened tongue. But photographs afford us a different view of the Gulf away from the narrative of morose self-realization and labor. Pictures can move away from the weight of diasporic thought based on alienation and *Bildungsroman* and academic rationalizations of remittance and mobility. They present us with an imagery that accounts for the network of relations as a fact of diasporic existence, the foreign space as a space of leisure, the laughter and banter of migrants, and the affective intensities of the unfamiliar.

We were modern

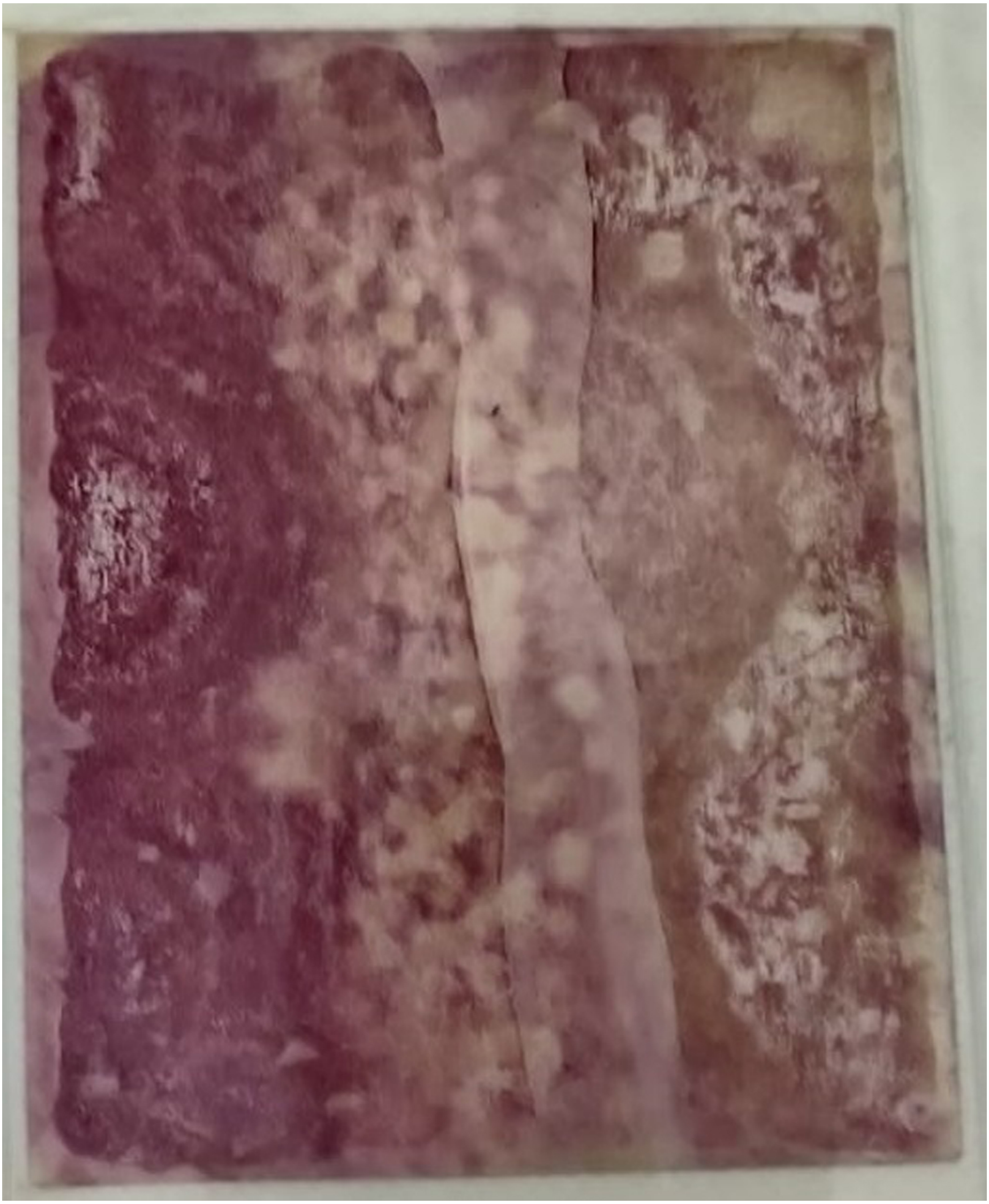
The question of fidelity

The study of photographs has undergone various shifts. Once studied as an indexical document, the linguistic, cultural, and material turns have left their mark on the study of pictures. The images have been analyzed for their content, composition, meanings, place in the discourse, their engagement with the everyday, their material constitution, their negotiations with the looking body, and their concretization in the haptic. When reading migrant photographs, I read them from the vantage point when they were produced–typically from the late 1970s to early 1990s. In such a reading, migrant pictures, in their representation of the foreign as a fantasy land but with realist moorings, put to question the analytical separation of the indexical and the iconic, the private and the public, the contemplative and the performative.

A researcher studying Gulf photographs is faced with, among other problems arising from photographs being a much more sensitive medium, the fact that the photographs themselves inhabit a temporariness. When looking at the Gulf photographs, I found that the albums are always stowed away in some old suitcase in a forgotten rack of knick-knacks. The study of a picture, no matter the paradigm, still requires us to foreground the photograph. The image becomes a prominent presence which may then be analyzed for its place in the broader system of significance. This is the case even if the importance of the picture does not lie in the deep structures of meaning but at the very surface. The image is still drawn attention to, its contents explicated, its placement elaborated, its uses examined, its affects made effable. The theorist assumes what her/his subject is indifferent to–that is, the theorist still finds it necessary to draw attention to the image even when the subject of his study is the undeliberated tactility of the images. What is lost for the theorist is the possibility of dealing with the picture as it exists. In "distraction," by which he means the non-contemplative engagement with the image as if in order of quotidian tactility, Walter Benjamin sensed the dawning of a new democratic age. What if, like Benjamin, who gave a positive spin to "distraction," we could speak of staleness as a mode of relation to the past that is not built on experiencing the past as if the past is a foreign space but as one that has claimed and has become oneself?

To turn to the "stale images," as I do in this paper, is not to suggest an engagement with the photographs as much as disengagement. It is to signal a peculiar type of engagement which is disengagement. In reading the stale images, my vantage point is that of the present. Where to locate these photographs in the present, these photographs which are away from sight and feel?

The stale photograph bears on its body the signs of negligence–that it has not been taken care of in the face of time. Tucked away in an album and exuding the weight of its enfoldment, the stale photograph marks the unmourned. Not available as a visual reminder of a phase which is arguably the source of all that changed in the lives of these migrants and their families, these photographs, which were once upon a time the site of a narration of worlds elsewhere, now lie hidden.



A stale image

I have read migrant pictures as suggesting past, present, and conjuring a future. However, in its historical role, the pictures also now lie in forgotten corners, decaying. Stale images confound our characterizations of domestic photographs being projections into the future or as anticipated memories. As forecasts into the future, the worn pictures speak of a future in which no one (except the theorist) cared to look at it. As an anticipated memory, again, the stale photograph tells us that they were hardly consulted. With failing memories, and aspirations that are already out of date, these photographs suggest a breakdown of the linearity of time as it was anticipated. Reading these migrant images therefore involves culling time out of its trajectory and revisiting it as projections of possibilities of a different time-space, that is, as projections and anticipated memories of a time which cannot be remembered and whose trajectory has escaped us. These photographs now belong to another dimension, one that is lost to gaze.

Conclusion

The stale food becomes one with the soil. Now part of our body, the past migration becomes the unthought, forever unfolding in the now. I can only conclude with questions: What is it to study photographs which have ceased to be photographs? How does one make one's study truthful to the experience of the artifact if the experience is in the register of the no-more-seen, the no-more-heard, and the no-more-thought? It is possible that soon these photographs will find their way into digital archives, facilitated no less by the academic and general interest in representing lesser known pasts. The pictures will then have a very different trajectory. The *gulfsouthasia* page on Instagram is exemplary in illustrating how the photographs of another time can be recuperated and contextualised, an alternate history activated, and how these pictures can move back to their zone between private and public, both indexical and iconic, demonstrative and affective. However, it also remains that one still has to invent not just a vocabulary but also a mode of being to engage with disengagement as the most common state of being of these images from another time.

Not in the race: in school uniform on fancy dress day

Contributor's biography

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil is an academic and teaches at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka, India. His research looks at the cultural dimensions of circular migration of labor from the South Indian state of Kerala to the Arabian Gulf countries, persistent for the last five decades. Shafeeq's focus has been on the visual aspects of this phenomenon. His paper "The Islamic Subject of Home Cinema of Kerala," published in *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies,* looked at one of Kerala's amateur movie practices. The article argued that these films, though attempting to lend voice to the migrants, still had to follow a predominantly migrant-blaming tradition of middlebrow cinema in Kerala. His subsequent papers, "Reading Aspiration in Kerala's Migrant Photography," which appeared in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, and "The Days of Plenty: Images of First Generation Malayali Migrants in the Arabian Gulf" published in *South Asian Diaspora* both looked at photographs by migrants from the 1970s and 1980s and read them along the vectors of aspiration and memory respectively. These articles established pictures as a site of reading migration differently.