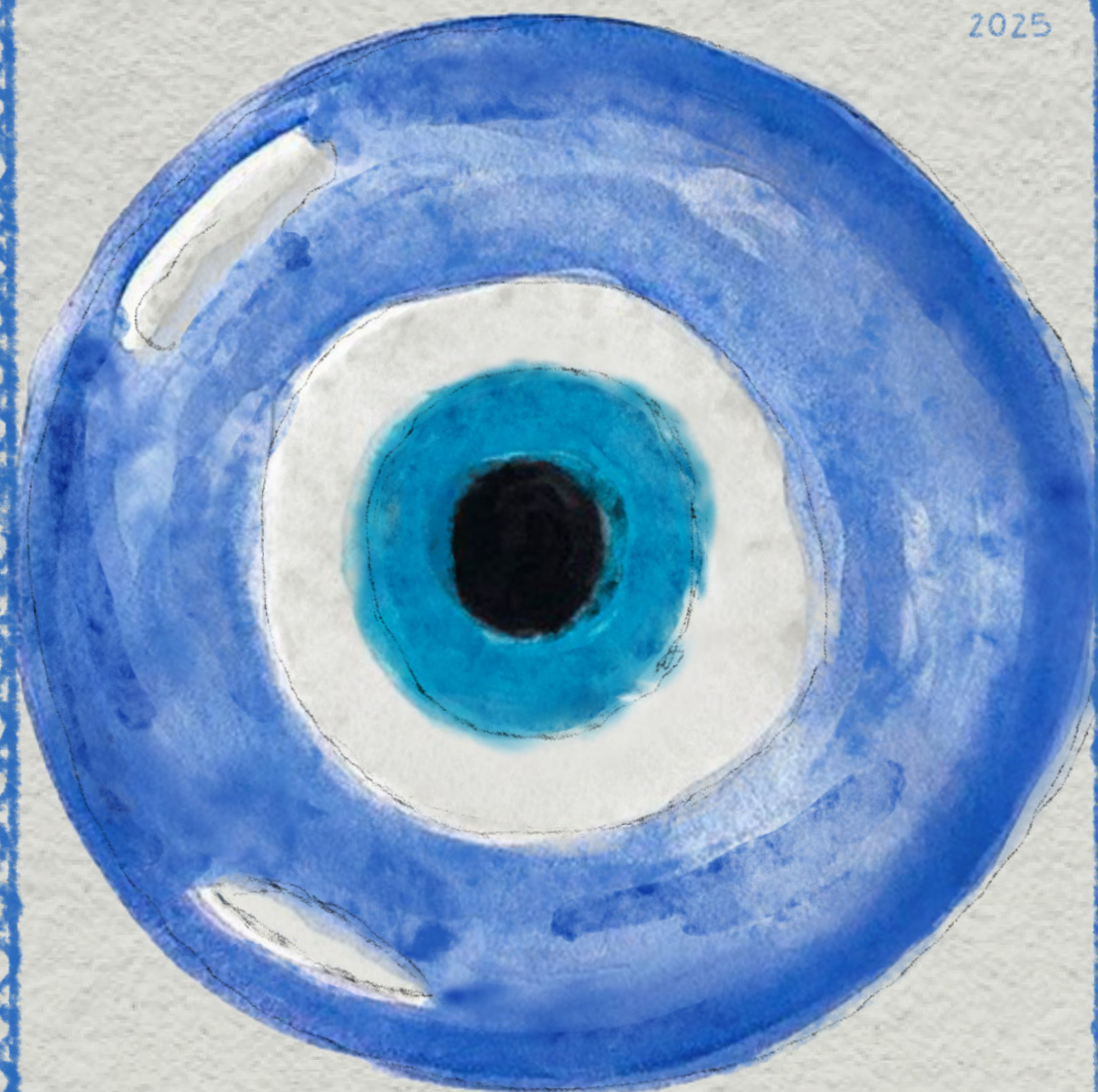


H A R F

2025



2025



A Journal of South Asian Studies

Volume 5
Spring 2025
McGill University
Montréal, QC

Land Acknowledgement

The land that *Harf* operates on has long been the traditional territory of Iroquoian and Algonquian speaking peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg nations. We acknowledge the continued presence of Indigenous peoples on this unceded land. We also urge McGill University to re-examine its relationships with Indigenous peoples and take further steps towards reconciliation.

Harf is a journal of South Asian Studies based at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. We invite submissions of academic and artistic work from undergraduate and graduate students, as well as professors, with a focus on South Asia. We are especially interested in pieces that explore the anthropology, history, literature, and religions of South Asia, aiming to highlight the diversity of South Asian thought, voices, communities, practices, and concepts.

Harf would like to thank the Arts Undergraduate Society, the South Asian Studies Student Association, and the Institute of Islamic Studies for their contributions and support in publishing this journal.

harfjournal@gmail.com

No portion of this journal may be printed without the consent of the editorial board.

Editors-in-Chief

Mikal Nazarani
Kai Samuel-Szablowski

Editorial Board

Shreya Anand
Aleena Anas
Reema Chauhan
Debanjan Das
Saarah Jabar
Amar Khan
Zara Khan
Hani Samad

Design

Alannah Perera



Contents

Catching the Baton Mikal Nazarani and Kai Samuel-Szablowski	10
The Birds Shall Return Seemil Chaudhry	13
An All-In-One Location for the Edible, the Inedible, and the Nation: South Asian Grocery Stores in North Texas Since the Twentieth Century Basmah Arshad	17
Ar-Rumman Khansa Rahim	51
Seeing the Nation: Visual Representation as a Tool of the Anti-Colonial Struggle in India Keya Tyagi	52
Bagh e Hijrat Asad Kamran	62
The Development of the Feminine Voice in Dakani Urdu Literature, c. 1350-1690 Arman Deendar	64
Untitled Muhammed Sinan	82
Velichathilekku—Towards the Light: Stories of migration to the Middle East, from a village in Kerala Nikhila Shanker	84

Contents

untitled S. Karthikeyan	96
city of soot Hanzala Mojibi	98
On Caring Lives in Gulshan-E-Sikandarabad Safina Azeem Qureshi	99
Undercover Samia Naqvi	123
The Jamatkhana: An Institution That Aided Integration Anah Ibrahim	125
Seven Poems in Train by Manglesh Dabral [pg. 58-61] Nisarg Patel	147
The Walled City of Lahore Alina Ali	150
An Atelier of Soft Power: How Coke Studio Cracked the Code Hiba Sohail	152
The Magic Carpet: Crafting Paradise Sarah Samsoudin	184

Catching the Baton

Mikal Nazarani and Kai Samuel-Szablowski

Last year, we put out a miniature edition of *Harf*: Volume 4.5. It contained three essays and a handful of art pieces from McGill undergraduates—a culmination of what was, essentially, a last-minute all-nighter. Three of us, fueled by adrenaline and a commitment to seeing *Harf* in print before the semester's end, sifted through undergraduate papers and learned to work with InDesign on the fly. Before that, the journal had been on hiatus since the pandemic. The last full edition was published in 2019, under the careful eye of Sabeena Ji and her editorial team of graduate students. We are deeply grateful for her guidance, generosity, and unwavering enthusiasm, which has been instrumental in bringing back *Harf* this year.

If last year's issue was a tentative step toward revival, this year marks our full return. We are thrilled to present *Harf*, Volume 5—our first full-length, international edition since the journal's relaunch. This issue features seven papers (three of which are from McGill undergraduates), eight pieces of artwork, and three poems. Our contributors hail from Canada, the U.S., the U.K., and South Asia, reflecting the plurality and transnational nature of South Asian thought and expression.

This year was our first time leading a journal, and with the seemingly ephemeral goal of restoring *Harf* to its former glory, we required the help of many to make our vision a reality. Our first *Harf* meeting took place in Sabeena Ji's office, where she explained to us what *Harf* had been in the past years, and how we should go about its revival. Waterlogged copies of the 2019 edition filled a shelf in the back of her office; she gave one to each of us, and we were instantly impressed and inspired.

There are many people to thank. First, to our dedicated team of editors—mostly undergraduates—who pored over submissions and worked closely with authors to ensure thoughtful, rigorous edits. To our brilliant Design Editor, Alannah Perera, whose artistic sensibilities and technical skill brought this issue to life. To the South Asian Studies Student Association, whose support has been invaluable. To Reza Ali, whose friendship and faith in us we are grateful for. And to Pasha Jī, who helped us secure funding through the Institute of Islamic Studies, amplified our call for submissions, and offered constant encouragement. We are indebted to both Sabeena Jī and Pasha Jī, our Hindi-Urdu teachers, for their guidance, example, and support.

Lastly, to our contributors, writers and artists, thank you. Your voices are the heart of *Harf*. We're thrilled to have a journal with international reach that showcases work from a variety of countries and academic levels. At the same time, we're proud to be able to provide a platform for McGill undergraduates to publish their work relating to South Asia, and we see the revival of *Harf* as a step toward the further development of South Asian Studies at McGill.

A variety of factors make platforming South Asian studies crucial in the current moment. In an era of increasing censorship, where universities seek to distill, dilute, or erase the richness of cultural studies and the humanities, journals like *Harf* acquire heightened salience. Based out of Montréal, in a province where conversations on plurality and diaspora are fraught with exclusionary rhetoric, our journal refuses the flattening tendencies of nationalist narratives and instead allows South Asian and diasporic cultures to flourish in all their vivid, textured complexity. From stories of Malayali migration to analyses of Pakistani music shows and Texas' South Asian grocery stores, our journal strives to display that plurality in all its splendor. We do not seek to portray South Asia as a fixed, static geography but rather as something fluid, ever-shifting—a landscape of contradictions, tensions, and convergences. A region that no matter where it finds itself, creates pockets of color that light up the monotone.



The Birds Shall Return

Seemil Chaudhry

This artwork vividly connects themes of Palestinian liberation and global solidarity among oppressed peoples. The piece centers around the phrase in Urdu, "*Parinde Wapis Aji Ga*" or "The Birds Shall Return," suggesting a resilient hope for freedom, return, and reclaiming one's homeland from depravity. Using Urdu and drawing inspiration from traditional Pakistani truck art style, this artwork brings the Pakistani perspective into dialogue with the Palestinian struggle. Pakistani truck art has been a medium of visual communication and cultural expression for locals, often highlighting themes of collective memory, shared histories and values.¹ Pakistani truck art began to emerge in its recognizable form after the 1947 Partition, later in the 1950s and 1960s. This distinct local art form is also post/anti-colonial, resisting western hierarchies of aesthetics, homogenization, and celebrates indigenous aesthetics and diverse regional identities.² Using a traditional design aesthetic, this piece pays homage to Pakistani heritage and underscores the notion of interconnectedness in the fight against colonial and imperial forces and the ongoing fight for self-determination against oppression and corruption. This piece intends to highlight the universal aspiration for justice and autonomy that links oppressed communities worldwide. The birds depicted in flight evoke a powerful sense of liberation and resistance, transcending boundaries and connecting different struggles for justice. The red background, patterned with a keffiyeh motif, is a powerful homage to Palestinian resistance, symbolizing the courage and unity of a people who have long resisted occupation. The olive branches further root the piece in Palestinian symbolism, representing peace and resilience despite

¹ Jamal J. Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011).

² Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

adversity. Ultimately, this artwork is a tribute to solidarity across borders—a visual expression of unity and hope that all those displaced or oppressed will one day return to their homelands and live freely and joyfully.

Bibliography

- Dadi, Iftikhar. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Elias, Jamal J. *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2011.

An All-In-One Location for the Edible, the Inedible, and the Nation: South Asian Grocery Stores in North Texas Since the Twentieth Century

Basmah Arshad

Introduction

In 1959, Tariq Abbas was selected to participate in a foreign exchange program between the United States and Pakistan. A native of Lahore, Abbas was unenthused about travelling to Dallas, Texas, a location relatively unknown compared to the famed New York City. Abbas's spirits further deflated when, upon arrival, he was forced to adjust to American cuisine. "I could not take mashed potatoes," he bemoaned. "Mashed potatoes! If you've never had any mashed potatoes in your life, let me tell you they are the worst tasting thing in the world! They are just like glue, for eating."¹ His food-related woes directly contrast with the experience of an anonymous immigrant who left Hyderabad, India, in 1999 to join her husband in Irving, Texas. Not only was she spared from mashed potatoes, but she was able to visit a restaurant that served North Indian cuisine hours after she arrived in Texas. "I

¹ Tariq Abbas, "My Name is Tariq Abbas," by Amber Abbas, *First Days Project*, <https://firstdays.saada.org/story/tariq-abbas>.

thought there would be Indian food, [there] would be good Indian food, or at least some decent Indian food,” she recalled. “So I was very happy on the first day to see the Indian food.”²

These oral histories illustrate two key details. First, how within forty years, North Texas was transformed in the eyes of prospective South Asian immigrants from an unfamiliar site to a city that was expected to have Indian food.³ Second, both Abbas and the anonymous immigrant measure their comfort and acclimation to the United States through food. For anyone, food is a full-body sensory experience, with its appearance, sound, smell, texture, and taste leaving a powerful and lasting impression. For the immigrant and the broader diaspora, food transforms into an edible symbol of the homeland itself, with all of these sensory details enabling a mental and emotional return to home as they remember it. Food studies scholar Krishnendu Ray, in his study of Bengali American dietary habits in Chicago, noted that it was “food, and especially nostalgia about home cooking, [that played] a crucial role in anchoring us in a world that refuses to stay still.”⁴ For Abbas, the revolting unfamiliarity of mashed potatoes made the transition to life in the United States all the more difficult. For the anonymous immigrant, the familiarity of North Indian cuisine enabled a comparatively smoother transition.

² “This is the story of my first day,” by Sraavya Chintalapati, *First Days Project*, <https://firstdays.saada.org/story/989>.

³ “North Texas” in this paper refers to the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex and its surrounding areas.

⁴ Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrants Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 12.

This is a paper chiefly concerned with the South Asian grocery store as a site that provides the necessary brands, spices, or produce for the nostalgic home cooking that Ray alludes to. Like restaurants, the store can serve as a gastronomic lighthouse for the diaspora by selling familiar food items. In selling non-food wares such as clothes or hosting events to play culturally specific games, these stores further function as spaces to create imagined or idealized versions of the homeland, especially as a means of subtly expressing nationalism. Discussing the store within these contexts (diasporic foodways, diasporic community building, and diasporic engagements with the homeland's politics) permits a more nuanced understanding of the store as a dynamic and ever-evolving location.

This paper strictly examines stores across the North Texas region, using recently collected oral histories, historic newspapers, and YouTube videos to examine their presence and function since the twentieth century. While there is significant, if scarce, literature available concerning South Asian grocery stores in select cities across the United States, few scholars have examined the South Asian diaspora in North Texas and none have looked at its stores. By crafting this argument about stores using primary source material from North Texas, this paper aims to fill this gap and encourage further study of the rapidly growing South Asian community living in this region.

From Delhi to Dallas: South Asian Immigrants and Texas

In 1947, India emerged from the shadow of British colonialism not as one country, but two: the Hindu-majority India and the Muslim-majority Pakistan. British and Muslim statesmen justified the Partition of India with the reasoning that South Asia's Muslim population—a minority of significant size and influence—deserved a homeland and government of its own. However, three decades later, Bangladesh declared itself independent from Pakistan in 1971, stating that its ethno-linguistically defined Bengali population was inadequately represented within Pakistan's government. In this paper, “South Asians” refers to anyone from the subcontinent, be they Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi.⁵ Different nationalities or religions (Hinduism, Islam, or others) are specified as needed, but using “South Asian” as a blanket term enables a more thorough consideration of all who consider the subcontinent home.⁶

While South Asian immigration to the United States predated the subcontinent's independence from British colonialism, immigration numbers dramatically increased during the postcolonial era. This reflected newfound political freedoms on the subcontinent as well as the American government's revised foreign policy objectives during the Cold War. Previously, immigration quotas based on national origin

⁵ As a subregion, South Asia is not limited to these three countries. However, this paper focuses solely upon the diaspora from these three countries.

⁶ Prema Kurien, “Religion, ethnicity and politics: Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2001): 263-264, 274.

had severely limited immigration from Asia to the United States, but these quotas were abolished in 1965. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the United States, hoping to expand its sphere of influence, advertised its cultural and economic opportunities across the South Asian subcontinent, which attracted affluent and well-educated people. Many, such as Abbas, immigrated through a foreign exchange program with the hopes of landing in New York City. Scientists and engineers hoped to settle in Houston, Texas, as it was a primary base for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. In deciding where in the United States they would go, most immigrants otherwise did not consider North Texas as their first option.⁷

Yet, as the discrepancy between Abbas and the anonymous immigrant's experiences demonstrate, North Texas ultimately transformed into a more desirable and recognizable location for South Asian immigrants. Those who immigrated to Houston during the 1960s or 1970s eventually traveled north, to Dallas, for other employment opportunities. However, upon moving, they were faced with two options for South Asian groceries: a lengthy drive back to Houston, or order items to be mailed in bulk from New York City. Ramesh Patel, a New Jersey resident who founded American Indian Traders in 1971 as one of the first South Asian grocery stores in the United States, attests to the popularity of mail-order groceries at this

⁷ Al Jazeera+, "Why Are There So Many Pakistanis In Texas?" YouTube, October 10, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0k7M_Xwx4k; Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 1-5, 29-32.

time: “Out of state, people don’t get Indian grocery. They used to call us and we would send through United Parcel Service. When they got their groceries, they would send a check to us.”⁸ This was a lengthy, complicated, but frequent practice amongst the diaspora. That North Texas residents either drove to Houston or ordered groceries from New York City is a testament not to the deliciousness of the food, but to the fact that these groceries enabled immigrants to get a taste of home.⁹

By the 1980s, however, South Asian grocery stores opened in North Texas. Among the first stores to open their doors in the area was Taj Mahal Imports, which began its operations in 1983 and was headed by Pramod and Renuka Shah, a husband-and-wife team. Before opening, the Shahs flicked through phone books and placed calls to anyone with an Indian surname (e.g., Patel) to invite them to their store. This helped them rapidly garner a loyal customer base, many of whom were relieved to no longer be dependent on Houston or New York City for their groceries.¹⁰ The opening of these stores testifies to the community’s increased size and presence in North Texas. A 1986 edition of the *St. Joseph Gazette*, for example, happily advised Dallas residents that if they wanted to cook Indian food at home, they could

⁸ Ramesh Patel, “Oral History Interview with Ramesh Patel,” by Rishima Raval, *South Asian Digital Archive*, 2019, <https://www.saada.org/item/20210611-6628>.

⁹ Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 141-143.

¹⁰ Renuka Shah, “Interview with Renuka Shah, December 9, 2021,” by Betsy Brody, *Digging in Dallas*, 2021, <https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/20>.

do so by purchasing the necessary spices from a nearby “specialty store,” meaning the recently opened South Asian grocery stores.¹¹

By the time the anonymous immigrant arrived in the late 1990s, the South Asian community of North Texas was well-established. According to Pramod, the population continued to grow with the advent of the twenty-first century, as many Indians immigrated “to fix the Y2K problem.”¹² With this new surge came more grocery stores, such as India Bazaar, which opened in 2004 for Dallas residents. India Bazaar gradually expanded over the next few decades, constructing itself as a popular chain store across Texas before eventually opening locations in Chicago and Atlanta.¹³ From Taj Mahal Imports to India Bazaar, grocery stores stood as evidence of the community’s expansion

¹¹ Babs Suzanne Harrison, “Spices set off Indian cooking,” *St. Joseph Gazette*, April 30, 1986, <https://books.google.com/books?id=2vBeAAAAIBAJ&lpq=PA25&dq=indian%20grocery%20store%20dallas&pg=PA25#v=onepage&q=indian%20grocery%20store%20dallas&f=false>. See Hojun Choi, “‘Uncles and aunties’ of Wingren Village: How a South Asian community blossomed in Irving,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2024/05/28/uncles-and-aunties-of-wingren-village-how-an-asian-american-enclave-blossomed-in-irving/>; Caroline B. Brettell, “The Spatial, Social, And Political Incorporation Of Asian Indian Immigrants In Dallas, Texas,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 34, no. 2/3 (2005): 255-258; and Betsy Brody, “Interview with Madan Goyal, April 15, 2022,” *Digging in Dallas*, April 15, 2022, <https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/25>.

¹² Pramod Shah, “Interview with Pramod Shah, December 6, 2021,” by Betsy Brody, *Digging in Dallas*, 2021, <https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/19>. The “Y2K problem” was a spate of computer errors that occurred at the end of the twentieth century.

¹³ See India Bazaar Franchise, “History,” <https://www.indiabazaardfw.com/contact-us/history>.

and their commitment to enjoying the foods that they had eaten at home.¹⁴

The Edible: Food, Taste, and Memory

The South Asian grocery store enables an edible recreation of the homeland largely due to the intersections between food, taste, and memory. These intersections were implied through Ray's quote about home-cooking, but are exemplified through the words of Madhur Jaffrey. An Indian-American cookbook author and actress, Jaffrey asserts that taste is itself a memory and a visceral link to one's history. She immigrated to Britain in the 1950s and learned how to cook so that she could taste at least an approximation of the flavors that had defined her childhood. The honey she grew up with in India, for example, was inscribed "in [her] palate and in [her] soul" so thoroughly that tasting it again would bring back memories of being a sweet-toothed child.¹⁵ "My palate had recorded hundreds of flavors," she elaborates. "From cumin to tamarind, they were all in my head, waiting to be called into service."¹⁶

Historian Arijit Sen offers extended commentary on this role of food through his study of Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores in Chicago's Devon Street. The Bangladeshi ownership of these stores is significant

¹⁴ Ibid. See Kurien, "Religion, ethnicity and politics," 274.

¹⁵ Madhur Jaffrey, "The Flavor of Memory," *The New Yorker*, August 11, 2002, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/06/magazine20020819sweet-memory>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

not only because they are a minority within the broader landscape of the American South Asian diaspora, but also because these stores provide fish imported directly from Bangladesh, which are not offered by other South Asian supermarkets. Sen quotes a community member and frequent shopper from these stores: “We try to connect with our home place. Its food – what we used to have back home. My mother used to cook fish. So when we go to Devon and buy Bengali fish it really brings back memory.”¹⁷ Similar to that of Jaffrey and Ray, these words demonstrate how thoroughly food, taste, and memory intersect with each other. In stocking a familiar fish or a particular brand of honey, these stores are not just offering a taste of home, but an edible and emotional journey through their memories of eating these foods in the homeland.¹⁸

The diaspora in North Texas has a similar symbolic engagement with food. A 1985 profile of the Modi family demonstrates the centrality of food in maintaining a connection with the homeland, for instance. In 1978, Nagindas and Minaxi Modi immigrated with their two children to Mineral Wells, Texas. Before moving there to be around friends and family, they had first moved to London from India. Throughout these migrations, the family’s diet was kept the same. Nagindas stressed to reporters that the family consisted of “strict vegetarians,” in line with their Hindu faith.¹⁹ Minaxi made monthly or bi-monthly trips to South

¹⁷ Arijit Sen, “Food, Place, and Memory: Bangladeshi Fish Stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago,” *Food and Foodways* 24, no. 1-2 (2016): 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67-70, 78-79.

¹⁹ Jeri Calcote, “Modi family’s Indian food diet ‘strictly vegetarian,’” *Mineral Wells Index*, December 11, 1985, The Portal to Texas History.

Asian grocery stores in Dallas to stock up on beans, rice, and other dry goods, stating with pride: “We cook here just like we cook in India.”²⁰ Throughout the profile, daily rituals surrounding food and religion—which, as demonstrated by Nagindas’s words, were intrinsically connected—were emphasized as a way to maintain a sense of stability and coherence amid these transatlantic migrations. Just as the fish helped Devon’s Bangladeshi residents reconnect with home, these everyday meals made the Modi family feel as though they were in India.²¹

The history of Kaurina's Kulfi again demonstrates how specific foods can resonate with and soothe the diaspora. As a family-owned business that got its start in Dallas during the 1990s in South Asian grocery stores like Taj Mahal Imports, Kaurina's Kulfi now sells kulfi across the United States. Kulfi is a traditional form of ice cream from the subcontinent that has a denser, creamier, and richer texture than standard American varieties. It is described by Aman Singh, one of the owners of Kaurina's Kulfi, to be “like a mother's hug on a stick.”²² Singh had immigrated to North Texas in the 1980s, where he grew up watching his mother make kulfi using a recipe that had been in their families for decades. It was popular in their network for its nostalgic appeal, with Singh noting how his mother was frequently told that:

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1170896/m1/8/?q=%22raita%22+%22modi%22+%22indian+grocery%22>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Singh, Aman. “Interview with Aman Singh, September 22, 2022,” Betsy Brody, *Digging in Dallas*, 2022, <https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/36>.

“[It] reminds us of home. Like we get visions of our childhood when we eat this product. It's so authentic and so familiar.”²³ When his mother, buoyed by her family's enthusiastic support and labour, began selling kulfi at local grocery stores, Singh again noticed how customers reacted to the product with immediate delight: “They were blown away by it. They loved it. And it was really cool to see [them satisfied] that they were able to taste it and have that same experience and that memory.”²⁴ It, here, refers to kulfi and its ability to make consumers re-taste memories: a mother's hug on a stick, a taste inscribed in their soul the same way Jaffrey never forgot the taste of honey from the homeland; a sweet taste of South Asia finally experienced again in the thick of North Texas.

Taj Mahal Imports, as previously mentioned, enjoyed a devoted consumer base since their 1983 opening because of their community outreach efforts. The first wave of customers arrived because of a phone call, but they returned for the store's unique produce. Pramod emphasizes that he and Renuka sold items not typically found in American grocery stores, such as the (appropriately named) bitter melon or other niche vegetables specific to Maharashtra or other areas in Southern India. The Shahs, both natives to Bramod, Gujarat, were continually exposed to new foods through the business, with Pramod realizing that different places of India had “totally different vegetables.”²⁵ This, in conjunction with Sen's research into Devon's

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pramod Shah..

Bangladeshi-owned stores, highlights how South Asia has no single flavor—everything is specific to factors like region, faith, or ethnicity.

Home, again, is accessed through specific memories and flavors. Sometimes they are found through more subcontinent-wide foods like kulfi, and other times they are limited to the fresh jute leaves frequently used in Bengali kitchens. Pramod strove to accommodate this reality by asking his customers what foods they wanted to purchase, leading the store to offer, for instance, an extensive variety of pickles. He recounts that customers would share them with each other, upon which the customer offering the pickles would say to the other, “You know what? You tasted one pickle. I bought it from here. So let's go.”²⁶ This quote underlines the South Asian grocery store as a site where multiple homes can be bridged. These flavor-memories are not always distinguished by region, however. Occasionally, they reflect immigration histories and distant colonial ties. Many immigrants, such as the Modi family, first traveled to the United Kingdom before coming to the United States. For the diaspora who first went to the United Kingdom or even for those who had grown up in South Asia consuming British products, brands such as Cadbury Chocolate, Horlicks, or McVitie's were more familiar than the corresponding American variants. While these products can be found across the United States, having sold these British brands alongside South Asian ones in stores like Taj Mahal Imports offered customers convenience and, nostalgically, linked modern South Asian identities to their

²⁶ Ibid.

colonial British heritage.²⁷ This link is not to undermine the brutality of colonial rule or to suggest that this era of Indian history should be returned to, but to acknowledge the reality that even after the British left India, their foods remained. This underlines, once more, that home and its tastes vary amongst the diaspora. The task of the grocery store, as exemplified by the Shahs, is to accommodate as many of these tastes as possible.²⁸

Beyond offering an inclusive and continually expanding catalog, the Shahs also strove to stay up to date with changes within South Asian cuisine. Pramod, during his travels to India to manage the import of items, always checked to see what the latest food products were, because “India was also progressing at that time. So, there are lots of good new items. [New] varieties of mixes, spice powder [...] [And] So many [new] pickles.”²⁹ Customers responded to these products with glee. To go to Taj Mahal Imports and find on its shelves new culinary developments from the homeland enabled the diaspora to stay connected with developments back home. If relatives called to mention a new cookie or pickle on the market, the diaspora could, after Taj Mahal Imports ordered and stocked their shelves, return with their own review of the product. Just as the homeland cannot be reduced to a single taste, it is not a static taste, either. The diaspora has an ever-

²⁷ The United States is also a former British colony and British culinary traditions have left an indelible mark on the American palate. However, compared to South Asia, the United States has existed outside of colonial rule for a greater length of time and has developed its food industries to the point where few, if any, British brands prove more popular than American variants within the United States.

²⁸ Pramod Shah.

²⁹ Ibid.

evolving relationship with the homeland that is facilitated by grocery stores like Taj Mahal Imports.

This forward movement complicates the arguments of anthropologist Purnima Mankekar. In her analysis of Indian grocery store patronage in San Francisco, she saw the store's aura as a key factor in reconnecting diasporas to the homeland. According to a shopper she interviewed, the experience of shopping at these stores was similar to "going into a time warp. It's messy, it's loud. It's fun while you're there. But you can then return home to your clean and quiet house. You don't have to stay there."³⁰ This quote not only emphasizes the desire to figuratively taste the past, but the desire to keep it separate from the present. Paired with Pramod's efforts to give his customers a literal taste of the latest in Indian food products, this complicates the diasporic desire for an idyllic memory of the homeland. In reality, both the diasporas and the homeland are changing, albeit through different paths. The appeal of the South Asian grocery store is that the diaspora can return to a dreamy past where the homeland is a contained and controlled space, before stepping back into the reality of their lives.

When Taj Mahal Imports opened in the 1980s, the South Asian community in North Texas rejoiced at no longer having to drive to Houston or order their groceries from New York. Today, in the 2020s, the community is now keen to have more localized options. In a 2021

³⁰ Purnima Mankekar, "India Shopping": Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging," *Ethnos* 67, no. 1 (2002): 85-86.

advertisement from the University of Texas at Tyler, a graduate student delights in a new South Asian grocery store opening in her city. “Previously we used to travel all the way to Dallas to get things like rice and everything,” she says. “Right now, this store is saving a lot of time and money.”³¹ The store’s cashier chimes in, affirming the graduate student’s relief at no longer having to spend gas and money on an almost two-hour drive down to Dallas. He assures viewers that if the store is lacking in anything, they will order items from the homeland as requested. The advertisement concludes with the cashier, smiling, encouraging viewers to come visit: “[The store is] a familiar face, like we have [a] community around here, you’ll meet more people over here, too.”³² This advertisement echoes the approach that the Shahs took to Taj Mahal Imports, demonstrating the diaspora’s growth in North Texas and their continued need for food and community through these stores.

The Inedible: Movies, Games, and Community

Food enables an edible reconstruction of the homeland that plays on diasporic memories of particular tastes. The physical space, ambience, and non-food items of the South Asian grocery store then complement this reimagining of the homeland. The warmth and nostalgic appeal of factors like movies and games enables the development of diasporic

³¹ The University of Texas at Tyler Graduate School, "Indian Grocery Store," YouTube, August 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvTK2T8XmmY>.

³² Ibid.

identities and communities. Mankekar argues that these stores are critical venues for transnational communication between the diaspora and the homeland, with their products supplying all the literal and figurative ingredients necessary to recreate social dynamics from the homeland in San Francisco.³³

Similarly, diaspora studies scholar Ruben Gowricharn discusses the store as a site that nourishes culture as much as bodies. Examining the Indian diaspora in the Netherlands, he notes that similarities in ethnic tastes for clothing, food, or lifestyles are crucial in binding diasporic communities to the new home as well as the homeland. In this context, the store and associated acts of cooking and eating cultural foods become more significant in that they reinforce cultural scripts (norms, attitudes, and everyday ways of behaving) of the homeland, not the new home. How closely these scripts are followed generations after the initial act of migration varies, but the existence of these scripts is notable in itself because, in the new home, there is no institutional or social pressure to maintain scripts from the homeland.³⁴

In addition to serving familiar food, the Taj Chaat House at Taj Mahal Imports added to the store's ambiance. Chaat is a dish of savory finger foods drenched in sauces, typically served as an appetizer or sold as street food across the subcontinent, often with local and regional twists. It is typically eaten communally in the homeland, and at the Taj

³³ Mankekar, 76.

³⁴ Ruben Gowricharn, "Practices in Taste Maintenance: The Case of Indian Diaspora Markets," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 19, no. 3 (2017): 1-7.

Chaat House it functioned as the centerpiece for a food court attached to the main grocery store. According to Pramod, the Taj Chaat House served chaat that reflected different regional flavors and sold drinks to accompany the meal. “We used to get the coconut and then cut it nicely and give it with the straw. Coconut in the hand and they drink the real, fresh coconut water,” Pramod recalled.³⁵ Families and friends could gather and talk while they shared chaat and coconuts—a common scene across South Asia that now extends to Taj Mahal Imports. This community space exemplifies the store’s ability to physically and gastronomically reinvent the homeland abroad.³⁶

Movies also offer an ideal means of promoting and maintaining these cultural scripts with regional and linguistic specificity. As visual mediums loaded with the norms, values, and fashions of the homeland, movies are frequently sold or rented in South Asian grocery stores. Taj Mahal Imports approached movies the same way that they had approached pickles and other food items: with enthusiasm and eagerness to represent the entire subcontinent. “[We sold] movies everywhere [from] India,” Pramod recalled. “South Indian movies, South Indian language, Gujarati movies, mainly Hindi movies, Hindi language. All the movies.”³⁷ The store offered VHS tapes of classic hits and—two weeks after their initial release—always had the latest movies available for customers to purchase. These entertainment services, particularly this effort to stay up-to-date with new releases,

³⁵ Pramod Shah.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

were immensely popular. Parents could show their children the films that they grew up with. People who heard from relatives in the homeland about certain new movies could, after a delay, report back with their own reviews. The store facilitated access to South Asia's old and new entertainment.³⁸

Games, too, helped knit communities together and allowed the diaspora to connect with the homeland. Taj Mahal Imports sold supplies for games popular in the subcontinent, including cricket and carrom.³⁹ Their sales for the latter game led to the creation of the Cowboy Carrom Association. "We started hosting tournaments," Pramod said, explaining the origins of what would become a 20-25 person organization that attracted players and spectators from across the state and, eventually, the nation.⁴⁰ In particular, the community that developed around carrom attracted parents hopeful that their children would come to love the game as they did. "[They brought their] kids with them, [and told them] 'So, see, *beta*, you play it this way, this way, this,'" Pramod recalled.⁴¹ His words illustrate how, in conjunction with food and movies, the store gave parents the opportunity to raise their children in accordance with the cultural scripts that Gowricharn describes.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Cricket is a bat-and-ball game similar to baseball; carrom is a tabletop game where players flick disks into assigned corners of a board.

⁴⁰ Pramod Shah.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Through these elements—the Taj Chaat House, the movies, the Cowboy Carrom Association—Taj Mahal Imports cemented itself as a space for the community to not just shop, but to gather. “[People coming to the store] were enjoying more because they used to meet people on the floor right there,” Renuka reminisced. “So, they will start talking to each other and mingle around and still do the shopping and enjoy the food and everything [...] and so they felt it like home, you know. Even during the festivities, [...] [people would] go to the store rather than [stay] at home.”⁴² This emphasis that the store felt like home and that it was a preferable location to visit during festivities reiterates that this space was genuinely an avenue through which the Shahs and their community could reimagine and revisit the homeland.

Pramod then explains how this community was cross-national, cross-ethnic, cross-language, and cross-regional: “[The] Pakistanis started coming, Bangladeshi[s] started coming, and Nepali people also started coming. [...] Then the Gujarati Association started—Gujarati Samaj. Even Hyderabad, or Tamil people [came and began their own organizations].”⁴³ That these different sub-communities came to Taj Mahal Imports and began organizations of their own speaks to the level of trust they had with the Shahs, who, in turn, assisted them by stocking the shelves with their national or regional foods. The Shahs further helped these organizations celebrate their holidays—the Gujarati Association’s first Kite Festival, for example, was made

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

possible through Pramod ordering the materials and then donating them to the Association. The involvement it had with these organizations demonstrates how Taj Mahal Imports was not just a recreation of the homeland, but also a site where others could go to for assistance in further recreating their regional and national homes outside of the store and across North Texas. The store dissolved key borders from the homeland while also providing the means to remake them for purposes of celebration and pride rather than for exclusion and segregation, as was the case in the homeland itself.⁴⁴

In a 1998 news segment for KXAS, a news station based in Fort Worth, Texas, grocery stores such as Taj Mahal Imports were recognized as an example of the diaspora shedding the rigid national borders that shaped society and culture in the subcontinent. Aired just a few months before the Kargil War between India and Pakistan began in 1999, the segment included a local man (identified only as Shah) who argued that while tensions flared in the homeland, there were no similar quarrels in North Texas. “He sent us to this Indian grocery store to prove it,” Joe Munoz, the newscaster, stated for the segment. “In the United States, it is not uncommon to see Pakistanis shopping at an Indian store or vice versa. The people we spoke with say that’s because the two share so much in common.”⁴⁵ Munoz’s segment for KXAS, much like the Shahs recollections of the community that

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ KXAS-TV (Television station: Fort Worth, Texas), “Indian Grocery,” Report by Joe Munoz, Fort Worth, Texas: KXAS-TV, November 9, 1998, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc2149436/?q=%22indian%20grocery%22>.

blossomed through Taj Mahal Imports, paints these grocery stores as a site where differences are set aside and people come together to shop, eat, and gather, regardless of national or regional origin. This is a heartwarming perspective that, while evidently correct, does not account for how these stores subtly keep these same borders alive.

Intersections between (Religious) Nationalism and Nostalgia

Aside from this interest in maintaining a culinary and cultural connection with the homeland, the diaspora sustains an interest in engaging with the homeland's politics from abroad. In the case of the South Asian diaspora, much of this engagement is grounded in religious identity. This is due to a history of communal violence between Hindu and Muslim communities that predates colonial rule. Additionally, because statesmen justified the Partition of India on grounds that Hindus and Muslims could not live together in one country, the "nation" is popularly defined and understood in religious terms within the subcontinent.⁴⁶ Sociologist Prema Kurien noted that both within South Asia and in the diaspora, this resulting overlap in national and religious tensions provided a frequent flashpoint. Looking specifically at diasporic Indian communities, Kurien notes that Hindus and Muslims operated within two distinct constructions of

⁴⁶ Hinduism and Islam are the two largest religions in South Asia. While other religions like Sikhism or Buddhism also have a significant presence within the subcontinent, modern South Asian history and contemporary politics are frequently framed in terms of conflict between these two faiths.

‘Indianness,’ rooted in their differing interpretations of India’s history.⁴⁷

The cross-national community formed at Taj Mahal Imports is a feat that could not be achieved within the subcontinent due to how strictly these national borders are enforced.⁴⁸ This community was not, however, thoroughly cross-religious. The Shahs, who are both Jains, stress that their store openly celebrated, through decorations and deals, holidays across the subcontinent, including regional holidays that they were previously unaware of or did not celebrate. The holidays that they recall celebrating are related to Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, or Buddhism. There is a notable absence of Islamic holidays, which reflects an implicit engagement with the homeland’s politics. As Kurien explains, the diaspora is divided between those that acknowledge the subcontinent’s Islamic history and presence alongside the predominance of Hinduism, and those that dismiss it.⁴⁹ The Shahs’ failure to mention celebrating Islamic holidays could be a mistake of memory, an innocuous omission due to their religious identity, or it could be an endorsement of a particular historical narrative.

⁴⁷ Kurien, 273-275.

⁴⁸ The cross-regional, cross-ethnic, and cross-language aspects of the community at Taj Mahal Imports can be found within the homeland, but are generally limited to urban areas.

⁴⁹ The inclusion or exclusion of Islam within historical narratives and studies of India is a hotly debated issue within popular and academic discourse, both inside and outside of the homeland. This paper posits that Islam’s history and presence in the subcontinent is significant and should not be ignored.

This last possibility counters that of historian Uzma Quraishi, who, upon constructing a portrait of the South Asian community in Houston, positioned the grocery store as a means of unifying different nationalities. “Local Pakistani immigrants regularly patronized Indian shops,” she observed. “[This] reality [was] reflected in signage advertising ‘Indo-Pak groceries.’ [...] [The] ethnic economy provided another sphere in which to blur national identity boundaries, as ethnic grocery stores sold Indo-Pak groceries and restaurants served Indo-Pak cuisine.”⁵⁰ Quraishi’s arguments are supported by Pramod’s comment that Pakistanis visited Taj Mahal Imports, as does the KXAS news segment that used shared shopping locations as evidence for a lack of national tensions in the diaspora. To a certain extent, these stores are where these national borders are blurred, where tensions are eased, where all nationalities break bread together. Again, however, the omission of Islamic holidays, paired with Kurien’s argument about religious groups within the diaspora accepting fundamentally different historical narratives of the subcontinent, reveals how this cross-national harmony does not necessarily cultivate a cross-religious community.⁵¹

Aakshi Magazine, an independent academic and connoisseur of South Asian grocery stores in the United Kingdom, expands this discussion with her view that these stores provide an essential and everyday venue for expressing nationalism. In particular, these stores function as a

⁵⁰ Quraishi, 143, 179-180.

⁵¹ Kurien, 273-275.

means for the community to maintain cultural scripts from the homeland, especially those concerning religion. For example, Magazine recalls visiting one store for the first time, only for an employee to ask if she was “interested in the non-vegetarian section,” which she explains was the employee’s attempt to determine which community she was from and what religion she followed.⁵² Within Magazine’s anecdote, it is specifically meat consumption that divides the diaspora between Hindu or non-Hindu, Muslim or non-Muslim.⁵³ If religious borders within the subcontinent are considered synonymous with national borders, then within the diaspora, religious borders are maintained not through distinctions of nationality but distinctions of faith, which is itself discerned through diet, dress, or demonstrative behaviors.⁵⁴

Magazine then suggests that the maintenance of these borders is made possible through the nostalgic appeal of these stores. She describes gazing at the products lining the shelves, warmed by her memories of consuming the same ones in her youth. She realizes, however, that nostalgia can easily be “taken to an extreme degree [and] can become the distorted feeling of superiority of food, culture, tradition. Which says this culture is better, which searches for its ‘authentic’ past and

⁵² Aakshi Magazine, “Grocery-store Nationalism,” *Popula*, January 30, 2019, <https://popula.com/2019/01/30/grocery-store-nationalism/>.

⁵³ Magazine further notes that vegetarian diets are generally a trait of upper-caste Hindus, while the lower-class Hindus do eat meat. Thus, meat consumption indicates both faith and caste membership. In the interest of capturing a broader portrait of the community, this paper did not delve into how issues of caste persist in the diaspora or manifest within grocery stores.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

roots, which seeks a static idea of self and by implication a static other.”⁵⁵ Mankekar likewise notes that these stores offered a momentary return to a heavily nostalgized past. Taken together, Mankekar and Magazine’s positions underline the political nature of nostalgia and memory. These stores offer a highly specific past based on highly specific memories that maintain and idealize certain histories while dusting away others. Nostalgia and nationalism intersect in the aisles of the grocery store in an utterly banal and, as Magazine notes, practically invisible manner. The diasporic shopper sees specific brands lining the shelves and sees specific holidays cherished and openly celebrated by the store. They understand themselves to be included or excluded in this reimagining of the homeland depending on their religious identity.

Returning to Taj Mahal Imports, the variety of medicine they stocked also underscores this complicated dynamic between nostalgia and nationalism. The Shahs sold some medicines from the subcontinent, such as packets of the antacid brand Eno, which is enjoyed across national and religious borders. According to Pramod, he began supplying other brands at the request of customers. “Hare Krishna temple people used to come and sit outside the store,” he recalled. “[Then] slowly, slowly, what happened is we started selling the Ayurvedic products [that the temple recommended].”⁵⁶ Like Eno, Ayurvedic medicine is widely available across the subcontinent and has

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Pramod Shah.

nostalgic appeal. It is also, however, explicitly linked to Hinduism, and in this case, the Hare Krishna temple in particular.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Taj Mahal Imports only sold Hindu items of worship. The walls behind the cashiers brimmed with rows of Hindu icons and related religious artifacts, some of which were also of relevance to Jain and Buddhist customers. Islamic items were noticeably absent. While it could be argued that this store did not have Muslim customers, Pramod and Renuka took pride in their cross-national appeal, and their Pakistani or Bangladeshi customers were more likely to be Muslim than not. The lack of Islamic items is an omission that again reveals a prioritization of Hinduism and a passive endorsement of a particular definition of South Asia—of India—that centers Hinduism.⁵⁸

These subtle modes of engaging with the homeland's politics are not unique to Taj Mahal Imports. Patel Brothers, a South Asian supermarket chain that services the diaspora across the United States, also quietly signals an allegiance with India and Hinduism. As seen in a 2021 vlog of a Patel Brothers location in the Dallas area, the brands that line the shelves are predominantly of Indian origin, the colors used by the store's signs and labels are that of the Indian flag, and the English-language signage itself resembles the written script for Hindi. Around the store, Hindu icons spot the walls and shelves, both as

⁵⁷ Hare Krishna is a specific movement within Hinduism.

⁵⁸ Betsy Brody, "Taj Mahal Grocers," *Digging in Dallas* (2022)

<https://diggingindallas.org/exhibits/show/stories/taj-mahal-grocers>; Renuka Shah 2021.

decor and as products.⁵⁹ A 2023 vlog of a different Patel Brothers location in Dallas showcases similar scenes: the customer enters and immediately sees a Ganesha statue near the cashiers before walking further to see that the produce section has been arranged to mimic the orange-white-green pattern of the Indian flag.⁶⁰ These symbols initially appear to be innocuous, but just as was the case with Taj Mahal Imports, they reveal an allegiance to a particular nation, faith, and history of the subcontinent. This contrasts with the sights commonly seen in Pakistani or Bangladeshi grocery stores, which, as Sen observes, tend to contain Islamic symbolism, non-Indian brands, or signs advertising halal meat.⁶¹ These stores, too, pledge fidelity to a particular nation, faith, and history of the subcontinent.⁶²

To borrow from sociologist Shirin Khayambashi, who studies Persian diasporic communities in Canada, this signage and public culture enables self-segregation to occur within the diaspora on religious lines. Regional and ethnic lines may be crossed in the spirit of creating a broader diasporic community, but religious lines persist in a silent and sometimes passive aggressive fashion. For both versions of the South Asian grocery store discussed—one that favors a Hindu-centric reading of the subcontinent, versus one that favors an Islam-centric reading—nostalgia is key to expressing this religious nationalism. Patel

⁵⁹ ShAaf Vlog, "Patel Brothers | Indian Grocery | Texas | Vlog 9," YouTube, October 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YW7MOITSlro>.

⁶⁰ Hello From Dallas, "Indian Grocery Store Shopping at Dallas!" YouTube, January 21, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vkk-UDC17U>.

⁶¹ "Halal meat" refers to meat that is pure by Islamic standards. Most Muslims strive to consume halal meat.

⁶² Sen 2016, 67-69.

Brothers selling largely Indian brands demonstrates a fealty to India, just as Pakistani or Bangladeshi-owned stores selling non-Indian brands demonstrate a fealty to their respective nations. Through these intersections between nationalism and nostalgia, the grocery store is transformed into a venue for the diaspora to engage with the homeland's politics, especially within this ongoing conflict of narratives concerning South Asia.⁶³

Conclusion

The ethnic grocery store is a diasporic invention. They do not exist in the same form within the homeland. It is only after immigrating and during attempts to carve a new home that the homeland is consolidated to an all-in-one stop, enclosed within four walls. The diversity of its cuisine is whittled down to its most essential and predominantly used spices, produce, and dry goods, no matter how ambitiously stores like Taj Mahal Imports may have attempted to capture every facet within its wares. The clothes they sell are generally of a specific style from a distinct time and place, with the garments swapped and updated at an extended delay, leaving the diaspora out of sync with the homeland's continued sartorial evolution. Movies, television shows, and music are similarly rented out to consumers after that entertainment's popularity within the homeland has peaked. The altar arrangements, sacred texts, statues, prayer rugs, crosses, and more

⁶³ Shirin Khayambashi, "Diaspora, identity, and store signs," *Visual Studies* 34, no. 3 (2019): 10.

are carefully chosen and displayed to communicate a belief not to a particular religion, but—in conjunction with all other items in stock—to a particular narrative of the homeland. The grocery store gives the diaspora a chance to define what the homeland is, from flavor to faith.

Previously, Mankekar and Gowricharn analyzed these grocery stores as a means of maintaining cultural ties and hierarchies in San Francisco and the Netherlands, respectively. Their focus, however, was solely on the Indian diaspora and the Hindu community within it. Both Sen and Ray offered new investigations into the Bangladeshi community within Chicago, expanding studies of the South Asian diaspora to consider non-Indians and non-Hindus. Quraishi, in her portrait of Houston's South Asian community, examined both Indians and Pakistanis, and even included brief discussions of these stores as a bridge between these two nationalities. Yet South Asian studies still lack examinations into the North Texas community and into the grocery store as a mundane, subtle, but effective way of reinforcing select historical narratives that may include or exclude certain nations and religions. There is consensus that these stores appeal to the diaspora's nostalgic visions of the homeland. There is less observation about how this nostalgia intersects with expressions of nationalism and how that may compete with inter-ethnic identification within the diaspora. South Asia is a subcontinent riddled with political, religious, linguistic, and ethnic borders. How they are negotiated by the diaspora vary, but the grocery store remains a key space where these boundaries are both reconfigured and reinforced.

Bibliography

- Brettell, Caroline B. "The Spatial, Social, And Political Incorporation Of Asian Indian Immigrants In Dallas, Texas." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 34, no. 2/3 (2005): 247-280.
- Gowricharn, Ruben. "Practices in Taste Maintenance: The Case of Indian Diaspora Markets." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 19, no. 3 (2017): 398-416.
- Khayambashi, Shirin. "Diaspora, identity, and store signs." *Visual Studies* 34, no. 3 (2019): 211-222.
- Kurien, Prema. "Religion, ethnicity and politics: Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the United States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2001): 263-293.
- Mankekar, Purnima. "'India Shopping': Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging." *Ethnos* 67, no. 1 (2002): 75-97.
- Quraishi, Uzma. *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston during the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- Ray, Krishnendu. *The Migrants Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.

Sen, Arijit. "Food, Place, and Memory: Bangladeshi Fish Stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago." *Food and Foodways* 24, no. 1-2 (2016): 67-88.

Oral Histories

Abbas, Tariq. "My Name is 'Tariq Abbass.'" By Amber Abbas. *South Asian American Digital Archive*.

<https://firstdays.saada.org/story/tariq-abbas>.

Goyal, Madan. "Interview with Madan Goyal, April 15, 2022." By Betsy Brody. *Digging in Dallas*, (2022).

<https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/25>.

Patel, Ramesh. "Oral History Interview with Ramesh Patel." By Rishima Raval. *South Asian American Digital Archive*. December 31, 2019. <https://www.saada.org/item/20210611-6628>.

Shah, Pramod. "Interview with Pramod Shah, December 6, 2021."

By Betsy Brody. *Digging in Dallas*, (2021).

<https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/19>.

Shah, Renuka. "Interview with Renuka Shah, December 9, 2021." By Betsy Brody. *Digging in Dallas*, (2021).

<https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/20>.

Singh, Aman. "Interview with Aman Singh, September 22, 2022." By Betsy Brody. *Digging in Dallas*, (2022).
<https://diggingindallas.org/items/show/36>.

"This is the story of my first day." By Sraavya Chintalapati. First Days Project. *South Asian American Digital Archive*.
<https://firstdays.saada.org/story/989>.

News Articles

Calcote, Jeri. "Modi family's Indian food diet 'strictly vegetarian.'" *Mineral Wells Index*, December 11, 1985. The Portal to Texas History.
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1170896/m1/8/?q=%22raita%22+%22modi%22+%22indian+grocery%22>.

Choi, Hojun. "'Uncles and Aunties' of Wingren Village: How a South Asian Community Blossomed in Irving." *Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 2024.
<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2024/05/28/uncles-and-aunties-of-wingren-village-how-an-asian-american-enclave-blossomed-in-irving/>.

Harrison, Babs Suzanne. "Spices set off Indian cooking." *St. Joseph Gazette*, April 30, 1986. Google Books.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=2vBeAAAAIBAJ&pg=>

PA25&dq=indian+grocery+store+dallas&article_id=6803,90
61642&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjy2ML8sd2JAxVx78k
DHQtsNnI4ChDoAXoECA0QAg#v=onepage&q=indian%
20grocery%20store%20dallas&f=false.

Jaffrey, Madhur. "The Flavor of Memory." *The New Yorker*. August
11, 2002.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/06/magazine20020819sweet-memory>.

Magazine, Aakshi. "Grocery-store Nationalism." *Popula*, January 30,
2019. <https://popula.com/2019/01/30/grocery-store-nationalism/>.

Videos

Al Jazeera +. "Why Are There So Many Pakistanis in Texas?"

YouTube. October 10, 2021. 13:18.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0k7M_Xwx4k.

Hello From Dallas. "Indian Grocery Store Shopping at Dallas!"

YouTube. January 21, 2023. 14:37.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vkk-UDC17U>.

KXAS-TV (Television station: Fort Worth, Texas). "Indian

Grocery." Report by Joe Munoz. Fort Worth, Texas: KXAS-TV, November 9, 1998.

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc2149436/?q=%22indian%20grocery%22>.

ShAaf Vlog. "Patel Brothers | Indian Grocery | Texas | Vlog 9." YouTube. October 28, 2021. 9:56.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YW7MOITSlro>.

The University of Texas at Tyler Graduate School. "Indian Grocery Store." YouTube. August 23, 2021. 1:22.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvTK2T8XmmY>.

Other Digital Sources

Brody, Betsy. "Taj Mahal Grocers." *Digging in Dallas*, (2022),
<https://diggingindallas.org/exhibits/show/stories/taj-mahal-grocers>.

India Bazaar Franchise. "History."
<https://www.indiabazaardfw.com/contact-us/history>.



Seeing the Nation: Visual Representation as a Tool of the Anti-Colonial Struggle in India

Keya Tyagi

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, a variety of production techniques emerged in India, such as lithography, chromolithography, metal engraving, and oleography.¹ The rapid development of these methods, later followed by the advent of film as a medium of communication, played a key role in shaping the visual repertoire of the country. This collective repertoire, in turn, was instrumental in the creation of a national identity and the resistance against British colonial rule. By using the power of religious imagery for political purposes, creating a nation through the idea of the imagined community, and using mimicry and parody to subvert British colonial authority, visual representation in the Indian subcontinent provided a key tool in the struggle against the British Raj.

Religious Imagery as the Site of Political Discourse

An important element in the anti-colonial struggle was the use of religious imagery in a political context, particularly to strengthen the growing nationalistic sentiment and mobilize the masses. For instance, the figures of Hindu goddesses, ubiquitous in the subcontinent, were

¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78.

used as a symbol of strength and resistance during the colonial period.² The colonial officer Herbert Hope Risley was especially concerned by a lithograph of the goddess Kali, printed by the Calcutta Arts Studio for “Kali Cigarettes,” a Swadeshi initiative meant to support Indian industries.³ In this image, the goddess is seen standing over her husband Shiva, a pose meant to symbolize feminine creative power or *Shakti*.⁴ However, as noted by Risley’s assistant B. A. Gupte, Kali’s usual garland of demon heads includes some which lack the usual caste marks, supposedly meaning that these are instead heads of Europeans.⁵ We also notice the presence of a decapitated, red-coated soldier, as well as a British lion in the corner of the image. Therefore, in this reading of the image, the power of the goddess is seen as destructive, and more specifically, as a predictor of the fall of the British empire. As a response to images such as this one, Risley drafted the Press Act of 1910—an attempt at monitoring and controlling the circulation of images deemed to have “seditious intent.”⁶ According to Christopher Pinney, however, this act would have a double-sided effect, as it “[precipitated] the emergence of a whole range of mobile anti-colonial signifiers.”⁷ That is, by proscribing the use of certain images or even individual symbols that were part of these images, the colonial government was simultaneously highlighting the power these images and symbols possessed.⁸ Thus, the Swadeshi movement’s convergence with the Goddess’s powerful religious imagery provided an effective tool to mobilize masses of Indians in support of the struggle for independence. In fact, as N. N. Bhattacharya states, many local rebellions in Bengal that took place after the establishment of the East India Company—such as the Sanyasi rebellion and the Chuar

² Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

³ Aashish Velkar, “Swadeshi Capitalism in Colonial Bombay,” *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 4 (2021): 1009.

⁴ Alice Wolfers, “Kali Rises in the East,” *The British Museum*, December 9, 2020.

⁵ Pinney, 121.

⁶ See note 5 above.

⁷ Pinney, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

rebellion—were “inspired in the name of Kali.” In Bengal, the figure of Kali also took on the role of nation-mother to address the anti-colonial struggle.⁹ The impact of these visual representations was partly due to the fact that Indians could do things in the name of religion that they could not do under the guise of “politics.”¹⁰

Mother India: Goddess as Nation

The idea of Mother India or “Bharat Mata” was born in the late nineteenth century as an embodiment of the national territory and was subsequently used as a rallying tool due to its immense affective power.¹¹ This concept of the Nation as Mother followed a familiar pattern of religious imagery being “morphed into nationalistic images,” then further circulated within the populace.¹² However, the idea of “Bharat Mata” went on to become hugely impactful in shaping how Indians perceived themselves and their nation. According to Sumathi Ramaswamy, the figure of the mother/goddess was part of India’s attempt to create a “visible and tangible form” for itself, which was a key element in the struggle for independence.¹³ Moreover, as this figure resided somewhere between the religious and the secular, it came to occupy a domain of indeterminate political significance, which posed a threat to the colonial state.¹⁴ “Mother India” not only became a powerful symbol of resistance, but also appealed to many people due to a deeply ingrained impulse to safeguard her. This symbol was also deeply tied to ideas of domesticity and gender. As a mother, she would protect her children from the evils of colonialism. In return, they

⁹ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology,” in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), 60–70.

¹⁰ Pinney, 11.

¹¹ Sumathi Ramaswamy, “The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India”, *Zubaan*, 2011.

¹² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New “Indian” Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹³ Ramaswamy, 2.

¹⁴ Pinney, 11.

would be compelled to defend her honor. She appears in many forms throughout various visual representations—prints, illustrations, and even maps—and is often seen as an anthropomorphic, sacred imagination of the land, evoking a sense of duty and responsibility from the people.¹⁵ In theory, this figure unified diverse sections of the Indian population that were once divided by caste, language, and ethnicity. However, in practice, the narrative of Indian unity was much more complicated and even served to deepen some of these existing fissures through its increasingly Hindu interpretation of the motherland.¹⁶

The Imagined Community

At the core of India's anti-colonial struggle was the idea of an "imagined community," a concept developed by political historian Benedict Anderson.¹⁷ He explains how the idea of a nation is discursively constructed, focusing mainly on cases of anticolonial nationalism. In this form of nationalism, an imagined community of citizens is constructed through a common—"imagined"—sense of affinity between these citizens, and the creation of an independent nation-state is sought.¹⁸ Christopher Pinney expands on this idea, stating that embodiment is crucial in order to create a "national feeling" or affinity.¹⁹ This embodiment is seen, notably, in the form of visual representations. An example of these representations may be found in the Amar Chitra Katha comics, which played an important part in shaping the collective Indian consciousness post-independence. Though they were not part of the anti-colonial movement, these

¹⁵ Ramaswamy, 132.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," *Verso*, 2006.

¹⁸ Julian Go and Jake Watson, "Anticolonial Nationalism from Imagined Communities to Colonial Conflict," *European Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 1 (2019): 32-35.

¹⁹ Pinney, 103.

comics played a crucial role in the development of a national identity post-independence. First published in 1967, 30 years after independence, the ACK comics series featured only mythological figures at first—such as Krishna, Shakuntala, and Rama—then later began to include historical figures ranging from Guru Gobind Singh to Subhash Chandra Bose.²⁰ In the wake of the 1947 partition, these comics quickly became a vehicle for nation-building and allowed for the creation of a shared “Indian history” in the minds of an entire generation through standardized narratives around the country and its core values.²¹ Importantly, these comics reflected a predominantly upper-caste Hindu perspective, which further contributed to a cultural homogenization and standardization of the national identity. As Benedict Anderson states in his three paradoxes, nationalism is a modern phenomenon.²² Therefore, although many may think of the “Indian nation” as an ancient and eternal idea, it is in fact a concept that was created discursively in recent history, notably through popular visual culture such as the ACK comics. Another prominent example of building an imagined community through visual representation is found in D. G. Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra*, considered to be the first Indian full-length feature film. Telling the story of the “truth-loving” King Harishchandra, the film utilizes framing as a “holding constant,” punctuating the rhythm of the narrative rather than containing it.²³ Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues that this allows Phalke’s work to realize a distinct gaze or standpoint for his audience—a gaze determined by the label of “Indianness.”²⁴ In terms of defining this “Indianness,” Phalke’s film benefited from the fact that there was already an established system of imagery and iconography in place by the time of its release, which included popular Hindu mythological figures, but

²⁰ Ritajyoti Bose, “Amar Chitra Katha and Its Cultural Ideology,” review of *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha (1967–2007)*, by Nandini Chandra, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 21 (2009): 33–35.

²¹ Bose, 33.

²² Anderson, 5.

²³ Rajadhyaksha, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

also specific modes of dress, posture, and choices of backdrop.²⁵ This visual repertoire had been made possible by previous modes of visual production such as chromolithographs and the “calendar art” of Ravi Varma, who is sometimes considered a cultural predecessor to Phalke.²⁶ This idea of “Indianness,” along with the use of modern, “Western” film technology, solidified *Raja Harishchandra* as the archetype of Indian cinema.²⁷ D. G. Phalke identified his work with the Swadeshi movement, which aligned with the view held by some—such as A. K. Coomaraswamy—that Swadeshi was a “spiritual struggle against [an] alien ideal” and that artists were the real nation-builders.²⁸ This further strengthened the sense of an imagined community with a shared gaze and common ideals that were opposed to the “alien colonial ideal.”

Another paradox of nationalism, says Benedict Anderson, is that it is powerful to the extent that people will die for their countries—although they may not be able to explain exactly why, on closer inspection.²⁹ This relates to the image of the Mother Goddess, towards whom many Indians feel a sense of duty and responsibility.³⁰ The specific form of nationalism found in colonial and even postcolonial India, says Christopher Pinney, involves “an intensely affective vision of the mother and her land”³¹ In fact, “the mother” and “the land” are seen as the same entity, and the nation’s territory is produced as a “deeply gendered, divinized, and affect-laden place.”³² By creating a sense of belonging and familiarity with this anthropomorphic representation of the nation, the cohesion of India as an imagined community is

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Ibid., 62.

²⁷ Brigitte Schulze, “D.G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*” in *Oskar Messter: Erfinder und Geschäftsmann*, ed. Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, and Martin Loiperdinger (Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1995).

²⁸ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 261.

²⁹ Anderson, 5.

³⁰ Ramaswamy, 2.

³¹ Pinney, 104.

³² Ramaswamy, 11.

strengthened.

“Mimicry as Menace”

In addition to its use of religious imagery and the concept of imagined communities, visual representation in India was also a powerful tool for subverting colonial authority through mimicry and parody. A prominent example of this can be seen in the figure of Bhagat Singh, an anti-colonial revolutionary and member of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA) who remains in the collective consciousness of South Asians to this day.³³ There have been many visual representations of Bhagat Singh across various mediums, from chromolithographs to film, and one element remains constant across these representations—his trilby hat. According to Pinney, this hat signals that Bhagat Singh is being depicted as a “mimic of the English sahib.”³⁴ In fact, Simeran Gill argues that Bhagat Singh’s huge popularity among Indians is largely due to the deceptive ability of his to “pass” as an Englishman in these images. This parody of Englishness, then, becomes a threat to the colonial state, as it breaks down the division between the Englishman and the “Other.” As Homi Bhabha describes in his theory on ambivalence, mimicry produces a subject of difference that is “almost the same, but not quite.”³⁵ In other words, the ambivalence of colonial discourse simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes the authority of the colonial state. The effect of these visual representations was clearly felt by the British authorities, as materials related to Bhagat Singh formed a significant part of proscribed publications in the colonial archive.³⁶

In brief, the use of visual representation in colonial India was a powerful tool in the anti-colonial struggle against the British Raj.

³³ Pinney, 124.

³⁴ Ibid., 126.

³⁵ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 129.

³⁶ Pinney, 127-128.

Through the repurposing of religious imagery and the creation of “national figures” such as the Mother Goddess, the formation of an “imagined community” as precursor of the independent nation, and the subversion of colonial authority through “mimicry as menace,” various mediums of visual production contributed to the anti-colonial struggle.

An important consequence of these representations, however, was that the idea of a homogenous Indian nation necessarily implied the neglect and further marginalization of many social and ethnic groups such as Dalits, Muslims, and women. The idea of India as a Hindu nation has persisted to this day and continues to inform the political landscape of the country, with Hindutva groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) dominating the scene, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) currently in power.³⁷ The rise of these groups can largely be traced back to the rapid rise of nationalism during the nineteenth century, which was facilitated by various methods of visual representation. In reflecting on how independence was achieved, we encounter a new set of considerations about whether it could have been accomplished by any other means, and are invited to imagine what the subcontinent would look like today if it had been.

³⁷ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "What Is Hindu Nationalism and How Does It Relate to Trouble in Leicester?" *The Guardian*, September 20, 2022.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984): 125–133.
- Bose, Ritajyoti. "Amar Chitra Katha and Its Cultural Ideology." Review of *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha (1967–2007)*, by Nandini Chandra. *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 21 (2009): 33–35.
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "What Is Hindu Nationalism and How Does It Relate to Trouble in Leicester?" *The Guardian*, September 20, 2022.
- Go, Julian, and Jake Watson. "Anticolonial Nationalism from Imagined Communities to Colonial Conflict." *European Journal of Sociology* 60, no. 1 (2019): 31–68.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Pinney, Christopher. *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology." In *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareashwar, 47–82. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993.

Schulze, Brigitte. "D.G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* in British India of 1913: Pioneering a National Cinema Under Colonial Rule." In *Oskar Messter: Erfinder und Geschäftsmann*, edited by Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, and Martin Loiperdinger, 173–189. Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1995.

Velkar, Aashish. "Swadeshi Capitalism in Colonial Bombay." *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 4 (2021): 1009–1034.

Wolfers, Alice. "Kali Rises in the East." *The British Museum*, December 9, 2020.





The Development of the Feminine Voice in Dakani Urdu Literature, c. 1350-1690

Arman Deendar

Introduction: The Roots of ‘Literary Transvestism’ in Urdu Literature

*Qadr kya na-mard jane mardue jo mard hai
Jan Sahab, shaad hote hai vahi sunkar mujhe*

*What do non-men know of respect? Those men who are O Jan Sahab
Only they can take pleasure in my verse.¹*

– Jan Sahab

In the 19th century in northern India, in the city of Lucknow, a peculiar literary movement began to develop, called *rekhti*. This genre, still used by contemporary Urdu poets, is characterized by men adopting the feminine voice, a kind of ‘literary transvestism’ as Urdu scholar C.M. Naim has previously shown.² The topics of their poems ranged from petty gossip of the imperial *harem* to brazen, licentious descriptions of homoerotic female desire, such as the following couplets (*sher*) from the poet Saadat Yaar Khan Rangin (1755-1835) show:³

*Aj kyon tu ne dogana ye sabura bandha
Tes lagti hai, bhala kyonki bache-dan bache*
Why did you fasten this dildo, my [female] darling?
I feel it piercing my womb.⁴

¹ Meer Yaar Ali Jaan, *Deewan-e-Jaan Sahab Ma Farhang-e-Mufeeda* ed. Nizami Badayuni. (Badaun: Nizami Press, 1927), 106.

² Choudhri M. Naim, “Transvestic Words? The *Rekhti* in Urdu,” in *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16, (2001): 22–23.

³ Naim, “Transvestic Words?” 10.

⁴ Ibid., Translation by author.

Rangin qasam hai teri hi hun maile sir se main

Mat kohl karke minnat-e-zari izar-band

Ragin, I swear to you, I am menstruating.

*Don't take off my pajamas, I beg of you!*⁵

Much of the *rekhti* produced during this period was bastardized by later scholars and historians of Urdu literature.⁶ These scholars largely exhibited a sense of shame regarding the genre's use of explicit femininity as demonstrated by a diagnostic indictment of *rekhti* written by the twentieth century scholar Agha Haidar Hassan:⁷

***Jab kis qaum ki tehzeeb aroj par paunch jati hai aur phir
hota hai is ka zawal mashru' to mardo mein rangini aur
bankpan, waza-dari, zyada aa jati hai, mard aurat konsa
aisa.***

*When a People's culture reaches its apex, it enters a period of decline,
then men become more flamboyant and concerned with opulence and
fashion—they become like women.*

Hassan elucidates that *rekhti* was a symptom of the supposed “opulence” and the subsequent decline of elite Muslim society and political power during Rangin's time. However, Hassan and other Urdu scholars who gave similar prescriptions about the genre failed to recognize that the literary precedents that led to the development of nineteenth century *rekhti* occurred much earlier in the history of Muslim literary society in South Asia.⁸

To trace the establishment of the feminine idiom in Urdu literature, we must travel back to the socio-cultural milieu of the courtly society

⁵ Ibid., Translation by author.

⁶ Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 205.

⁷ Naim, “Transvestic Words?” 15. Translation by author.

⁸ Carla Petievich, “The Feminine and Cultural Syncretism in Early Dakani Poetry,” in *Annual of Urdu Studies* 8, (1993): 111–113.

of the Deccan Sultanates that flourished in central and southern India between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. I argue that the establishment of the aforementioned ‘literary transvestism’ in *rekhti* began in the cosmopolitan political and cultural environment of the Deccan Sultanates—especially at and around the courts of Bijapur and Golconda. This literary innovation emerged in the Deccan due to the dynamic governance structures, religious movements, and the geopolitical entanglements of the period, which synthesized a composite cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic lexicon from Indic, Persianate, and Islamic worlds.⁹

Islamic Rule in the Deccan: Migrations and the Development of the Dakani Language (c. 1320-1425)

From the beginning of Islamic rule in the Deccan, the influx of new immigrants to the region and their interactions with the court and local communities created a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity that would later thrive in the early modern period. Islamic rule in the Deccan began with the southward expansion of the Delhi Sultanate under Muhammad bin Tughluq (1290–1351). Though Muslims had been present in the Deccan region since the eighth century, with the earliest among them being Arab traders settling along the Konkan coast, Tughluq’s political incorporation of the Deccan into his kingdom ushered in a class of elites that would eventually rebel against Delhi and form the Bahmani Sultanate (1347-1527).¹⁰

⁹ I use the term “Indic” to refer to cultural and religious practices that were not explicitly associated with Islam in South Asia, practices that might be uncritically characterized as “Hindu.” My use of Marshall Hodgson’s term “Persianate” denotes a shared literary and ethical worldview shaped by the use of the Persian language across South and West Asia during this time period. As with all historical categorizations, mapping these terms onto the past given their modern associations is imperfect.

¹⁰ Richard Eaton, “A Social and Historical Introduction to the Deccan, 1323–1687,” in *Sultans of the South: Arts of India’s Deccan Courts, 1323-1687*, ed. Navina N. Haidar and Marika Sardar (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 5.

The Bahmani Sultanate, vying to establish political and economic independence from Delhi and compete with the burgeoning Vijayanagara Empire to the south, encouraged the migration of elites from the Arabian peninsula and the Iranian plateau.¹¹ These migrants, referred to as *gharibi* (lit. ‘foreigners’) were given positions in the civil bureaucracy alongside local elites (mostly, Brahmins and Telugu warrior clans) and Persianate arts were patronized heavily by the court.¹² The influx of the *gharibis* clashed with the other predominant Muslim social grouping the Bahmani Deccan, the *dakanis* (lit. ‘of the Deccan’).¹³ The *dakanis* were mostly composed of Muslims who had lived in the Deccan for generations (aforementioned Arab traders in the Konkan, mostly Sunni Turkic migrants from Tughluq’s conquest, Abyssinian slaves, and Hindu converts).¹⁴ Having lived in the region for many generations, they were more integrated into the local social and cultural systems of the Deccan than the *gharibis*. The influx of migrants to the Deccan plateau brought about the creation of a new language shaped by the interactions between migrants and local populations called by a variety of names: *dakani*, *zaban-e-dibli*, *hindavi*, and *qadim* (old) Urdu.¹⁵ Crucial to the development of the language and its transformation later into a literary language patronized by the Sultanates was the influx of Sufis to the Deccan.

Many scholars have written about the importance of Sufis in bringing large numbers of people within the fold of Islam; however, as Richard Eaton notes, they have been largely unable to understand “how an essentially esoteric mystical tradition might have filtered down to

¹¹ Emma Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6.

¹² Richard Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Haroon K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan, an Objective Study*. (Hyderabad: Manager of Publications, Saood Manzil, 1953), 194.

¹⁵ David Matthews, “Eighty Years of Dakani Scholarship,” in *Annual of Urdu Studies* 8, (1993): 82.

commoners in some sort of comprehensible and appealing form.”¹⁶ Folk literature composed by the Sufis in vernacular languages, as opposed to mystical literature largely composed in Arabic and Persian, provides an understanding of the popular dissemination of Islamic devotional ideas during the late medieval era.¹⁷ In the Deccan, Sufis incorporated vernacular languages like Marathi, Kannada, and Telugu into their devotional poetry in order to be understood by the masses of people unfamiliar with Arabic or Persian.¹⁸

Women’s Devotional Songs: *chakkinama* and *bhakti*

There emerged in the late medieval Deccan, new genres of poetry, composed primarily in Dakani and popularized through oral transmission are the *chakkinama* (poetry of the grinding mill) and *charkehanama* (poetry of the spinning wheel). These works were incredibly popular amongst women and while markedly different in purpose and audience from the later *rekhti* style, they illuminate the multiplicity of themes and subjects pertaining to women that the early male writers and poets in the Deccan explored. The fact that many of these songs are still sung today by rural women of the Deccan attests to the wide reach and penetration of Sufi activity into local communities over time.¹⁹ Take the following *chakkinama* composed by the revered Sufi Saint Gesu Daraz (d. 1422), one of the first Sufi saints to migrate to the Deccan during the Sultanate period and by far the most popular:

*See that our body is also a **chakki** [spinning wheel],
And be careful in grinding,
The devil is my **saukan** [rival wife]*

¹⁶ Richard Eaton, “Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam,” in *History of Religions* 14 no. 2 (1974): 117.

¹⁷ Eaton, “Sufi Folk Literature,” 117–118.

¹⁸ Matthews, “Eighty Years of Dakani Scholarship,” 83.

¹⁹ Eaton, “Sufi Folk Literature,” 127.

Which prevents me from working and tires me.

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

*The chakki's handle resembles **alif**, which means **Allah**;*

*And the axle is **Muhammad**, and is fixed there.*

In this way the truth-seeker sees the relationship.

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

*We put grains in the **chakki**,*

To which our hands are witnesses

*The **chakki** of the body is in order*

*When you follow **shari'at** [Islamic law]*

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

*The name of Allah comes from **alif**.*

*Know that **pirs** and **murshids** can direct our lives.*

Grind the flour and then sift it,

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

*Grind the flour and make stuffed **puri**;*

Put it in heavenly fruits and sugar,

The seven qualities of God must be taken in the body

*As the seven ingredients fill the **puri**, oh Sister.*

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.²⁰

This *chakkinama* employs a feminine idiom—through familiar aspects of domestic labor—by early Sufis in a popular vernacular (Dakani) in order to propagate the simplest tenets of Islam using an existing poetic device. Gesu Daraz implores his followers to follow *shariat*, emphasizes the holiness and guidance of the Sufis (*pirs* and *murshids*), and teaches the importance of the seven qualities (*sifat*) of Allah. However, the

²⁰ Richard Eaton, “Women’s Grinding and Spinning Songs of Devotion in the Late Medieval Deccan,” in *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 90–91.

content and form of the *chakkinama* differ greatly from the Persian *ghazal* that became the archetypical form for *rekhti*. In terms of formal elements, the *chakkinama* differs from the *ghazal* by way of rhyme scheme and the inclusion of the author's pen name (*takhalus*) in the last line of the poem. Rather, the *chakkinama* is an adapted form of a regional devotional poetic structure, primarily sung in vernacular languages like Marathi and Kannada by women while working on a grinding mill (*chakki*).²¹

By the end of the thirteenth century, the *bhakti* movement in the Deccan had become incredibly popular with the non-elite, non-Muslim communities.²² The *bhakti* movement encouraged devotion and spiritual unity to a singular god (*deva*) as a rejection of complex, ritualistic worship, which Brahmins held dominion over.²³ As such, devotional poetry and the imagery of the *bhakti* movement were intensely attuned to regional themes, and played a pivotal role in defining regional identities of the non-Muslim Deccan.²⁴ For example, the *chakkinama* of the early Sufis is nearly identical in content to Marathi *bhakti* songs sung by rural women while working on the grind mill (*jatyavarchya ovyā*).²⁵

Both the *chakkinama* genre and the Dakani language in itself take form as a result of these social processes. Early Sufis of the Deccan like Gesu Daraz adapted their Islamic teachings to existing popular non-Muslim cultural formations that encouraged devotional unity. That the *chakkinamas* are one of the first examples in which we see Dakani writers employing the feminine idiom illustrates that cultural interactions between new migrants to the Deccan and existing

²¹ Eaton, "Sufi Folk Literature," 120.

²² Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*, 1st ed. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978), 11.

²³ Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 423-431.

²⁴ Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 7.

²⁵ Eaton, "Sufi Folk Literature," 120.

communities not only forged an entirely new vernacular, but imbued it with local aesthetic lineages.

Dakani's "Golden Age:" Aesthetics at Golconda and Bijapur

After the fall of the Bahmani Sultanate in the late fifteenth century, the Deccan was splintered into five sultanates (Bidar, Bijapur, Ahmednagar, Golconda, and Berar) which facilitated processes of acculturation between Arabo-Persian and Indic worlds instantiated by the Bahmanis. Though the initial development of Dakani began by way of Sufi migration to the Deccan and the propagation of their popular literature, rulers, especially the Adil Shahis at Bijapur and the Qutb Shahis at Golconda, patronized the language for courtly pleasure.²⁶ As its literary output exploded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, modern scholars have characterized this period as "the Golden Age of Old Urdu [Dakani] of the Deccan."²⁷

From the late fifteenth century to the late seventeenth century, Carla Petievich has found a marked growth in the "frequency and a diversification in the style of female narration" in Dakani literature written by men.²⁸ The development of the feminine voice during this period was truly an innovation in the literary tradition of the *ghazal*, given that no evidence exists of a feminine narrator in the Perso-Arabic tradition from which the Dakani *ghazal* descends.²⁹ Whereas the *chakkinama* of the early Deccani Sufis adapted Islamic ethics and values into *bhakti* poetry's narrative framework, the growth of the feminine voice in Dakani represents an inverse acculturative process: a shift from Indic aesthetics to an Islamicate one. To illustrate this process,

²⁶ Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan*, 9.

²⁷ Haroon K. Sherwani, Ghulam Yazdani, and P.M. Joshi, *History of Medieval Deccan, 1295-1724*, Vol. 2. (Hyderabad: Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, 1973), 22.

²⁸ Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry*. (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007), 138.

²⁹ Petievich, "The Feminine and Cultural Syncretism," 111.

take the following two *sher* (couplets) from Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1565-1612), the fifth sultan of Golconda:

Nahin amman-e-khatir munje vasal miyane

Kih har dam munje biraha sa'in darata

Nabi sadqe Qutba ki mati kati hai

Qutb Shah sundar gayi madd-mata

Tranquility does not come to me in the middle of union

For with each breath my lover threatens me with separation

By the blessing of the Prophet, Qutba's love says

*Qutb Shah has become as beautiful as a maiden.*³⁰

The inclusion of the word *biraha*—the vernacular form of the Sanskrit word, *viraha*—meaning separation, longing, or abandonment is a common trope in *bhakti* devotional poetry, typified in the figure of Radha longing for her lover, Krishna.³¹ As I have already shown, themes from Indic devotional poetry were embedded into early formations of Dakani vis-a-vis Sufi activities, so it is highly likely that the *viraha* archetype was available to Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. Combined with the fact that the Shah had extensive working knowledge of vernacular languages, even patronizing Telugu, the Shah must have been intimately familiar with this popular Indic idiom.³²

In the above lines, Qutb Shah not only writes in the feminine voice to articulate the longing for a lost lover, but even refers to himself in the *maqta'*—last line of a *ghazal*, which includes reference to the poet (*takhalus*) in the the third-person—in the frame of a beautiful woman

³⁰ Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, *Kulliyat-e-Sultan Mohammad Quli Qutb Shah* ed. Syed Muhiuddin Qadri Zor, 26–27.

³¹ Carla Petievich, “Dakani’s Radha-Krishna Imagery and Canon Formation in Urdu,” in *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Venice, 1997* ed Mariola Offredi. (New Delhi, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2000), 118-1-119.

³² Haroon K. Sherwani, *Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, Founder of Haidarabad*. (Bombay: Asia Pub. House, 1967), 44.

(*Qutb Shah sundar gayi madmatta*). Though longing for a lover (*firaq-e-yaar*) is an incredibly common theme in the Perso-Arabic *ghazal*, the inclusion of an Indic narrative device represents the high degree of cultural exchange in the refinement of literary Dakani and Deccani culture more broadly.³³ By the middle of the seventeenth century, during Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah's reign, the kingdom of Golconda and the neighboring Sultanate of Bijapur consolidated political power in the Deccan due to the decline of the other Bahmani successor states.³⁴ Thus, the increasing prevalence of the feminine idiom represents the cultural fruits borne from a period of economic prosperity and political stability that maintained power through a complex network of relationships between the cultural formations and communities that constituted the kingdoms.

The sophisticated cultural production of this period can be seen from the developments in the Bijapur Sultanate. Bijapur became known for its extensive production of Persian miniature paintings that contained explicit iconographic references to Hindu gods and Indic aesthetic systems, especially the paintings produced under the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1570-1627).³⁵ Ibrahim Adil Shah's *Kitab-e Nauras* is a collection of rhyming couplets (*dohas*) written in Dakani set to prescribed *ragas* (musical modes).³⁶ The collection contains poems in praise of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, the aforementioned Gesu Daraz, as well as to the Hindu gods Ganesha and Saraswati.³⁷ The Sultan's existence in the continuum of intercultural exchange and his patronage—the Metropolitan Museum of Art states that “Ibrahim's court attracted some of the most talented artists of the age, who gave expression to the sultan's inner vision”—are best exemplified by the painting “Saraswati enthroned,” (fig. 1) painted in

³³ Petievich, “Dakani's Radha-Krishna Imagery,” 117.

³⁴ Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan*, 7–9.

³⁵ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250–1800*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 296.

³⁶ Matthews, “Eighty Years of Dakani Scholarship,” 93.

³⁷ Matthews, “Eighty Years of Dakani Scholarship,” 93.

the Persian style and influenced with aesthetic elements found in the *Kitab-e Nauras*.³⁸ This example of visual culture at the Bijapur court exhibits the synthesis of Indic and Perso-Arabic cultural forms through its heterodox depiction of the Hindu goddess in an archetypical Islamicate court setting.³⁹



Fig. 1. “Saraswati enthroned,” Farrukh Husayn, Bijapur, ca. 1595–1609. Jaipur, Brigadier (From C. Singh and M. Narayan, *From the Collection of Maharaja of Jaipur: Six Multicoloured Prints, Surat Khana, Jaipur, 16th–17th Century, Mughal and Deccani*)

³⁸ Haidar and Sardar, *Sultans of the South*, 79.

³⁹ Keelan Overton, “Book Culture, Royal Libraries, and Persianate Painting in Bijapur, Circa 1580–1630” in *Mugharnas* 33, no.1 (2016): 118–119.

In Ibrahim Adil Shah's court, we find the last major Dakani male poet who wrote in the feminine voice, Hashmi Bijapuri (d. 1697). Writing at the tail end of the so-called "golden age" of Dakani literature, Hashmi is described as the first *rekhti* poet by Naim and Petievich even though he predates the formal development of the *rekhti* in North India by a century and a half—Naim finds that of the 305 *ghazals* in his *Divan-e-Hashmi*, 240 "are identical in content with what later came to be called *rekhtis*."⁴⁰ In Hashmi's poetry, we find a direct relationship between the poet himself and themes of women's representation and spaces with the poet writing in a *maqta'*, "*diye hain Hashmi izzat hamari ui ki boli kun*," ("Hashmi has given respect to our speech.")⁴¹ We also see Hashmi appropriating the voice of a woman to comment on the practice of seclusion (*pardah*) and relationships within women's spaces:

Onu aven to parde son ghari bhar bhar baithungi

Bahana karke motiyan ke pirate har baithungi

If he comes, I shall sit outside for a moment, unveiled, pretending that I was stringing pearls into a necklace.

Latapat mein tute hain koi yu band dekhe to hai mushkil

Bichari sas miskin hain nanad dekhe to hai mushkil

The ties of my gown are wrapped in a knot—it would be awful if someone sees.

*My poor mother-in-law is harmless, but it would be awful if my sister-in-law sees.*⁴²

Hashmi's *shers* include more sensual descriptions of women's bodies, expanding greatly upon Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah's poetry as Hashmi features a glimpse into the world of women's spaces, whether

⁴⁰ Naim, "Transvestic Words?" 6.

⁴¹ Hashmi Bijapuri, *Deewan-e-Hashmi* ed Hafeez Qateel. (Hyderabad, Idara-e-Abadiyat-e-Urdu, 1961).

⁴² Hashmi, *Deewan*, 123.

fictitious or imagined. That this subject matter would be a defining characteristic of later *rekhti*, what can be said of the lived realities of elite women in Deccani society as depicted by Hashmi?

While British and European historians erroneously characterized imperial women in high Muslim society, especially Mughal women, as intensely oppressed and concealed by patriarchal society, there is evidence that suggests that elite women actually held much more agency and power in Indo-Muslim kingdoms.⁴³ In the Deccan, elite women commissioned manuscripts, oversaw architectural projects, owned property, and led sections of the civil administration.⁴⁴ As opposed to the Orientalist constructions of elite women's spaces, the *harem* was a deeply political space, rife with internal hierarchies between women of different occupations, generations, statuses, and cultural backgrounds.⁴⁵

Within this context, is it possible that rather than a fanciful, false narrative about the lives of elite women, Hashmi wrote with some degree of truth? That Hashmi's *divan* (collected work of *ghazals*) even survives to this day indicates that his poetry was well received by the court—a reception marked by qualities of entertainment and pleasure. Thus, we may also understand Hashmi's *ghazals* to occupy a similar position as *rekhti*'s 'literary transvestism': for the sake of male entertainment. Coupled with the dominance of the classical Islamic doctrine that saw women as a source of *fitna* (chaos),⁴⁶ Hashmi's

⁴³ Sarah Waheed, "Whatever Happened to Chand Bibi Sultan? Narratives of a Deccan Warrior Queen" in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2024): 618–619.

⁴⁴ Sarah Waheed, "Whatever Happened to Chand Bibi Sultan?" 619.

⁴⁵ Taymiya R. Zaman, "Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India" in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, no. 5 (2011): 677–700; 687.

⁴⁶ For discussion on women invoking *fitna* in classical Islamic literature, see "The Bold and the Beautiful: Women and 'Fitna' in the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*; The Story of Nūrā," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 99–116.

depiction of elite women may have more in common with the couplets of later *rekhti* poets than has been previously analyzed.

While these considerations are out of the current scope of this essay and require a much more in-depth analysis of Hashmi's *Diman*, it is clear that Hashmi developed the feminine idiom further to depict and comment on the intimate lives and ethics of elite women in Deccani society.

Conclusion: What's a patron to your mother tongue?

With the Mughal Empire expansion into the Deccan under Aurangzeb (1618-1707) and the subsequent fall of the Deccani Sultanates, Dakani lost its patronage and its status as a literary language, especially as the urban centres of literary and cultural production shifted to the new Mughal capital of the Deccan at Aurangabad.⁴⁷ However, developments in the language during the Sultanate era laid the bedrock for the growth of modern Urdu literature.⁴⁸ The emergence of the language and the Deccani aesthetic alike were forged out of multi-directional exchanges between Islamic, Perso-Arabic, and Indic cultural institutions, which resist the modern proclivity to attach “Hindu” and “Muslim” identities onto the social milieu fashioned in the Deccan.

Among the cultural processes that shaped the Dakani language and Deccani culture was the incorporation of the feminine idiom from devotional *bhakti* poetry to the Perso-Arabic *ghazal*, a process inaugurated by Sufi activities. This idiom would crystalize as *rekhti* poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in northern India. *Rekhti* poets expanded the themes of female desire, politics of the *harem*, and longing that took root in the Deccan; however, their

⁴⁷ Shagufta Shaheen and Sajjad Shahid, “The Unique Literary Traditions of Dakhni,” in *Languages and Literary Cultures in Hyderabad*, ed. Kousar J. Azam (Routledge, 2018): 116.

⁴⁸ Sherwani et. al, *History of the Medieval Deccan*, 23.

overt femininity received harsh criticism from modern historians and scholars. The long history of the use of the feminine idiom by male poets, or ‘literary transvestism,’ shows that this literary form was not the result of an over-opulent or decadent society, but rather a gradual process of cultural translations across communities that called the Deccan home.

Though the cultural production of the Deccan Sultanates is largely overlooked in the histories of Urdu, Indo-Muslim society, and South Asia more broadly, the language of its formation, Dakani, persists today. I come from a multi-faith (Hindu and Muslim) Deccani family, a living testament to the modes of relationality and processes of translation explored in this essay. Though the worldviews face the threat of suffocation by the rise of religious nationalisms in South Asia and globally, the rich history of the Deccan attests to the centrality of history in shaping contemporary identitarian categories. With this, I end with a *sher* from Hashmi composed in 1686 after the fall of the Bijapur Sultanate and the loss of his patron:

Tuje chakri kya tu apnich bol

Tera sher Dakhni hai, Dakhnich bol

What’s a patron to your mother tongue?

*Your poetry is Dakani, so it is Dakani that you will speak.*⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Hashmi, *Deewan-e-Hashmi*. Translation by author.

Bibliography

- Bijapuri, Hashmi. *Deewan-e-Hashmi*, edited by Hafeez Qateel. Idara-e-Abadiyat-e-Urdu, 1961.
- Blair, Shiela S. and Jonathan M. Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250–1800*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Eaton, Richard. *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Eaton, Richard, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*, 1st ed. Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Eaton, Richard. “Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam.” *History of Religions* 14, no. 2 (1974): 117–127.
- Eaton, Richard. “Women’s Grinding and Spinning Songs of Devotion in the Late Medieval Deccan.” In *Islam in South Asia in Practice*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Flatt, Emma. *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Haidar, Navina and Marika Sardar. *Sultans of the South: Arts of India’s Deccan Courts, 1323-1687*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.
- Husayn, Farrukh. “Saraswati enthroned,” ca. 1595–1609, Bijapur. In *Sultans of the South: Arts of India’s Deccan Courts* by Navina Haidar and Marika Sardar, 35. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.
- Jaan, Meer Yaar Ali. *Deewan-e-Jaan Sahab Ma Farhang-e-Mufeeda*, edited by Nizami Badayuni. Nizami Press, 1927.
- Matthews, David. “Eighty Years of Dakani Scholarship.” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 8, (1993): 81–99.
- Naim, Choudhri M. “Transvestic Words? The *Rekhti* in Urdu.” *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16, (2001): 3–26.

- Overton, Keelan. "Book Culture, Royal Libraries, and Persianate Painting in Bijapur, Circa 1580–1630." *Muqarnas* 33, no.1 (2016): 91–154.
- Petievich, Carla. "Dakani's Radha-Krishna Imagery and Canon Formation in Urdu," in *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Venice, 1997*, edited by Mariola Offredi. Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2000.
- Petievich, Carla. "The Feminine and Cultural Syncretism in Early Dakani Poetry." In *Annual of Urdu Studies* 8, (1993): 110–121.
- Petievich, Carla. *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Pollock, Sheldon. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 1st ed. University of California Press, 2006.
- Quli Qutb Shah, Muhammad. *Kulliyat-e-Sultan Mobammad Quli Qutb Shah*, edited by Syed Muhiuddin Qadri Zor.
- Shaheen, Shagufta, and Sajjad Shahid. "The Unique Literary Traditions of Dakhni." In *Languages and Literary Cultures in Hyderabad*, edited by Kousar J. Azam, 89–154. Routledge, 2018.
- Sherwani, Haroon K. *The Bahmanis of the Deccan, an Objective Study*. Manager of Publications, Saood Manzil, 1953.
- Sherwani, Haroon K. *Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, Founder of Haidarabad*. Asia Pub. House, 1967.
- Sherwani, Haroon K., Ghulam Yazdani, and P.M. Joshi. *History of Medieval Deccan, 1295-1724*, Vol. 2. Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, 1973.
- Vanita, Ruth. *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

- Waheed, Sarah. "Whatever Happened to Chand Bibi Sultan? Narratives of a Deccan Warrior Queen." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2024): 616–633.
- Zaman, Taymiya R. "Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54, no. 5 (2011): 677–700.



لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ



سُبْحَانَكَ يَا رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ
مُحَمَّدٌ عَبْدُكَ وَرَسُولُكَ



لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ عَبْدُهُ وَرَسُولُهُ

Velichathilekku—Towards the Light: Stories of migration to the Middle East, from a village in Kerala.

Nikhila Shanker

“How did you decide to go to the Gulf?” I wrote to my grand uncle. “Just to make me millionaire [laughing emoji],” he responded.¹

It is with this dream of becoming millionaires that thousands of Malayalis set off to the Middle East, beginning in the early 1970s. Much of this migration could be attributed to a change in the Middle Eastern economy following the price hike of oil and a subsequent increase in revenue, which kickstarted a process of industrialisation calling for an influx of foreign workers.² People would migrate to the Gulf, find jobs, and send home money for their families to sustain themselves. What started back in the 1970s set the precedent for a phenomenon of migration to the Middle East that would become intrinsic to the social, cultural and economic fabric of Kerala as we know it today. In B.A. Prakash’s article, he estimates a stock of around 28 lakh Indian immigrants in West Asian countries at the time of writing, of which 14 lakh were from Kerala.³ But it is not just economic factors sustaining this pattern of migration today. K.C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, in their paper titled “Kerala Migration Study 2014,” highlight intergenerational upward mobility and labour localisation policies as non-economic factors contributing to the efflux of Malayalis.⁴ Identifying what they call the “Gulf Glamour Factor,” they

¹ Pushpan Kalathil, “Kalathil,” message transcripts, uploaded by Nikhila Shanker, December 17, 2024.

² B. A. Prakash, “Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 50 (December 12-18, 1998): 3209–13.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ K. C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, “Kerala Migration Study 2014,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 6 (February 6, 2016): 66–71.

assert Gulf migration and the glamour associated with it as being “embedded in the Kerala psyche,” considering it a “rite of passage.”⁵

And so, everyone in Kerala knows someone in the Gulf. Someone is sending their daughter off to Dubai with her newly wed husband, and someone else is waiting for their son to come back with his annual bounty of duty-free goods. This is perhaps why the existence of these Gulf expats within my family had become a fact that prodded no further questioning; I had family in the Gulf because everyone else did. For me, these were familiar faces that had blended into the mundanity of everyday life. Growing up, I had never wondered what it had meant for them to reach the Gulf—what dream they had chased, and what it had taken to chase it. So as I sat down to talk to Das uncle, I was told a side of his story I had never known. Das uncle is my grandmother’s neighbour. My interactions with him have generally been fleeting hellos, goodbyes, and usual niceties, but I have always known him as “Das uncle, who drops in to say ‘hello’ when we are in town.” As I talked to him on the phone, however, he became K.T. Ramdas, someone who had braved treacherous waters, evaded cops, and survived the blazing desert heat to make a life for himself in the Middle East.

To Mr. K.T. Ramdas, who has entrusted me with his story, my uncle Tempie Rajen Shonker and grand uncle Pushpan Kalathil, who shared their experiences as well, and my father Unni Rajen Shanker, who graciously agreed to illustrate this piece for me—I extend my deepest gratitude. And to the words that were unable to transcend the unyielding barriers that arose from my feeble grasp of the Malayalam language, I express regret.

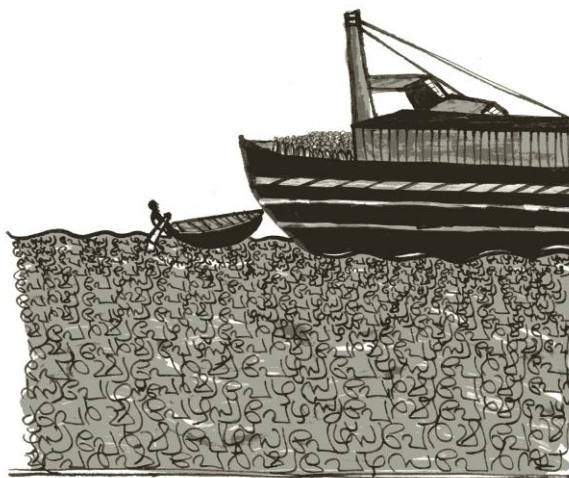
K.T. Ramdas was barely 18 when he made his first attempt to set foot on Middle Eastern soil. But on that fateful December evening in 1970, he and the others on the boat set to fare the Arabian Sea were caught and taken to a police station in Kozhikode. While the others slept,

⁵ Ibid.

exhausted from the night they had endured, Das planned his escape: “I scoped out a wall I could jump over but as I stood beside it, a guard asked me what I was doing. I told him I had to urinate so they sent someone to keep an eye on me. I couldn’t escape.”⁶ The guard took him back into the station where he was questioned relentlessly: “They didn’t question anyone as much as they did me. They asked me who my agent was so I told them I didn’t have one. I met someone on the Kozhikode beach and gave them money to let me on the boat.”⁷ After spending 17 days in the Kozhikode sub jail, the travellers’ case was taken to court where the charges against Das were dropped in light of him being underage. The end of the trial marked the end of a dream for a lot of the people who had gotten on the boat that night with the hopes of a new beginning in a foreign land. Scared, defeated, and exhausted from the results of their first attempt, many decided not to try again. But Das was determined. In March of the same year, Das found himself on Kozhikode beach yet again. Again, he prepared to get on the boat that had landed him in jail the last time. This time though, the boat and its passengers would reach Middle Eastern soil.

⁶ K.T. Ramdas, “Das,” interviewed by Nikhila Shanker, December 17, 2024 (3:18).

⁷ Ibid., 4:02.



ON MOONLESS NIGHTS
SMALL FISHING BOATS
FERRIED MEN, YOUNG
AND MIDDLE-AGED
TO THE LUNCH
(BOATS) WAITING IN
THE DEEP SEA ---

The journey was not an easy one. “We only got one meal a day. There was a plate that was a metre long out of which ten to fifteen of us would eat. They would catch fish from the sea, cook it with rice and put it right out on the plate. We would jump on it even if it meant burning our fingers off, because the food would get over if we waited for it to cool down.”⁸ Water too, was a scarce resource, with each person getting just about an ounce a day.⁹ The boat itself was so congested, Das says, that the hot breath of passengers crammed together could “cook a plate of raw rice.”¹⁰

Interestingly, my grand uncle Pushpan Kalathil, who went by ship, describes his journey as having been “beautiful”¹¹—that everyone got “liquor and luxurious food at [their] bunk.”¹² Unlike the passengers on Das’s boat, who were counting down the days left to reach their destination, Kalathil recounts everyone on his ship as being

⁸ Ibid., 8:27.

⁹ Ibid., 9:15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4:02.

¹¹ Kalathil, message transcripts, 11:57:43 AM.

¹² Ibid., 11:57:43 AM.

sentimental when it was time to leave.¹³

The real extent to which Das and the other travellers suffered is something ineffable. The boat, carrying the dreams of all those on board and all those they had left behind, had seen horrors beyond comprehension. However, the days of torment would pay off, for soon the Gulf coast would enter the horizon. Upon reaching Dubai's shore, the anchor was dropped and the passengers were told to get down with the help of a rope. Many had forgotten what it meant to be able to walk freely, their legs having been accustomed to being tightly packed in compact corners of the cramped boat. As they got off, they were told, "*Aa light laksham vechu angottu nadannaa mathi, ningalku road kittum*" ("Use the light as your goal and walk towards it. You'll find the road").¹⁴

So they walked. And walked. And walked some more, till their legs threatened to give out and sink into the sand beneath them. "We walked till we saw some small shops to stop and eat at. At these hotels there would be a Malayali who would come ask you where you were coming from and where you were going and they would take you with them. This was a common experience."¹⁵ These Malayalis would feed and house the travellers, after which they guided them on what to do to reach their destinations—often giving them the money they needed to do so. "They didn't get five pence back for helping the travellers out, but they remembered what it was like for them when they had arrived in their boats."¹⁶ The only thing that prompted these strangers to help each other was a sense of community—a sense of solidarity and brotherhood in knowing where they had come from, and in knowing what it meant for them to be there. Das says he noticed a lack of this solidarity with people who came in later: "Later, people started coming on planes and there was a shift in the way they behaved.

¹³ Ibid., 11:57:43 AM.

¹⁴ Das, interview, 12:20.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13:40.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15:04.

When these people were approached by unknown Malayalis they would think they would rob them. We had the willingness to take money out of our own pockets and help anyone who came. But this changed.”¹⁷

Most people shared tiny rooms with seven to eight others. The rooms themselves were poorly built, salvaged out of steel sheets covering shabbily-made walls. But within the confines of these flimsy structures emerged a feeling of fraternity and companionship that provided the men with warmth in trying times. While some looked for jobs, the income of the others became sustenance for the rest. “One person would be in charge of cooking. If he didn’t know how to cook he had to whip something up to the best of his ability. Each day a different person had to cook. If he was working that day he either had to wake up early to cook, or he had to come back home and cook.”¹⁸ People who had preliminary knowledge of Hindi or English were able to secure office jobs. “Muslims who came from places like Malappuram, Kasargod and Kannur knew some Arabic, or they could understand some words since they had memorised the oath. They usually worked at the houses of Arabs. Others started small businesses selling *beedis*, cigarettes, tea and coffee and things like that since they didn’t know any language.”¹⁹

While many found jobs in Dubai, reaching Dubai was just the first hurdle for Das. His final destination was Abu Dhabi. At this point, Dubai and Abu Dhabi were separate emirates. They had different currencies and required different visas. The only way to get to Abu Dhabi was to cross a bridge, at the end of which were thorough inspections of passports and visas—neither of which Das had. Das spent two months in Dubai, during which he found a vehicle taking a bunch of Pakistani and Irani immigrants to Abu Dhabi. For a small sum, he secured a spot on this vehicle and made his next journey.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35:08.

¹⁸ Ibid., 29:22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27:39.

Das recounts how different Abu Dhabi was back then—unlike the plethora of skyscrapers embedding the city today, there were only a couple of four-storeyed buildings. These were known as television buildings. “You would find 90% of the Malayalis in Abu Dhabi at these television buildings in the evening. After work most Malayalis would hang out here, meet each other and discuss news back home.”²⁰ Over time, more of these spaces for community to gather would develop. As the number of Malayalis and other Indians increased, there emerged groups like the Indian Social Centre and the Kerala Social Centre where people would meet up in the evenings.²¹

Das worked as a caretaker at Star Hotel in Abu Dhabi, where he would collect laundry from customers and bill them. After working in the housekeeping department for four to five years, he was promoted as the supervisor of the housekeeping department and soon the chief of housekeeping. Later, he also worked in the bar as barman and supervisor of the bar.²²

No matter the work one did, no one spent a single coin on themselves. Outside of sustaining themselves, any and all money they earned was sent back home. Although the families of these migrants had odd jobs and small businesses back home, their main source of income was the money their relatives sent from the Gulf.

But the realities of the migrants’ lives were contained within the borders of the Gulf. “Some people would say they worked in the railway when asked what they did back in the Gulf. There were no railways back then (...) In reality, most of them held lowly jobs, worked in houses, mixed cement and things like that.”²³ With barely any money left for themselves, the migrants often had to borrow or have their roommates pitch in to help buy a ticket home. The return ticket

²⁰ Ibid., 23:42.

²¹ Ibid., 35:38.

²² Ibid., 46:04.

²³ Ibid., 1:00:47.

was funded by selling the *thaalis* (ceremonial wedding necklace) of women in the family who had recently gotten married. Unfortunately, the migrants rarely got to enjoy the benefits of their hard work. Houses built with their money were often divided among the family, wherein the migrant himself was often left a negligible share: “Sometimes these people would come back with their pockets emptied and suddenly they were wanted by no one.”²⁴

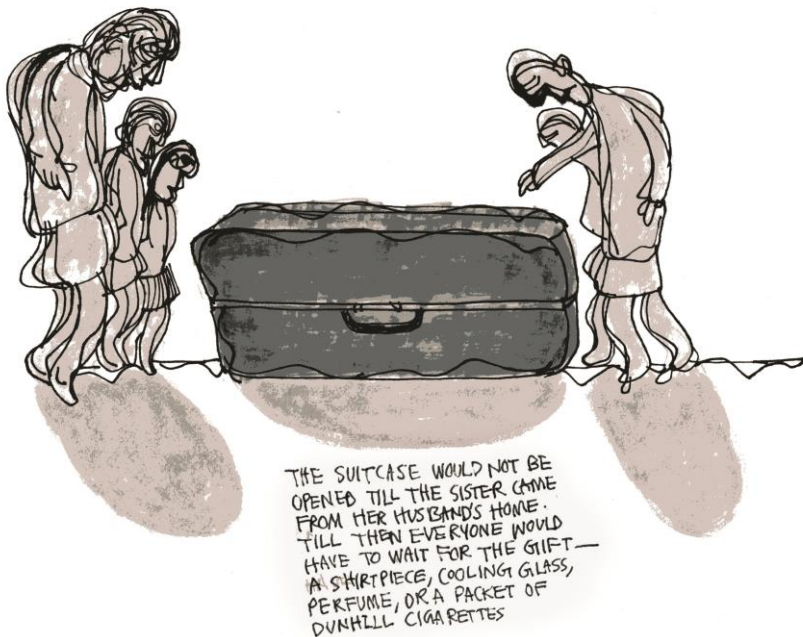
Keeping in touch with family and friends required writing letters and sending parcels, but this was rarely ever done by post— they were usually sent through people going back home. The “Gulf return” came bearing letters, snacks, and gifts. Since the workers in the Gulf came from different regions in Kerala, the homebound migrants often had to go out of their way, sometimes as far as 50 kilometers from their hometowns, to ensure that the goods reached their destination safely. Some would make the journey themselves, but if it was too far they would send it by post upon reaching Kerala. “After reaching home, the first two to three days were usually spent delivering these goods.”²⁵



²⁴ Ibid., 37:21.

²⁵ Ibid., 58:25.

Getting home was no easy task. Das, who had gone to the Gulf without a passport, availed the services of a fake passport business. On his first trip back home as a twenty-something-year-old, his passport identified him as a thirty-year-old man from Kannur. Unable to fathom the young man in front of them as being thirty years old, the security guards at the Bombay airport detained him. No amount of questioning on their part could break Das though. Having done his homework, Das had memorised the address and signature on the passport, and even went as far as describing the surrounding vicinity: “How would they know all these details? I’d say there’s a school here and a school there but luckily there are schools everywhere.”²⁶ Das only returned to Abu Dhabi after he received a legitimate visa from his employers in accordance with his real passport. However, now fearful of the airport, he chose to go by ship this time around.



²⁶ Ibid., 41:50.

As I listened to his hardships, I wondered what it took—where he found the will to get back up despite all the hurdles, and why he chose to go to the Middle East in the first place. When I asked him how his decision to migrate came about, he told me that he had lost his father while he was in seventh grade. This left the household to him, his mother, and three sisters. Although he tried working in Bombay, nothing significant came of it. “I realised that if I were to earn, I had to go to Dubai.”²⁷

And such is the story of most Malayalis that find themselves on their way to the Middle East. For these people, who have not known a life outside of the Malabar Coast, the Gulf often becomes synonymous with better economic prospects. A ticket to the Middle East then becomes a ticket to a life bigger than they had thought possible before. This was the case for my uncle Tempie Rajen Shonker as well, who emigrated to Dubai later in the 1990s. When asked what resulted in his decision to move, he says the job prospects in Kerala were sparse, even with a degree: “Even if you get a job, the salary isn’t much.”²⁸

In 2000, Das decided to quit his job and return to Kerala. Many expressed shock and dismay at his decision, especially given the position he had earned in the Gulf. Despite being offered another job there, he turned it down. He returned home and took on a temporary role to show gratitude to the company for supporting him by issuing his visa multiple times. However, for the most part, he chose to close that chapter of his life.²⁹

Das uncle’s story is not just his own, but that of countless people from my dad’s village—stories of resilience and determination. Stories that get buried in passing comments and brief anecdotes shared over

²⁷ Ibid., 43:40.

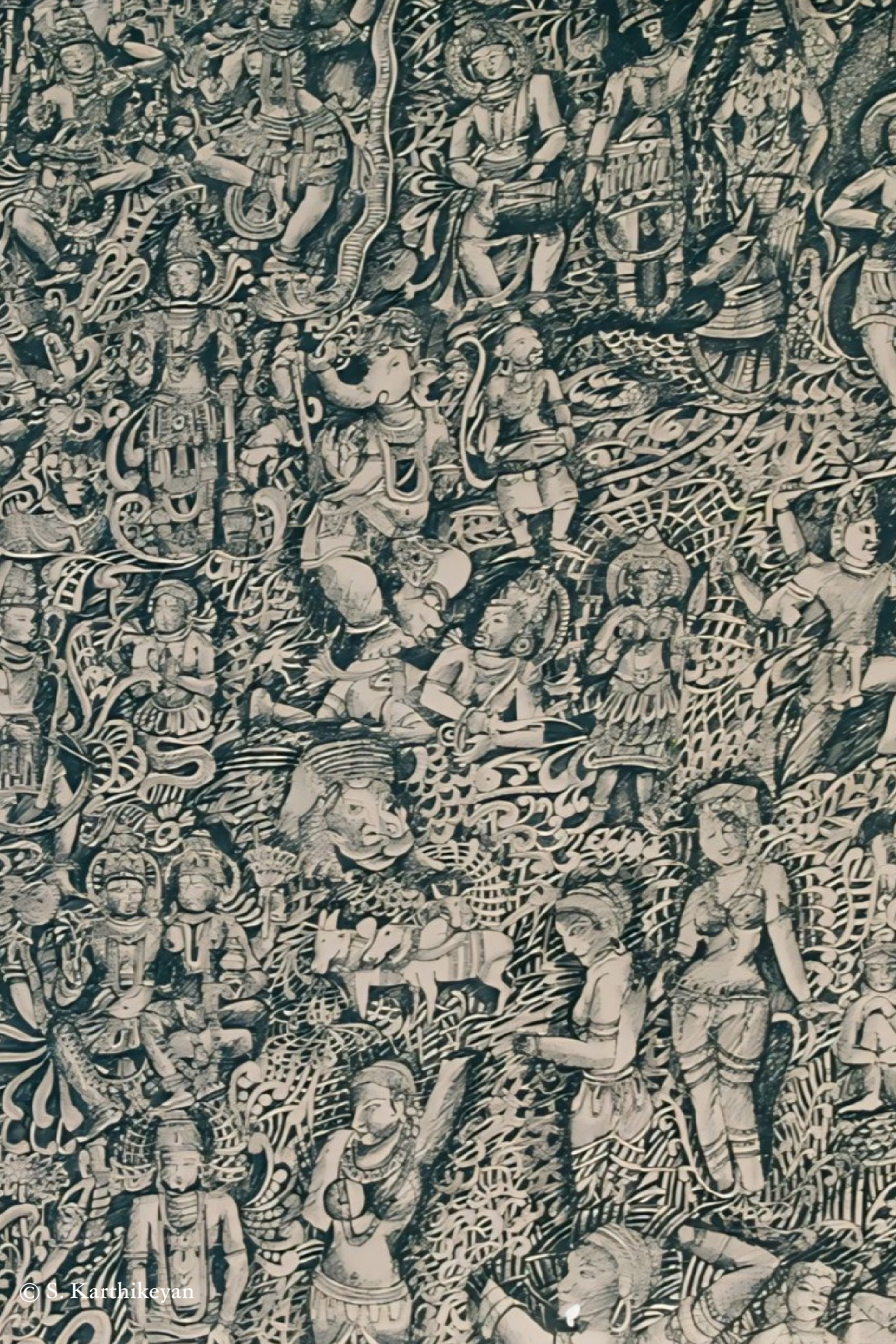
²⁸ Tempie Rajen Shonker, “Shonker,” interviewed by Nikhila Shanker, December 17 2024 (00:52).

²⁹ Das, interview, 53:50.

evening tea. They speak to the inescapable melancholia that consumes those who step foot on foreign land. For this reason, I hope to carry this story not only in my documentation of it but in the person I become.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, Ishtiyag, and Bilal Ahmad Khan. "Indian Migrants in Gulf States: Issues and Problems." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 72, no. 4, October-December, 2011, pp. 1143–64.
- Das, K.T. "Das." Personal Interview, Recorded by Nikhila Shanker, 15 December, 2024.
- Kalathil, Pushpan. "Kalathil." Message Transcripts, Uploaded by Nikhila Shanker on 17 December, 2024.
- Prakash, B. A. "Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 50, December 12-18, 1998, pp. 3209–13.
- Shonker, Tempie Rajen. "Shonker." Personal Interview, Recorded by Nikhila Shanker, 17 December, 2024.
- Zachariah, K.C. and S. Irudaya Rajan. "Kerala Migration Study 2014." *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 6, February 6, 2016, 66–71.





city of soot

Hanzala Mojibi

i come from a city of soot
of soot in drains
of soot in breaths
of soot in coagulated river beds.
i have seen the hearts of citizens
spew nothing but soot.
blood is black here.
i have seen rickshaw pullers
cough up soot as dark sweat
trickles to their rocky knees.
my city sleeps under a blanket of soot
that showers over the minds
of two anna politicians
roaming around under self-attested cars.
when soot collects on them
they summon soot draped children
to wash what they never could.
one day,
as quick as thought,
this soot will rise from the depths of yamuna,
a raging leviathan ready to loot
the eyes of the bipeds
till this city is left with nothing
but the blind and the blinding soot.

On Caring Lives in Gulshan-E-Sikandarabad

Safina Azeem Qureshi

Introduction

Gulshan-e-Sikandarabad is a neighbourhood nestled behind Ziauddin Hospital in the cantonment area of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. Navigating through the tightly packed streets and houses, you find yourself at the railway tracks, beyond which is Sikandarabad—home to the working-class Pashtun, Punjabi, and Saraiki populations of the city. Most of the houses, which are now structurally weak and old, were constructed in the late 1900s when Pashtun families started investing in the area's business. Since then, the houses have been home to a large proportion of migrants moving in and out of the city for work. Over the years, Gulshan-e-Sikandarabad has grown sporadically, developing into a labyrinth of narrow streets with two and three-story houses, many of which are further divided into single-room accommodations.

Within these homes, multiple families often reside together, sharing a single veranda and restroom while maintaining individual kitchen spaces. It was here that I learned that home exists as both a private and communal space and, within one such house during my research, I began to understand how care, too, exists in this balance. Woven into the daily lives of urban residents and city dwellers, it intersects across and intertwines class, kinship, migration, and gender. Care, in these narratives, emerges not only as an act of personal or familial obligation but as a broader communal process embedded in kinship networks that bridge rural and urban life.

I first arrived in Gulshan-e-Sikandarabad in the winter of 2021, as a budding ethnographer doing independent fieldwork for the first time,

bursting with the idealism of “saving the world one research at a time.” Growing up in the cantonment area of the city, the neighbourhood of Sikandarabad was not entirely foreign to me, owing to the fact that most of the kiosks around the city’s corniche are run by residents of Sikandarabad, due to its proximity to the sea.¹ I would always observe the area from outside, on trips to Ziauddin Hospital or to the public park within the vicinity. However, it remained quite unfamiliar to me for the most part, perhaps even risky to enter, within the larger context of Karachi, a city often unkind to its non-male residents. However, it is this unfamiliarity that has driven me to revisit my conversations with my interlocutors, time and time again, as I think through my own assumptions of care and its entangled presence in our everyday lives. In this paper, I attempt to understand the complexities of care in Sikandarabad and explore how it permeates the daily life of female migrant workers in Karachi.

This paper centers around three women: Shumaila, Aziza, and Khala Jameela.² Throughout my fieldwork, Shumaila’s home was our meeting place, located on the streets nearest to the railway tracks and a central location for all of us to gather. Shumaila’s cousin, Neha, and her husband live next door to Shumaila, while Neha’s mother and Shumaila’s aunt, Khala Jameela, sometimes stays with them when her son is back in Punjab during the summer harvesting season. A little further into the area, near the river, lives Aziza, Shumaila’s childhood friend and sister-in-law.

My first time meeting Khala Jameela was quite foreboding—while most of my interlocutors were in their early thirties at most, Khala Jameela was a wise woman of many years and a bit curt at first. I wasn’t sure if she’d be open to speaking with me, let alone allow me to enter her life as a confidante. Despite dabbling in various ethnographic projects across the province of Sindh throughout the past few years, I

¹ A quick conversation with the adventurous youth of Karachi on where to find the best *hashish* will lead you to Sikandarabad.

² Pseudonyms have been used.

always find myself shy when interacting with older women—an unavoidable sentiment, I suppose, when your questions probe intimate themes of family life that women in South Asia rarely allow themselves to discuss. However, when concluding our first meeting, she told me to call her Khala—a term reserved for maternal aunts—and to write about her as if she were my own. I’m not sure if we can ever write with as much care as our interlocutors bestow us with, but each piece, I hope, is a step in that direction.

The conversations explored reflect these women’s experience of living in Karachi and their memories and reflections on life in the province of Punjab before they migrated. Using ethnographic methods and fieldwork spanning six months, this research started as an undergraduate thesis project in 2021 and, over time, became a collaborative encounter with female domestic workers residing in Gulshan-e-Sikandarabad, as we reflected on their day-to-day negotiations within familial and urban spaces. By centering care as both a method and a subject, this paper explores themes of family life, caregiving, and internal migration.³ It examines how my interlocutors, working as domestic workers in Karachi, navigate and exchange care within their surroundings.

Within the household, we consider the shifting dynamics of working-class families as women gain informal employment, build aspirations, and hold space for their desires. Alongside familial dynamics, we reflect on how homemaking is redefined as their role within the patriarchal family shifts due to their economic mobility. The family shifts and rebalances itself within larger kinship networks of Sikandarabad—another key insight that this paper explores through ideas of supported rural-urban migration. Kinship, broadly referred to as *biraderi*⁴ in Pakistan, works as a support network for families adapting to urban

³ González-Duarte, “Borders of Care: Ethnography with the Monarch Butterfly.”

⁴ As an academic from South Asia, I deliberately refrain from italicizing local languages. Translations are provided when necessary to ensure clarity.

life through communal caregiving. In these networks, we can attempt to answer how care is reciprocated and trickles down from community to family to the individual. What motivates this care practice? In this circulation of care, how do the working-class women of Sikandarabad move within their communal networks and negotiate their own space within the family and beyond? By exploring such questions, the paper attempts to bring forth the nuances that shape the lives of Sikandarabad residents and the complex caring my interlocutors maintain in their everyday lives.

Intersecting Realities: On Caring Attempts of Ethnography

The concept of intersectionality serves as an analytical framework to understand how different facets of our identities intersect to influence our experiences of privilege and discrimination—both relational to our sociocultural contexts. Feminist scholars have underscored the need to consider overlapping social identities to fully comprehend how they might be disadvantaged in relation to others.⁵ Therefore, intersectionality is integral to the analytics of this paper as we attempt to trace the merging aspects of class, ethnicity, age, and cultural factors to distinguish the unique experiences of female domestic workers from generalized narratives of womanhood.

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks notes that the concept of intersectionality highlights how gender is not the sole determinant of a woman's fate, which contradicts the idea of women being a homogenous category.⁶ This perspective enables us to explore how gender and class intersect to shape the "female destiny," particularly for South Asian female domestic workers, who navigate different sociocultural and economic hurdles and are underrepresented within systems of power.⁷ Women's categorization as innate caregivers

⁵ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," *Decolonial Imaginings*.

⁶ hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*.

⁷ Ibid.

affects how their labor in domestic roles is perceived and neglected. In the context of paid domestic work, caregiving is treated as inherent to femininity and thus is undervalued compared to other forms of paid labor.⁸ Arlene Daniel's concept of "invisible work"⁹ addresses how narrowing and restricting the definition of labor to paid tasks underestimates women's contributions to family life and communal care, as our individual work constitutes our status and therefore, identity in society.¹⁰ Of course, this is through the eyes of others but there is a paradox: with female domestic workers upholding a large portion of informal labor in Pakistan, they aren't recognized as participants of the economy due to their work being within the home, even if someone else's.¹¹

Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism* dissects how economic production is regarded as separate from social reproduction under capitalism, relegating the latter to womanhood and unpaid labor, deeming it less valuable.¹² When households participate as consumers, there is an urgency to shift the care work to others, usually migrant workers. Through Fraser's critique, we can contextualize our musings where paid domestic is considered less essential due to its feminine associations even as it is integral to sustaining household and societal functionality. It is affective labor and therefore seen as less important but paid work.

⁸ Shahid, *Silent Voices, Untold Stories*.

⁹ Daniels, "Invisible Work."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In my work during the COVID-19 pandemic with University College London, many families—especially women of the households—highlighted the immense care burden they had to shoulder in the absence of domestic help due to the lockdown imposed by the government of Pakistan. One might question why such a vital 'informal' labor network is not recognized as formal labor, and thus, why workers are not provided benefits (Azeem et al., 2022). The answer, perhaps, lies in the ingrained association between caregiving and femininity, whether paid or unpaid.

¹² Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*.

Julie Brines explores economic dependency within households and its effects on the division of labor within the family. Her gender-neutral framework indicates that the primary earner, or the partner who brings more resources into the household, can “buy out” their share of household contributions and care work, resulting in greater caregiving burdens on the economically dependent spouse, who picks up the share.¹³ This becomes an important point of analysis, discussed later, for us to understand the changing dynamics of familial caregiving in our interlocutors’ lives. In South Asia, scholars such as Chitra Joshi have researched the intimate interactions in working-class neighborhoods and the impact of economic shifts on families, such as the loss of employment of the patriarch. Joshi’s analysis of de-industrialization, and the subsequent unemployment surge for men, explores how women’s entry into domestic work reshapes familial dynamics, sometimes prompting men to attempt to regain control through domestic violence to “save face.” This idea of “saving face,” is to protect against perceived threats to their masculinity which is tied to their ability to provide for their family financially.¹⁴ The anger expressed in private speaks volumes of the struggles faced in public and shifting gender equations. However, as I will explore further, it provides us context of the spheres female domestic workers move within. Additionally, it also paints a picture of the complexities of urban working-class lives.

In “Subaltern Streets: India, 1870-1947,” David Arnold focuses on subaltern spatiality and the idea of the city street as a heuristic device that frames urban subalternity.¹⁵ Modern cities are viewed as being separated from rural life to the extent that, in discourse, subaltern identities are constrained to pre-colonial and colonial temporalities and rural settings. If the subaltern is placed in the city, it is on the outskirts in spaces such as the factory. The shortcoming of this negligence

¹³ Brines, “Economic Dependency, Gender, and the Division of Labor at Home.”

¹⁴ Joshi, “On ‘De-Industrialization’ and the Crisis of Male Identities.”

¹⁵ Arnold, “Subaltern Streets: India 1870-1947.”

overlooks the presence of urban subaltern identities in the cityscape that are different from but just as important as *natural* subalternity that exists in factories and rural settings. Focusing on subaltern geographical transformations, such as my fieldwork site, allows a broadening of conceptual frameworks that account for gendered experiences of informal, unregulated work that is different from the popular idea of the subaltern identity.

This is crucial, as existing literature on labor studies pertaining to the experiences of female domestic workers in Pakistan focuses on issues of class and work experiences while neglecting the multi-faceted experiences of these women in terms of gender, ethnicity, and age. This must be rectified by taking an intersectional, care-oriented ethnographic approach to labor studies in conjunction with women's studies—one that does not rely solely on archives and surveys to highlight the struggles of working-class women but instead allows them to choose issues they wish to bring attention to.¹⁶ An intersectional, ethnographic approach rectifies this oversight by centering the voices of working-class women, allowing them to speak and for ethnographers to listen and convey.

Donna Haraway's concept of feminist objectivity as "situated knowledge" deconstructs the notion of objectivity in the social sciences, calling instead for a localized, individualistic construction of knowledge and one's surroundings.¹⁷ This became central to the interviews I conducted during fieldwork for this research project, receiving care from the women I interacted with. The ethnographic encounter, therefore, is an avenue to co-create careful knowledge,

¹⁶ As a history major, during my undergraduate degree, I had to fulfill the obligation of going to the archives to begin my research. The Pakistan Institute of Labour, Education, and Research (PILER) archives are located on the outskirts of Karachi and have been maintaining documents pertaining to labor in Pakistan since 1982. However, to my disappointment but not surprise, they barely hold any information or statistics about female domestic workers in Pakistan. An occasional pamphlet on women's rights and the factory would find its way to me through the dust but nothing concrete revealed itself to me.

¹⁷ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

learning from our interlocutors. Furthermore, Chandra Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship in "Under Western Eyes" discusses the problematic categorization of women in third-world countries under a singular "Third World Woman" image that homogenizes their identity as singular.¹⁸

Similarly, in "Towards a Decolonial Feminism," Maria Lugones proposes a caring, decolonial feminist framework that centers the experiences of those it claims to represent instead of pushing all women under the category of the "global South."¹⁹ Understanding that the researcher is an outsider by virtue of their positionality, entering the field requires continuous self-reflection. Therefore, my ethnographic practice was situated between acknowledging being a middle-class, privileged individual in Karachi but also a woman entering an unfamiliar public space and having to negotiate ideas of piety and honor. This meant taking into consideration how I dress, speak, and move in the space without appearing too *liberal* but also holding my ground as a researcher there for work. This reflexivity pushed me to ensure my presence was as minimally intrusive as possible and avoided scrutiny from neighbors towards my interlocutors.

In *Matters of Care*, María Puig de la Bellacasa provides us with a definition of care in which "Care is everything that is done (rather than everything that 'we' do) to maintain, continue, and re-pair 'the world' so that all (rather than 'we') can live in it as well as possible."²⁰ This definition allows us to reimagine care through a lens that is not centered around our own experience. It decenters care and expands it to all human and non-human experiences. Therefore, as an ethnographer, it is crucial to move beyond internalized categories of what the experience of womanhood is. I have spent many years

¹⁸ Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*.

¹⁹ Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism."

²⁰ Puig de La Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

unlearning ideas of womanhood introduced to me through religion, culture, family, romantic partners, and anyone who stakes a claim on women around them. This involves dressing how I want in a social context that understands modesty through clothing. I have never covered my head growing up, and I thought I never would. However, in my research work, I have learned how important it is to present yourself in a familiar way to the women you're collaborating with, sometimes requiring me to be more thoughtful about my appearance.

I spent my first week of fieldwork, in early October, just standing on the street adjacent to Sikandarabad. I have no shame admitting now, a few years later, that I was intimidated by the prospect of approaching strangers in the middle of their commute. Back home, we often joke that the hot climate of Karachi results in short-tempered individuals that don't enjoy being bothered. You'd be smart not to bother anyone, I thought, but my one week of staring did result in some good things. I knew I would cover my head as I saw all the other women did—not for anyone's sake except to avoid upsetting the men in the lives of my interlocutors. It's a little funny game we would play—they know I don't cover my head outside of Sikandarabad but they appreciate that I don't leave women in their families with ideas of modernity. Anyway, I covered my head and walked to a group of women about to cross the street towards the neighborhood. I asked if they were working nearby, and one of them was kind enough to entertain me while the others giggled. Partly embarrassed and partly exhilarated, I told her what I was doing there, and she told me to come find her the next day in the morning if I still wanted to talk. This was the first time I met Shumaila.

From then on, we spent the next month walking to and from her workplace back home to Sikandarabad. Her friends eventually took a liking to me, and we'd spend our walks discussing the day-to-day updates about our lives, the city, and the weather. This decision to walk with them stemmed from my decision that I do not disrupt their routine in any way, at least as much as possible. By November, I had

met ten Punjabi married women between the ages of 20-60 who were related to each other through their kin network. They all belonged to Khanewal, Punjab, lived in Sikandarabad, and worked as domestic workers. Eventually, Shumaila offered to open her home to us, and we began gathering in small groups for longer periods of time. Five women were a permanent part of our gathering and the remaining would come whenever their schedules and responsibilities allowed. Our meetings would happen on Sunday, their day off, and we built a routine of drinking tea and snacking while discussing what it was that brought them to Karachi and what it is that makes them stay.

Caring Conjuality and Rest

Shumaila moved to Karachi with her husband shortly after giving birth to her second daughter, determined to make a better living in the city away from her in-laws, who were waiting for a grandson to grace their lives. They were married in 2008, when she was 16 years of age, and lived with her husband's family for a few years. The lack of financial success back in Punjab encouraged the couple to seek work in Karachi through the help of their relatives already settled in Sikandarabad. They have four daughters now, the youngest being 3 years of age at the time, whom the other three look after alongside tending to household chores, while Shumaila works in a nearby middle-class neighborhood as domestic help. Her husband, although previously employed at a well-known private hospital in Clifton as a janitor, lost his livelihood during COVID-19. The quarantine period allowed him to stay home with the children and pick up daily wage work in marbling and painting houses. Eventually, he found a nighttime shift as a security guard, which ensured he was at home in Shumaila's absence.

While her elder daughters tend to clean during the day, Shumaila comes back home and looks after the kitchen, as she's uncomfortable with her daughters around the stove. Her husband looks after the children while she cooks and, on the weekends, takes on the responsibility of cleaning the house and doing the laundry. He is

popular amongst the neighborhood women for his involvement in domestic work. In one of our gatherings, Shumaila mentioned in passing that her husband had been doing laundry before I arrived, to which her neighbor Rufayda remarked: *...mai apni betiyon ko bhi bolti hun, mamu [ki] itni achi adat hai* (“I tell my daughters as well, that uncle has such a nice habit”).

Like the other women, Shumaila walked to and from work. After her third pregnancy, she started experiencing knee pain. This makes it difficult for her to go up and down the stairs of her living portion, unless necessary, so her husband is in charge of buying the household necessities and running errands. Once, as we discussed domestic life, Shumaila briefly mentioned the role guilt played in ensuring her husband does his part at home as she is doing his part outside the house by working. In sharing these experiences, Shumaila provided me with the reasoning behind her husband's active and unusual role as a caregiver:

...bahar ka ham logon ko karna nahi chahiye wese toh karte hain ham log na, apne mardon ke liye karte hain na, woh ehsaas karte hain, bahar ka bhi karti hai, ghar ka bhi karti hai...toh woh karte hain, karna bhi chahiye, ghar ka [kaam] karna chahiye (“We shouldn’t have to work outside but we do it, for our men, so they feel that she does outside work and housework...so they do it, they should do housework”).

These instances were my first joyful experience of the uncertain aspect of fieldwork—a space for no assumptions. I would be lying if I said I didn’t hold a bias when it comes to familial caregiving in Pakistan, where male family members don’t participate in housework—but I had to correct myself. Although we might believe that in Pakistan, caregiving is primarily carried out by female family members, Shumaila’s example broadens our understanding of shifts in cultural norms across class lines. Additionally, when I would ask Shumaila about activities she indulges in for herself, she would smile and tell me that she most looks forward to staying home on Sunday and sleeping till eight in the morning instead of her usual routine of waking up at

sunrise. Quite excitedly, she added that she had been learning embroidery through YouTube videos and would soon make me a handkerchief. She proceeded to show me a floral design she had been working on and was curious what I thought about the colour palette. Her routine of learning embroidery at night after her children and husband sleep is her time of relaxation.

Among Shumaila's relatives in Sikandarabad is her childhood friend, Aziza, who moved to Karachi a few years before her. They studied in the same school back in Punjab and grew up living close to each other. Aziza played a vital role in convincing Shumaila to get married, as Aziza was already married into the same family to Shumaila's brother-in-law. They are friends and sisters-in-law, who now live a fifteen-minute walk from each other in Sikandarabad, a place far away from their life in Punjab. Aziza's husband is also a daily-wage worker while Aziza cleans houses in the same building as Shumaila. Unlike Shumaila, Aziza and her husband's motivation to move to Karachi was solely to find work opportunities. They had been encouraged by Aziza's parents to do so, who already lived in Karachi for some time. As both partners financially contribute to the household, they try to equally participate in the chores. Aziza prefers cleaning up the house while her husband has taken the responsibility of cooking their meals, doing laundry, and tending to the children in her absence. Again, this is happening within a larger culture where masculinity is undermined if men participate in household work. Aziza spends her one day off from work at home and occasionally visits Shumaila or her brother, who lives next to Shumaila.

Around then, Aziza had just stopped training to become a midwife after practicing for some time. She had always wanted to become a dai ("midwife"), and after moving to Karachi seventeen years ago, she had learned of a woman in Sikandarabad who ran her practice within her private house. Eager to learn, Aziza convinced the lady to take her under her wing and teach her the craft. Aziza, excited whenever we discuss this, finds pleasure in accomplishing her childhood dream and

occasionally helps administer injections to her relatives as there is no free clinic in their vicinity. She hoped to return to her dai practice when things were financially more stable for them, even if it was going to take some time.

In our conversations surrounding the city and leisure, I would ask Shumaila and Aziza about what they enjoy doing in Karachi when they want to relax. During the festival of Eid, in May, Shumaila's family went to Seaview—her first visit—with Aziza's family and their other relatives. She insisted that she hadn't seen the rest of Karachi because staying at home is better and provides sukoon ("rest"). Aziza feels the same, letting me in on a deal between her husband and her, where he takes the children out so she can get some time to herself at home. Shumaila and Aziza enjoy seeking rest within the household space and indulging in the hobbies they like.

These instances are only a glimpse into the lives of the women who leave their homes to work when the financial burden of the city cannot be uplifted by the patriarch alone. In both vignettes, certain similarities emerge. Spousal caregiving is present to account for the women exiting their homes and taking up paid work. Previous studies on working-class lives have concluded that households within such neighborhoods value traditional gendered roles and the patriarchal hierarchy even if women work outside their homes.²¹ However, my interlocutors show that this trend is shifting to accommodate female aspirations and changing family roles. Helene Lawson in "Gender Inequality in the Manual Working Class" establishes the shift in gender roles within families with employed mothers. She argues that the imposed requirements of financial burden allow working-class families to move away from tradition and create their own routines.²² This means that caregiving does not have to remain a feminine role and can be taken up by the masculine patriarch, as seen in the case of Aziza and Shumaila: their husbands were willing to step up and get involved with

²¹ Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*.

²² Lawson, "Gender Equality in the Manual Working Class."

domestic work. Such a finding undermines the assumption that the female body is rooted in biological and intrinsic roles of care-work. It shows that caregiving is need-dependent and constantly shifting, such as in the case of migrant working-class families, who organize care practices according to their capacity. It also introduces questions surrounding the class-based approach to caregiving, where middle-class bodies are a central lens to understanding the body within familial structures.

Naomi Gerstel and Sally Gallagher argue that masculine caregiving is not a substitute but acts as complementary to feminine caregiving.²³ This is important to acknowledge, as we observe that although Aziza and Shumaila's partners participate in household work, the two women must stay involved and are not entirely exempt. In this manner, we can argue that perhaps masculine caregiving is defined by socioeconomic factors but also acts on the premise that some form of female caregiving must exist. In *Oaxaca in Motion*, Sandoval-Cervantes discusses how internal migration has shaped and altered ideas about masculinity and femininity. Using the phrase "masculine familiarity of work," Sandoval-Cervantes discusses how masculinity is constructed within specific family settings—it is defined within the home and in relation to family members present. This provides an avenue to build a "hybrid masculinity," and therefore provides them social legitimacy by reclassifying womanly activities as manly.²⁴ Through this argument, we can assess how in the absence of financial social legitimacy, female domestic workers' spouses acquire legitimacy by participating in household work as a way of saving face.

This analysis, in reference to my time in Sikandarabad, highlights how caregiving across generations remains a gendered concern and highlights the role of guilt—as Shumaila pointed out in why her husband participates at home. Such findings complicate our

²³ Gerstel and Gallagher, "Men's Caregiving: Gender and the Contingent Character of Care."

²⁴ Sandoval-Cervantes, *Oaxaca in Motion*.

understanding of caregiving, as it's not solely defined by gender or class but also by individual perspectives. Caregiving, enacted by the two women and their partners, also leads us to wonder how rest is negotiated. Shumaila and Aziza took up activities they desired and used the time spent learning them as self-care and space for themselves. This, of course, is in addition to their desire to spend time alone at home on their terms, free of housework.

Female domestic workers, like other laborers, are exploited under capitalism through the utilization of their bodies. Choosing to relax the body and pause feminine caregiving or capitalist work is a radical act of self-care. In "Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation," Altheria Caldera discusses the political act of choosing to pause capitalist work as a form of self-care. She states that self-care—which in the case of Aziza and Shumaila can be actual rest or hobbies—is vital in rejecting the complicity of our body in our destruction in society.²⁵ Similarly, Bianca Williams writes, through the lens of emotional transnationalism, how everyday acts of community building can also become acts of care.²⁶ Although the focus in these texts is on the experiences of black women, I believe this idea can be expanded to the South Asian working-class women's body that has to engage in exploitative work for self-sustenance and sustenance of the family. Caldera argues that self-care and women's leisure must resist the popular capitalistic idea of self-indulgence by rejecting care accessible only to the elite and privileged.²⁷ Aziza and Shumaila enact this praxis in their imaginations of caring for themselves alongside caring for others by nourishing their desires through what is accessible to them.

Kinship Networks and Migration

Outside the immediate family, my interlocutors engage with and live amongst their relatives who were either present in Sikandarabad and

²⁵ Caldera, "Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation."

²⁶ Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

²⁷ Caldera, "Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation."

Karachi before they arrived or migrated here after them. These kinship networks have played a vital role in the trajectories of the women I spent time getting to know in matters of marriage and troubles of city life. Consequently, these relations become an exchange of care and emotional support. The close setting of the area and living arrangements ensure everyone is always connected, which also allowed us to gather weekly to hold our discussions. For each of the women, the presence of their extended family has impacted them in unique ways. In providing care and support to their extended family, the individual is alongside negotiating the care that they reserve for themselves.

In rural Punjab, kinship relations are not only markers of one's biological relations but also impact their economic and personal prosperity. In "Kinship in West Punjab Villages," Hamza A. Alavi discusses the importance of kinship systems in defining social organization and loyalties in the rural settings of West Punjab, akin to the role of caste in other cultures. Central to this structure is the idea of *biraderi*, into which one is either born or married. It can be understood as a collection of related families and households.²⁸ The author explains that the *biraderi* is indefinite in size as the linkage between individuals is of common descent—irrespective of the number of generations that have passed. The genealogical depth of recognition in a *biraderi* depends on physical distance and memory, with social interaction keeping the *biraderi* intact. Owing to advanced technology and access to cell phones in current times, staying connected with one's *biraderi* over more considerable distances has become easier. In such a situation, we can think of what Alavi refers to as a "biraderi of participation," with households from the *biraderi* in several villages and, in our case, different cities.²⁹ The women I engaged with are related to each other through such a *biraderi*, hailing from Khanewal, Punjab.

²⁸ Alavi, "Kinship in West Punjab Villages."

²⁹ Ibid.

In addition to maintaining affiliation through memory and across distances, another feature of kinship networks—or diasporic kin in Sikandarabad’s case—is the economic functions it plays in the lives of individuals from these families.³⁰ The kin network relays the role of authority and leadership onto a member of the biraderi whose decisions are upheld by the community, thereby transforming individual choices into collective and mutually discussed ones.³¹ These can be decisions concerning marriage, financial choice, and family disputes; failure to comply imposes the risk of ostracization. For Shumaila, Aziza, and Khala Jameela, alongside others, similar economic changes were facilitated through their biraderi, with the presence of relatives in Karachi helping their transition from the village to the city.

A 2009 report, “Migration and Small Towns in Pakistan,” discusses the rural-urban migration within Pakistan, with 13% of migrants moving to Karachi, a mega-city. Socioeconomic struggles in the village and lack of opportunities for their offspring emerge as the reasons behind the migration of families.³² The interviews conducted for the report highlighted that the process of migration is supported by relatives already settled in the city. They help the migrants find jobs through their contacts and provide accommodation within their homes in the katchi abadi (“informal neighborhood”) until a vacant accommodation nearby can be located.³³

The same pattern emerges in the case of Sikandarabad, where the participants of this study settled down in the area with their relatives’ help. In this manner, their biraderi system remained intact and supported its members in attaining economic mobility. Khala Jameela,

³⁰ Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

³¹ Gazdar and Mohmand, “Kinship as a Traditional Social System.”

³² Raza and Hasan, “Rural—Urban Migration.”

³³ Ibid.

Shumaila's maternal aunt, moved to Karachi nearly twenty years ago—the first amongst the group, with her husband and four children. Her motivation was to build a better life for her family by engaging in paid work alongside her husband. After her husband passed away a few years back, her son insisted she live with him and migrate occasionally back to Khanewal, during the harvesting season. However, Khala Jameela chose to stay in Karachi with her two married daughters and now moves between her three children.

Khala Jameela's presence in Karachi paved the way for Aziza, Shumaila, and their other relatives to move to Karachi. Belonging to the same biraderi, she encouraged Aziza and her husband to take the step of leaving their village and helped them find accommodation and work eight years ago. Shumaila followed suit with her family and stayed with Khala Jameela for their first few months in the city. Khala Jameela's actions are not unusual, considering what Arif Hasan or Hamza Alavi tell us about migration and kinship. However, we can understand her intentions as guided by the practice of care. In welcoming and encouraging people, Khala Jameela established a reciprocity that Shumaila and Aziza both have participated in.

Since moving to Karachi, they proudly shared that each year at least once or twice they welcome extended relatives to stay with them till they find another residence or paid work. In "Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship," Veena Das looks at the biological and social aspects of kinship in Punjabi communities. In discussing social kinship, Das comments on the idea of *sharam* ("shame") and *haya* ("decency"), or the loss of face if the moral rules of the biraderi are breached.³⁴ In this manner, individual and familial behavior revolves around these moral codes of *duniyadari* ("ways of the world") to ensure one's duty to their biraderi is not shirked. However, I believe this morality also invokes a sense of obligatory care within the individual in terms of what they owe to their kin.

³⁴ Das, "Masks and Faces."

Sandoval-Cervantez discusses how kinship and social networks provide female family members social legitimation when internally migrating without male supervision.³⁵ Although, in our case, women have mostly migrated to Karachi after marriage, Khala Jameela represents an interesting intersection of feminine support while also upholding kinship. She is the matriarch in this wide network of Sikandarabad, enabling younger women to internally migrate in Pakistan while maintaining social legitimacy, due to her older age as well as their marital status.

Care theory and ethics have tried to bring together the concepts of “caring about” and “caring for,” which revolve around the difference between concern and action. Maurice Hamington discusses the implications of conjoining these two ideas of care into a singular practice of care in “The Will to Care: Performance, Expectation, and Imagination.”³⁶ Performing care as actions towards others integrates it into our identity and our morality, which we enact in front of society and its criticisms. He discusses how caring is actualized through our actions when we “do” something for the people around us.³⁷ We can, therefore, imagine care practice as a component of the individual’s identity within their biraderi, extending their morality out of an imaginative state. In a kinship setting, care is not contained within the household or towards oneself but is also extended to communal relatives—interconnected and interdependent.³⁸ This form of caregiving cannot be categorized as that which we might perform toward friends or colleagues but is as intimate as that which we carry out for loved ones. There are no predefined or clear boundaries in a biraderi that might distinguish between the household and the extended family.

³⁵ Sandoval-Cervantes, *Oaxaca in Motion*.

³⁶ Maurice, “The Will to Care: Performance, Expectation, and Imagination.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The Care collective, *The Care Manifesto*.

Conclusion

The stories of Aziza, Shumaila, and Khala Jameela reveal the intricate web of care that holds together families and communities of Sikandarabad, helping us to expand our ideas of caregiving beyond typical notions of domestic roles. In a place like Sikandarabad, where people live closely intertwined lives, caregiving transcends individual households, creating a shared social fabric that incorporates the economic and emotional support systems within their biraderi. The experience of migration from rural Punjab to urban Karachi also adds another layer, as kinship networks become vital for navigating city life and transforming it into collective endeavors under diasporic conditions.

These dynamics of care reflect the values surrounding kinship and family within South Asia, where one's responsibilities often extend beyond immediate family to the biraderi, which serves as both a support network and a moral structure. Khala Jameela, for instance, becomes a matriarchal figure in this setting, providing not only physical space and resources but also a sense of legitimacy for younger women in her surroundings. Her role, akin to the community authority figures described in rural kinship studies, underscores how female kin assume caring leadership, offering support and guidance to others. Here, care embodies a relational practice, one that fosters continuity across generations alongside evolving gender roles. Through this lens, we observe how care is expressed in diverse ways—caring for self, for extended family, and for one's community, which reflects broader structures of class and gender that regulate domestic labor and caregiving in South Asia. These expressions of care are not strictly defined by role or responsibility but are instead dynamic negotiations shaped by the specific socio-economic and cultural contexts of each family.

The division of care within and outside the home is thereby both fluid and context-dependent. Our interlocutors show us how caregiving practices connect self-care and familial duty within a communal framework, revealing how deeply embedded caregiving is within their identities. Care in Sikandarabad becomes a practice that is both intimate and public, where private affections and communal obligations converge, making “home” a space that is at once personal and shared, a blend of individual autonomy and collective interdependence. In unraveling these personal stories, we ultimately position ourselves to enrich definitions of care as a complex phenomenon that sustains itself through continuous interaction with families and communities. It isn’t a static act but a lived practice.

Bibliography

- Alavi, Hamza A. "Kinship in West Punjab Villages." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6, no. 1 (January 1972): 1–27.
- Arnold, David. "Subaltern Streets: India 1870-1947." In *Subaltern Geographies*, edited by Jo Sharp, 36–57. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019.
- Azeem, Safina, Shama Dossa, Asiya Jawed, Ayesha Khan, Faiza Mushtaq, and Mahnoor Mahar. "Pakistan: Families in Karachi Recalibrating Care during COVID-19." In *Family Life in the Time of COVID*, edited by Katherine Twamley, Humera Iqbal, and Charlotte Faircloth. UCL Press, 2023.
- Brah, A. *Decolonial Imaginings: Intersectional Conversations and Contestations*. London: Goldsmith Press, 2022.
- Brines, Julie. "Economic Dependency, Gender, and the Division of Labor at Home." *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 3 (November 1994): 652–88.
- Caldera, Altheria. "Challenging Capitalistic Exploitation: A Black Feminist/Womanist Commentary on Work and Self-Care." *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 3 (2020): 707–16.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241.
- Daniels, Arlene K. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987): 403–15.
- Das, Veena. "Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 10, no. 1 (January 1976): 1–30.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet - and What We Can Do about It*. London New York (N.Y.): Verso, 2022.

- Gazdar, Haris, and Shandana Khan Mohmand. "Kinship as a Traditional Social System." *Social Structures in Rural Pakistan*. Asian Development Bank, 2007.
- Gerstel, Naomi, and Sally K. Gallagher. "Men's Caregiving: Gender and the Contingent Character of Care." *Gender and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001): 197–217.
- González-Duarte, Columba. "Borders of Care: Ethnography with the Monarch Butterfly." *American Ethnologist Online*, 2022.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. 4. pr. Boston: South End Pr, 1988.
- Joshi, Chitra. "On 'De-Industrialization' and the Crisis of Male Identities." *International Review of Social History* 47, no. S10 (November 2002): 159–75.
- Lawson, Helene M. "Gender Equality in the Manual Working Class." *Race, Gender & Class* 2, no. 2 (1995): 127–38.
- Lugones, María. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–59.
- Maurice, Hamington. "The Will to Care: Performance, Expectation, and Imagination." *Hypatia* 25, no. 3 (2010): 675–95.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*, 1984.
- Puig de La Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. Posthumanities 41. Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota press, 2017.
- Raza, Mansoor, and Arif Hasan. "Rural—Urban Migration." *Migration and Small Towns in Pakistan*, 2009, 18–27.

- Rubin, Lillian B. *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.
- Sandoval-Cervantes, Iván. *Oaxaca in Motion: An Ethnography of Internal, Transnational, and Return Migration*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022.
- Schensul, Jean J., and Margaret D. LeCompte. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach*. 2. ed. Ethnographer's Toolkit 3. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013.
- Shahid, Ayesha. *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: Women Domestic Workers in Pakistan and Their Struggle for Empowerment*. 1. publ. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- The Care collective, ed. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. London New York (N.Y.): Verso books, 2020.
- Williams, Bianca C. *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Undercover

Samia Naqvi

My friend told me
Her therapist told her
Our bodies remember.

My *Ami* saw my friends,
They walk with chests out
These girls I don't like—

It was thus decided
Nostrils up in diagonals
Besharam, dripping disgust

So shoulders hunch forward
Find their forever shape
I don't stand straight.

My friend told me
Her therapist told her
Our bodies remember.

On a soft summer noon
The long table is set
Such a wise girl

Her *dupatta* conceals
All those troublesome curves
Pats on my back—

It was thus revered
How I drape, how I dress
I lost my silhouette.

My friend told me
Her therapist told her
Our bodies remember.

WAPDA and shedding load
Those long sweltering nights
Her sheets don't slide

Such haya she has
How she honours herself
Even in sleep—

It was thus upheld
The trait that makes me great
I sleep as I'm awake.

My friend told me
Her therapist told her
Our bodies remember.

On memories, they say
The new replace the old
Repurposing, I'm told—

It is thus agreed
When you think a lot
So you stop the thought

Patiently, I wait
Bones straight, naked I greet
One day I will sleep, when I sleep.

My friend told me
Her therapist told her
Our bodies remember.

The Jamatkhana: An Institution That Aided Integration

Anah Ibrahim

Abstract

This paper explores how jamatkhanas, as a social and religious physical institution, aided the integration of early Ismaili migrants in Canada from the 1960s onwards, with an emphasis on the 1960s to the 1980s. The study focuses on Khoja Ismailis, the descendants of Hindu converts to Nizari Ismailism, primarily originating from Gujarat and Kutch.¹ In the 19th century, Aga Khan III, the Imam of the time, encouraged migration of Ismailis from India to East Africa to pursue more favorable economic and social conditions.² Within the contemporary Ismaili tradition, Khoja is a self-identifying term that denotes a certain culture, language, and tradition that largely honors the legacy of South Asian traditions sustained throughout the history of the Khoja community. The distinction between Khoja Ismailis and other Ismaili traditions is critical for understanding the emergence of Ismailis in Canada, as Khojas have influenced the cultural practices of jamatkhanas today. The influence of South Asian culture on the practice of Khoja culture in Canada has proved inseparable from early Ismaili settlements in Canada. Regardless, Khojas and other Ismaili cultural traditions are unified under the same theological belief in the Ismaili Imamate.

The main sources of information for this assignment were collected through a series of interviews with Khoja Ismailis, who migrated from East Africa to Canada between 1960 and 1980. The diversity of

¹Azim Nanji, Khojas (Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2022).

²Azizeddin Tejpar, *The Migration of Indians to Eastern Africa: A Case Study of the Ismaili Community, 1866–1966* (University of Central Florida 2019), iii.

experiences documented through these oral histories highlights the individuality of the Ismaili migration journey. These testimonies emphasize the function of jamatkhanas as critical to the integration of early Ismaili settlement in Canada by facilitating a social space that emulated culture, offered stability, and formed a community underpinned by kinship networks.

Pre-context: Ismailis, Jamat, and the Jamatkhana

The Shia Nizari Ismaili Muslims, more commonly referred to as Ismailis, are a minority sect of Shia Islam. Theologically, Ismailis believe in the Imamatus, the continuous hereditary succession of Prophet Muhammad, to the current and 50th living Imam, the Aga Khan V (commonly referred to as Aga Khan). The Ismaili Imamatus (office of the Imam)³ is understood as the entity that represents the succession of Prophet Muhammad.⁴ According to the Imamatus, as the current Imam, the Aga Khan “not only leads in the interpretation of the faith but also in the effort to improve the quality of life of his community and of the societies in which it lives.”⁵ Beyond his spiritual role, the Imam is also seen as a guiding figure to ensure the safety and security of Ismailis worldwide.

The jamatkhana, translating to “assembly house,”⁶ is the congregational space of worship for Ismailis. Historically, jamatkhanas were used principally as a site of worship for expressions of devotional and pious practices. In the contemporary context, jamatkhanas have evolved as a multifunctional institution, serving the religious, educational, and social needs of the broader Ismaili Community.⁷ As a congregational space, the jamatkhana has become the center of

³ Nanji.

⁴ The Ismaili Imamatus, Introduction: The Ismaili Imamatus.

⁵ Aga Khan Development Network, Ismaili Imamatus (2024).

⁶ Farhad Draftary and Azim Nanji, “What Is Shi’a Islam?” (The Institute of Ismaili Studies n.d.).

⁷ Karim Jiwani, “Muslim Spaces of Piety and Worship” (The Ismaili-UK, 2006).

socialization within the Ismaili community. It has fostered the exchange of knowledge, traditions, and practices on both a religious and social level, pivotal for the formation of kinship networks. The term *jamat* is used to refer to the global Ismaili community, similar to the use of *ummah* to represent the global Muslim community.

Jamatkhanas' contemporary emphasis on both the social and religious practices of the community is reflected in the deliberate inclusion of social halls in almost all purpose-built jamatkhanas across the world. As designated spaces for communal interactions, social halls facilitate interpersonal exchanges that strengthen kinship networks and community ties, a critical aspect of the fabric of the Ismaili community. Celebrations facilitated within social halls often reflect the culture of the jamatkhana through foods, languages, and music.

Early Ismailis in Canada

Ismaili migration to Canada before the 1970s was limited and dispersed, with the first recorded Ismaili, Safar Ali Ismail, having settled in Ottawa in 1952.⁸ Early Ismaili migrants sought out different opportunities in Canada, including Nyaz Jetwani, one of the first Ismailis in Toronto. On June 23, 1962, Nyaz, his wife Gulzar, and their newborn baby traveled from India to Toronto in pursuit of greater economic opportunities.⁹ Nyaz, who had studied in India's British School System, was welcomed into the workforce, securing a job at Ontario Hydro, where his education and language proficiency were recognized. Despite his professional success, Canada's social and cultural conditions were not as pluralistic as he had anticipated, producing a sense of melancholia rooted in a yearning to return to what was familiar and comfortable.

⁸ Salina Kassam and Rizwan Mawani, *Jamatkhanas in Canada: Architecture, Identity and Community* (exhibition).

⁹ Nyaz Jetwani and Sabina Jetwani, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 13, 2024 (47:38).

Moving to Canada without a social network became a barrier to integration and happiness, evidently producing melancholia for Gulzar Jetwani. Gulzar's melancholia was rooted in her yearning to return to India, where she "had a good life."¹⁰ Dissatisfied with the social conditions in Canada that did not match her comfort and level of social and economic esteem, migrants like Gulzar had a challenging time adjusting to Canada. In a society where "multiculturalism was not encouraged,"¹¹ many minority migrants were forced to navigate through a discriminatory society while trying to affirm the social and economic opportunities they migrated to Canada for. Sabina, Nyaz, and Gulzar's daughter, recall their mother saying, "If you saw a brown person on the streets, you invited them over to your house."¹² The cultural solidarity between religious and cultural minorities became the social networks that grounded integration. They validated cultural and religious identities that were contested by Canadian society, creating a strong bond rooted in shared experiences. In the absence of an Ismaili community, Nyaz turned to other Muslim communities to affirm his religious identity. Reflecting, Sabina says, "And that's when we were going to other Muslims and saying *namaz* with them. But that's why they had a good relationship with the other Muslim communities because there was nobody here."¹³ The community and acceptance that Nyaz and Gulzar yearned for reinforced the importance and criticality of kinship networks in affirming a sense of comfort and security for migrants. These factors distinguished their experience in Canada from the later Ismaili migrants, highlighting the role of kinship networks in sustaining migration and integration into a normative culture different from their own.

The Jetwani's first encounter with Ismailis in Canada was 15 months after their arrival. While speaking Kutchi (a Gujarati dialect spoken by many Khoja Ismailis) in a grocery store, someone overheard and

¹⁰ Ibid., 10:10.

¹¹ Ibid., 04:53.

¹² Ibid., 04:40.

¹³ Ibid., 1:16:40.

approached them and asked, “*Ismaili ai o*”¹⁴ (Are you Ismaili?). Interactions like this formed the basis of the Ismaili community in the 1960s. As the Ismaili community grew, the first jamatkhana was established in Nyaz Jetwani's living room. The makeshift jamatkhana represented a social and religious congregational space that united Ismailis across the region, where the first Ismaili community in Canada formed, facilitating social exchanges and interactions. Throughout the 1960s, a majority of Ismailis who attended Jetwani's makeshift jamatkhana were students studying under bursaries awarded by the Aga Khan. By 1969, 75 Ismailis attended the Jetwani's jamatkhana, and the progressively increasing attendance forced them to relocate to a larger space. Thus, the first jamatkhana, Coxwell Jamatkhana, was opened.¹⁵

Early jamatkhana were set up primarily in rented school halls, where Ismaili volunteers played an indispensable role in facilitating the religious and social services of the jamatkhana. Nyaz realized that “because he worked for a crown corporation, [he] found out that you could rent a school hall and tax-free.”¹⁶ School halls accommodated the financial and social needs of the Ismaili community, serving as an ideal space that emerged as the foundation of the jamatkhana for the Canadian jamat. Volunteers, including Nyaz, transformed these unconventional spaces into prayer halls, wheeling out carpets and setting up chairs. School halls became a defining feature of jamatkhana in Canada, a common space used to facilitate religious prayers and social interactions for the Ismaili community. However, jamatkhana held in school halls were often only open from Fridays to Sundays, limiting social and religious congregation. The early Ismaili community in Canada lacked the financial resources to rent elaborate spaces, limiting the types of spaces that were accessible to use. As the Ismaili community grew, different spaces opened to encourage the

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:16:15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11:49.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12:39.

social and religious practices of the jamatkhanas, including halls and hotels that held daily prayers.

1972 Ugandan Exodus

On August 4, 1972, Ugandan President Idi Amin issued legislation demanding all Ugandan Asians to leave the country within 90 days. Growing support for an 'Africa for Africa' movement across the country increased anti-Asian sentiments, worsening tensions between Ugandan Asians and Ugandan Africans. Amin's expulsion order affected an estimated 80,000 Ugandan Asians, a significant amount being Ismailis.¹⁷ The threat of Amin's order jeopardized the social standing of Ugandan Asians, who were hierarchically situated between the British and the local Ugandans. Within this system, Asians were typically given greater social, political, and economic opportunities than their African counterparts, creating a complicated social structure that bred anti-Asian hate.

Amidst the social and political tension in Uganda after the declaration of the exodus, the Aga Khan, whose time with Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau at Harvard led to a close relationship, had advocated for the entrance of Ugandan Ismailis into Canada. After previously renouncing their British citizenship, Ugandan Ismailis were rendered stateless after the exodus, where Amin had taken measures to revoke their Ugandan Citizenship.¹⁸ Concerned with the safety of Ugandan Ismailis, the Aga Khan played a critical role in influencing policies that enabled Ismailis to migrate to Canada. The Aga Khan's efforts granted entry to 7000 Ugandan Asians, most of which were Ismaili. Throughout the Aga Khan's Imamate, an emphasis on education drove the establishment of schools in East Africa to increase Ismailis' skills and knowledge. This was particularly useful during the

¹⁷ Bert N. Adam, "The Kin Network and the Adjustment of the Ugandan Asians," *Journal of Marriage and Family* (1974).

¹⁸ Shezan Muhammedi. "Gifts from Amin: Ugandan Asian refugees in Canada." (University of Manitoba Press, 2022), 93.

exodus, where the Aga Khan highlighted the economic and social contributions of the jamat, emphasizing their prospective contributions to civil society in Canada. As a large group of highly skilled migrants, Ismailis became the “desirable migrants” because of their social and economic skills.¹⁹ Their integration into Canada may be partially attributed to the education and skills that they brought, supported through the education provided by the Aga Khan.

The imminent threat of the Ugandan exodus grew the Ismaili Community in Canada overnight. Both the Aga Khan and Ismaili kinship networks played an indispensable role in receiving 6000 Ismailis into Canada, fostering a welcoming space. The Aga Khan had subsidized flights and accommodations for Ugandan Ismailis, prioritizing their safety. He further donated money to Ismaili leaders in Canada to aid settlement efforts.²⁰ Ismailis who had already settled in Canada continuously offered support for new migrants—many of which offered spaces in their homes to new migrants who had nowhere to live. Others helped find jobs and accommodation. The hospitality and willingness to help exhibited by the pre-established Ismaili community in Canada became the backbone of integrative efforts.

Cultural Emulation: The Culture of the Jamatkhana

By the mid-1970s, much of the Ismaili community in Canada were Khojas from East Africa. The 1964 Zanzibar Revolution, the 1967 Arusha Declaration in Tanzania, and the 1972 Ugandan Exodus all became key events that conditioned Ismailis to migrate away from East Africa. The influx of Ismailis after the exodus sustained the Ismaili community in Canada, where Canada became a destination for many East African Khoja Ismailis.

¹⁹ Muhammedi, 94.

²⁰ Jetwani and Jetwani, interview, 12:17.

The migration of Khoja Ismailis from India to East Africa in the early 1800s led to the emergence of a unique subculture. As the Khoja Ismaili community in East Africa grew, so did their interactions with the surrounding culture. Dialectical differences emerged: blended Hindi, Gujarati, and Swahili, cuisines adapted to regional produce, and music and dance from East Africa and India were celebrated within this subculture. Over time, this culture became the definition identity of Khoja East African Ismailis, blending traditions and practices from their rich South Asian heritage with the culture of East Africa. Khoja East African Ismailis shaped the culture of early jamatkhana in Canada following their migration, where the jamatkhana became an emulation of East African Khoja Ismailism, replicating its traditions, practices, and culture. Prayers were recited in Gujarati and Arabic, the same as they had been in Africa. Food during celebratory events consisted of East African delicacies such as Mandazi and Sev. Entertainment in Africa has also influenced music, where a blend of Swahili and Hindi music was played during dandiya-raas celebrations.

The cultural emulation of jamatkhana greatly aided integration into Canadian society for many early Ismaili migrants by representing a sphere that validated and accepted their cultural identity. From the 1960s to the 1980s, many Ismailis, including my Nani and Nana (maternal grandmother and grandfather), Amirali and Rabia Kassam, turned to the jamatkhana as an affirmation of their identity. My Nani and Nana had moved to Canada in either late 1971 or early 1972 (my mother can't recall the specific year) in pursuit of a better education for their children, who were 5 and 3 at the time.²¹ Since the jamatkhana upheld many East African Khoja traditions and customs, they, like many Ismailis, perceived the jamatkhana as not only a reflection of their cultural identity but as a way to honour the country and culture they left behind.

²¹ Salina Kassam, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 18, 2024 (0:12).

The jamatkhana, as an emulation of East African Khoja culture, aided integration by becoming a sphere that affirmed and celebrated their cultural identity. The cultural intolerance of Canada was discriminatory and inflicted race-based barriers to success for minorities. My mother recalls her father, Amirali Kassam, struggling to find a job. She remembers him saying, “The way he would look for work would be by buying a newspaper, gathering coins, and making phone calls to respond to newspaper advertisements. I recall him telling me that as soon as he said, ‘I’m inquiring about the job,’ they recognized his accent wasn’t Canadian. At times he was hung up on or told that the job had been filled.”²² Continuous discrimination in Canada contrasted with the acceptance and validation given inside the jamatkhana. Social barriers experienced by Ismailis outside the jamatkhana demonstrated the indispensable role of jamatkhanas in aiding the settlement of Ismailis, an environment that affirmed their cultural identity when Canada did not.

The jamatkhana allowed Ismaili migrants to settle in Canada without forcing them to forget their customs and cultures. Jamatkhanas facilitate the continuity of Khoja culture, passing it down through generations. My mom arrived in Canada at the age of five and recalls the strong presence of East African Khoja culture in her upbringing. She learned the language, cooked the food, and understood the traditions, not only because it was reinforced at home by her mother, but also because it was celebrated and practiced in the jamatkhana. Thus, jamatkhanas became an integral part of aiding integration because it allowed for the intergenerational preservation of culture that dissolved fears about possible culture erasure.

The emulation of Khoja East African culture in the jamatkhana further eased any sense of melancholia or yearning to go back. The social, political, and economic conditions of East Africa proved unsuitable for the success of Ismailis. Growing anti-Asian sentiments across East

²² Ibid., 5:31.

Africa threatened both the safety and comfort of Ismailis. Jamatkhana became a sphere that allowed Ismailis to maintain their cultural identity, providing a sense of familiarity and comfort. Ismailis were able to celebrate traditions, practices, and ceremonies as they had in East Africa without having to worry about external threats.

Community

All interviewees reflected on the role of the community in sustaining their integration into Canada. Interestingly, the notion of the Ismaili community in this context denotes two separate ideas. On one hand, it refers to the overall Ismaili Community in Canada, united by a shared faith. This notion of the Ismaili community, though it prevails based on faith, fosters community through shared traditions, beliefs, and practices under the umbrella of a singular religious tradition. The second notion of community refers to the sub-communities formed within individual jamaatkhana within the broader Canadian jamaat. Defined primarily through localized and geographical areas, each jamaatkhana offers a unique subculture developed by the traditions, celebrations, and practices of the jamaat within it.

In response to the growing jamaat, the systematic organization of Ismailis in Canada entailed the emergence of smaller jamaatkhana established on a rolling basis. These jamaatkhana were established based on Ismaili settlement and accessibility to public transport.²³ Ismailis attended jamaatkhana based on proximity but also pre-established social ties. For instance, new Ismailis arriving in Canada may have attended the same jamaatkhana as their family, not the one closest to them. Social activities held in respective jamaatkhana, including chai nights, children's programs, and dance shows, encouraged interactions between the jamaat, establishing a sense of community distinct from that jamaatkhana. These bonds were critical in establishing comfort and belonging for Ismailis in their jamaatkhana.

²³ Jetwani and Jetwani, interview, 1:03:58.

Ismaili migrants, including my great-aunt Shamim Ebrahim, reflected on the role of the community in aiding her integration into Canada. Born in Zanzibar, Tanzania, Shamim, along with her brother, had left after the revolution in 1964 to go to school in Lindi, a city inland Tanzania. After her father passed away, they moved to Dar es Salam. They completed their education in a convent school, after which they moved to Pakistan, where Shamim later traveled with my grandparents. She recalls my grandfather (her brother) telling her, “Okay, well, go to London, if they accept you, good, and if they don't you'll just have to come back.”²⁴ The integral role of the Ismaili community was central to Shamim's life. In 1974, Shamim landed in the United Kingdom knowing nobody except her sister and brother-in-law. Communication in the 1970s complicated the migration journey for many migrants, where communication was not as accessible or efficient. Shamim recalls planning with her brother-in-law; he would meet her at the jamatkhana if she were granted entry into the United Kingdom. If she weren't, he would go home. Shamim's flight was delayed, and she arrived in the United Kingdom long after the jamatkhana had closed. She was alone in London at night, with nowhere to stay. She recalls walking to the jamatkhana anyway, where she encountered the last two Ismailis leaving the building who offered her a place to stay.²⁵ Hospitality and generosity are embedded in the fabric of the Ismaili community and were critical in sustaining the migration of early Ismailis into Canada by offering a network of unconditional support.

Recalling her arrival in Canada in 1976, Shamim described the Ismaili community as “very close-knit.”²⁶ The social bonds that formed the basis of tight-knit communities were facilitated within the jamatkhana, where a sense of familiarity was established through both people and practices. Critical to the tight bonds formed within the jamatkhana was

²⁴ Shamim Ebrahim, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 14, 2024 (13:16).

²⁵ Ibid., 14:11.

²⁶ Ibid., 21:08.

the wealth of knowledge and resources critical to sustaining integration. By the mid-1970s, the Ismaili community in Canada had grown substantially, and many had successfully transitioned into Canada. These settled Ismailis would often informally mentor newcomers, supporting them financially, professionally, and emotionally. Support included cooking, childcare, and even assistance in finding housing, schools, and jobs. This system helped to familiarize new Ismaili migrants with the social and cultural climate of Canada. These social interactions provided much-needed support for new migrants by giving them access to knowledge and resources that allowed new Ismailis in Canada to prosper. The jamatkhana became the environment that facilitated this system of informal support and the exchange of knowledge and resources.

The jamatkhana also provided Ismaili migrants with a sense of purpose. Laila Jiwa moved from Tanzania to Canada after the Arusha Declaration, which nationalized many businesses and schools, and challenged the economic aspirations of many Asian-Tanzanians involved in business and trade. After moving her oldest daughter, who was five at the time, to Canada to pursue a better education, Laila traveled between Canada and Tanzania. Finally, in 1974, she permanently moved to Canada with her three children. Her husband joined them in 1975 after closing up his businesses in Tanzania. She recalls that finding her place in jamatkhana gave her a sense of purpose and a role in the community.²⁷

Many Ismailis found their purpose in volunteering within the jamatkhana. Ismailis assumed different roles, from parking officers and cooks to religious education teachers. For many, involvement in jamatkhana signified piety and devotion to their faith. For others, it represented giving back to a community that had given them so much. Regardless of their reason, Ismailis across the country were eager to

²⁷ Laila Jiwa, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 19, 2024 (31:44).

volunteer in jamatkhana. The roles filled by Ismailis in jamatkhana formed the backbone that sustained the Ismaili community in Canada.

For many people, finding their place and purpose in jamatkhana—combined with the kinship bonds they had created and sustained—drove a sense of loyalty to that particular jamatkhana. Loyalty was driven by social exchanges that created a community so “close-knit, that it makes them feel like home.”²⁸ Jamatkhana became a marker of personal identity for members denoting a certain sub-community. Ismaili migrants like Laila recall that despite geographical changes, she consistently went to *her* jamatkhana even though it may not have been the closest to where she lived.

Stability

Jamatkhana, as both an emulation of culture and a facilitator of kinship networks, offered stability in aiding integration into Canada. Many Ismaili migrants, especially those who did not come from Uganda, did not follow a straight path to Canada. Rather, they experienced complicated and extensive journeys, crossing countries and continents, where they sought out social and financial success. Ismaili migrants often endured wars, military regimes, and extreme violence, acclimating to a challenging migration journey. The deteriorating social, economic, and political conditions of many countries that Ismailis had moved to drove migration in the face of continuous instability. Such conditions forced many migrants to move around the world before finding a stable home. Such included my father, Rizwan Ibrahim, who had already moved to four different countries across three continents by the age of nine.

My paternal grandmother and grandfather got married in Mtwara, a small town on the coast of Tanzania. Within the year, they moved from Tanzania to Dhaka, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), in pursuit of

²⁸ Ibid., 31:23.

opportunity, where my father and aunt were born.²⁹ By 1971, the tensions between East Pakistan and West Pakistan had escalated, waging a civil war across East Pakistan. My father reflected on this, saying that “the situation had worsened quite a bit, and [their] lives were in danger, so [his] family had made the decision it was time to get out and leave everything behind. They took whatever they could very quickly and [they] waited at the airport.”³⁰ They relocated to Karachi, in West Pakistan (now Pakistan), from 1971 to 1973; however, as political tensions escalated, Karachi began getting bombed. My grandparents moved to the outskirts of Karachi and sent my father to boarding school in Northern Pakistan, where he spent the next year and a half. His uncle had picked him up from boarding school and, during their trip back to Karachi, informed him that his parents had gone ahead to Europe. Months later, my four-year-old aunt and seven-year-old father were put on a plane, by themselves, to reunite with their parents in Spain. In Spain, my grandfather had hoped to open a bar and make enough money to support his family, but despite continuous efforts, he was not able to open the bar. This unsuccessful pursuit had drained his finances, motivating my grandfather to move him and his family away, and so they ended up in Canada.

Kinship networks were critical for many Ismaili families who migrated to Canada. My grandfather “had been corresponding with a friend of his from Bangladesh, who had also left. They went to England, and then they came to Canada.”³¹ They had been encouraged by his friend to bring his family to Canada, painting it as a land of opportunity. Another close friend of my grandfather had sponsored my father and his family, assisting their migration from Spain to Canada. Ismaili families that lacked the financial resources to sustain migration relied heavily on pre-established kinship networks to fund the move. The willingness of the Ismaili community to assist was largely underpinned

²⁹ Rizwan Ibrahim, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 15, 2024 (1:18).

³⁰ Ibid., 2:56.

³¹ Ibid., 12:15.

by shared experiences of frustration and struggle through extensive migration journeys. These relations helped to ensure the well-being of other Ismaili families in the face of social, economic, and political threats.

Throughout the series of transitionary segments in my father's migration journey, he recalls finding it very challenging to find stability.³² The social, economic, and political conditions of all the places he had moved to proved consistently unstable. Instability had waged war and bombings, created barriers to financial and social success, all acclimating to continuous hardships endured by my father and his family. Coming to Canada provided him and his family the stability they had yearned for. It provided his parents an opportunity to build a life that was sustainable over the long term. Notions of stability and the prospect of success and opportunity aided integration through the support of the Ismaili community had been a catalyst for support. Stability had undermined any desire to go back, considering the hardships my grandparents had overcome. Their decision was solidified by the understanding that what they had left was long gone. My father reflected on the position of his parents and their migration to Canada, "I think they by then they had sort of decided, okay, you know we're here. This is where we are raising our kids. We don't have to worry about the military taking our house, curfews, all that kind of stuff, like all the things that, you know, we take for granted here right, you couldn't take for granted in those places, right? Because it could change in a dime."³³

Many of my grandparent's friends and family had also settled in Canada, where a new notion of culture emerged within the jamatkhana. In this respect, my grandparents became greatly involved in the jamatkhana, taking leading roles in volunteering for the community. Further, the jamatkhana has affirmed their cultural identity by

³² Ibid., 34:59.

³³ Ibid., 47:50.

becoming a center that continues to celebrate their traditions and practices from Africa. The stability and cultural acceptance granted by the Canadian Ismaili Jamat played an indispensable role in aiding the integration of my grandparents into Canadian society.

Institutional Integration

During the early years of the Aga Khans Imamate, he established several institutions and foundations across East Africa to improve the jamat's quality of life. The Aga Khan emphasized the importance of education and active participation in civil society through speeches and public statements. Amongst those institutions were Aga Khan Schools, founded to increase education accessibility for both Ismaili and non-Ismaili citizens across East Africa. These schools adopted a curriculum influenced by the British school system, where graduates obtained diplomas that allowed them to enroll in post-secondary institutions in the West. Bursaries distributed by the Aga Khan further facilitated accessibility to education, allowing lower-income Ismaili students the opportunity to attend post-secondary institutions worldwide. Many Ismaili students attended university in Canada and the United Kingdom, in hopes of returning to East Africa with a higher education.³⁴

In 1967, after receiving a scholarship, Nizar Jiwan arrived in Montreal on his way to Queens University to study engineering. He attended an Aga Khan School in Kampala, Uganda, and had hoped to pursue a post-secondary education in Canada. Nizar remembers the first few days at university being tough because he was alone. However, he easily made friends at university, sustaining his life as a young student in Canada. Nizar, like many Ismailis, was fluent in English, greatly facilitating his integration into Canada, due to his strong understanding, proficiency, and familiarity with the language.

³⁴ Nizar Jiwan, interviewed by Anah Ibrahim, December 19, 2024 (36:58).

It was only after Nizar moved to Toronto that he started getting involved with the Ismaili community. Nizar remembers going to Eglinton Jamatkhana, held at St. Monica Catholic School in Midtown Toronto. After hearing about Eglinton jamatkhana, he went “In order to introduce [himself] to whoever was there.”³⁵ Although integrated into Canada during his time at Queens University, Nizar still sought out the Ismaili community's cultural familiarity.³⁶ Social networks were inherently critical within the jamatkhana to affirm and establish a sense of community. In a country where cultures, traditions, and languages were all very different, jamatkhanas became the single sense of familiarity, through the cultural connection and sense of belonging. Interestingly, Nizar Jiwan introduced himself to Nyaz Jetwani. He recalls Nyaz asking him “‘Where are you staying?’ I said, ‘I don’t have a place to stay’ so he said, ‘You bring your things and you come and stay at my house.’”³⁷ The bond between Nyaz and Nizar started through social interaction in Eglinton Jamatkhana but became critical for the future of Ismaili Institutions in Canada.

The Ismaili Council in Canada was formally established in 1973³⁸ in response to the increasing size of the Jamat. Similar to already established Ismaili Councils in East Africa and India, the Ismaili Council for Canada was aimed at guiding and addressing the needs of the emerging Canadian Jamat. Critical to the formation of the council was the jamatkhana. Social interactions facilitated within the jamatkhana by Nyaz Jetwani and other early Ismaili migrants, recognized the need for an institutional base that would “[allow] us to integrate into the larger community.”³⁹ As Nizar explains, the Ismaili Council was “responsible for the development of many other committees and institutions which formed the basis on which we

³⁵ Ibid., 43:03.

³⁶ Ibid., 45:19.

³⁷ Ibid., 43:14.

³⁸ Kassam and Mawani, *Jamatkhanas in Canada*.

³⁹ Jiwan, interview, 17:41.

created social services, cultural services, education portfolio.”⁴⁰ Within the Ismaili council, portfolios were formed aimed at addressing certain needs of the jamat. Members of the jamat, specifically those who knew Nyaz, were recruited into the Council with their respective portfolios. Nyaz, having met Nizar Jetwani, has recruited him as a member without portfolio. Nizar’s involvement in politics put him at the forefront of the Ismaili council. He was recognized as “a person who could link the Ismaili community to the government,”⁴¹ where Nizar would use his government involvement to assist the Ismaili Community.

Portfolios within the Ismaili Council included ‘Member Without Portfolio,’ where members such as Nizar, under the Regional Council for Canada, attended to the needs of the community as they arose. One project, the Jamatkhana Planning Project, advocated for measures to focus on integrating Ismailis into Canada by establishing new jamatkhanas.⁴² Nizar understood the necessity of integration in creating a sustainable community for Ismailis that would lead to success and prosperity for individuals in the Jamat. The establishment of smaller jamatkhanas around Toronto was deliberate, adopting a “decentralized strategy for the development of jamatkhanas.”⁴³ Instead of one singular larger jamatkhana in the center of Toronto, the city and its surrounding areas were divided into “northeast, northwest, northcentral, and central,” and smaller jamatkhanas were established within each respective region. This approach aimed to avoid the formation of a single ethnic enclave and encouraged interactions between Ismailis and non-Ismailis. These conditions were likely to ease integration in Canada by promoting greeted social interactions within greater Canadian society.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18:01.

⁴¹ Ibid., 48:42.

⁴² Nizar Jiwan, *Collection of Personal Reflections*, 2024, personal document.

⁴³ Jiwan, interview, 15:07.

Nizar Jiwan's motivation for his involvement in the council, specifically focusing on the integration of Ismailis, was largely influenced by personal experiences that illustrated the culturally intolerant landscape of Canada at the time. Nizar shared an anecdote about the incident of Mr. Kanji, a young Ismaili in Canada, who had been standing on the subway platform at Young Street Subway Station. Somebody shouted at him, "Hey Paki!" and pushed him onto the tracks. His leg was run over by the train, but thankfully, he survived.⁴⁴ Following the incident of Mr. Kanji, Nizar and other Ismailis took action and protested against race-motivated crimes:

"Following the Kanji incident on [the] TTC subway, Nizar Jiwan organized a group of Ismaili professionals who met with Mayor Crombie urging him to make a strong statement to declare that race-motivated violent and criminal acts will not be tolerated in Toronto. The Mayor, being more concerned about Toronto's reputation as a loving city, failed to acknowledge the Kanji incident as a racially motivated crime. Such passive response by senior public officials represented a climate of poor commitment to human rights during the early period of migration of visible minorities from developing countries of Asia and Africa."⁴⁵

Experiences like Mr. Kanji's illustrate that, despite the integrative efforts made within the jamatkhana and Ismaili institutions, racial discrimination prevailed in Canada. Systemic barriers caused by the cultural intolerance in Canada challenged integration for many Ismailis. As both a religious and cultural minority, Ismailis were a vulnerable population susceptible to the external threats of discrimination. Many Ismailis, specifically in the 1960s to 1980s, recall continuous racism as inherent to their settlement into Canada. However, the strength and resilience of the jamatkhana became a support system for Ismailis facing barriers to integration.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 50:53.

⁴⁵ Jiwan, *Collection of Personal Reflections*.

Concluding Remarks

The jamatkhana, as both a social and religious space, played a crucial role in the integration of early Ismaili migrants into Canada. As a social space that emulated culture, offered stability, and formed a community underpinned by kinship networks, many Ismailis turned to the jamatkhana in the face of hardships and marginalization when settling in Canada. Many Ismailis found a sense of purpose and belonging in the jamatkhana, facilitated by its cultural emulation validation. Social ties formed by the jamat created support networks that not only sustained the Ismaili community in Canada but conditioned their prosperity into professional and economic success.

Since the 1960s, the Ismaili community in Canada has grown exponentially. Currently, an estimated 80,000 Ismailis reside in Canada from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. Waves of Indian, Pakistani, Afghani, and Central Asian migration followed in 1980, when integration was greatly aided by the established Ismaili community and their councils and institutions. 50 years after the first major settlement of Ismailis in Canada following the 1972 Ugandan Exodus, many Ismailis have reflected on the critical role of the jamatkhana in aiding their integration into Canada. Social spaces in jamatkhanas continue to foster the development of social networks, which have continuously proven integral for sustained integration. Social programs through The Ismaili Council for Canada have emerged, including specific portfolios designated for job acquisition and settlement. Through the continuous migration of Ismailis to Canada, many Ismailis, across generations, have, without hesitation, willingly donated time, knowledge, and services to aid the integration of new Ismaili migrants. Hence the jamatkhana, both a social and religious congregational space, continues to be a grounding sphere for Ismailis in Canada.

Bibliography

- Adams, Bert N. "The Kin Network and the Adjustment of the Ugandan Asians." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 36, no. 1 (1974): 190–95.
- Draftary, Farhad, and Nanji, Azim. "What Is Shi'a Islam?" *The Institute of Ismaili Studies*. Accessed December 21, 2024.
- Jiwani, Karim. "Muslim Spaces of Piety and Worship." *The Ismaili-UK*, 2006.
- Kassam, Salina and Mawani, Rizwan. *Jamatkhanas in Canada: Architecture, Identity and Community*.
- Muhammedi, Shezan. *Gifts from Amin: Ugandan Asian Refugees in Canada*. University of Manitoba Press, 2022.
- Shariff, Kunigal Asadullah. "Nana's General Immigration Story." Personal Interview. Uploaded by Noor Bhaghani, October 12, 2022.
- Tejpar, Azizeddin. *The Migration of Indians to Eastern Africa: A Case Study of the Ismaili Community, 1866–1966*. 2019. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations* 6324. University of Central Florida.

Interviews

- Ebrahim, Shamim. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 14, 2024.
- Ibrahim, Rizwan. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 15, 2024.
- Jetiwani, Nyaz, and Jetiwani, Sabina. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 13, 2024.
- Jiwa, Laila. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 19, 2024.

Jiwan, Nizar. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 19, 2024.

Kassam, Salina. Interview. Audio Recording. Conducted by Anah Ibrahim, December 18, 2024.

Web Articles

Aga Khan Development Network. "Ismaili Imamat." July 17, 2024.
<https://the.akdn/en/who-we-are/ismaili-imamat>.

Nanji, Azim. "Khojas." *The Institute for Ismaili Studies*. January 1, 2022.
<https://www.iis.ac.uk/learning-centre/scholarly-contributions/encyclopedia-articles/khojas/>.

The Ismaili Imamat. "Introduction: The Ismaili Imamat." Accessed December 21, 2024. <https://ismaili.imamat/#introduction>.

***Seven Poems in Train* by Manglesh
Dabral [pg. 58-61]**

Translated by Nisarg Patel

i.

Train

leaving the platform

moves ahead

the platform is like people

left behind[,] empty[,] sad[,]

in its own light[,] alone

shivering

no one goes

along with the train

only night walks along with it

like iron is this night

we[,] within this iron[,]

take our breath.

ii.

from the window of the train

I look at the sky

which[,] at a distance[,] has mixed with earth

there asleep are

birds tired from the chores of the day

there asleep are dejected people

there spreads

earth's infinite sorrow

on the train a child takes a nap

dreaming of his mother's milk

an old man closes his eyes

and thinks
death is like a train
taking me with it
with a tilted head [,] a girl
reads a book[,] lost
there passes through the pages of her book
a train-like line of tears

in a wilderness like that of sleep
the train whistles
the time is passing
and the time will eventually pass
leaving things behind.

iii.
on looking down
I see my shadow on the ground
it is twice my size
and it sits without taking any breath
it is futile to talk with it
for any response it always
looks at me
with other shadows it has no relationship
it is seated so afar
and yet it has engulfed me completely
only between me and her
when trees and bridges intervene
does she disperse
and become
shadow of somebody else.

iv.
there are so many rivers
which I don't know
and brides
on which I haven't walked

there is so much water
which I haven't touched

now all of this
lies in my way

v.

suddenly in the sky
a star becomes visible
we are both together
travelling in this darkness
that star and me

vi.

this is that place
where time and again the train comes and stops
and disperses smoke for a while

this is that place
where we became young once upon a time

vii.

I saw a vision
in which there was a silent river
and a few bushes
surrounding the river

I saw it and
got overwhelmed
oh vision! I will remember you
forever
for I became overwhelmed





An Atelier of Soft Power: How Coke Studio Cracked the Code

Hiba Sohail

Introduction

Pakistan, in all its politically unstable glory, has stumbled on what can be arguably categorized as its strongest mechanisms of international communication: cricket and Coke Studio. While this paper focuses only on Coke Studio, both entities are legitimate institutions of the nation-state, contributing immensely to Pakistan's image-building. Coke Studio Pakistan, referred to as just Coke Studio, launched in 2008 after the success of performances on a concert-like platform in Brazil. The Coca-Cola Company collaborated with Pakistani music producers to create a spin-off of the one episode the company tested in Brazil. It features recorded live performances of a variety of Pakistani artists and the episodes premiere both on television and YouTube. It is currently the country's longest-running annual television music show and is known for its seamless blending of South Asian and Western influences.

In a world that is increasingly erasing borders via digital media, it has become imperative for countries to create transnational archives to cultivate memory actively—in this case, through music meant to transcend geographical boundaries. Coke Studio serves this exact purpose for Pakistan: it reimagines and repurposes Pakistani culture for a larger audience and in doing so, shifts the influence of the country in the region. Coke Studio revolutionized the way music was *seen* and what it could achieve, and because Pakistan was used as a launchpad, it had a unique advantage in terms of garnering its South Asian audience, leaving India's eventual venture to fend for itself. For a country that borders its arch-rival, and has long been contending with

an internal identity crisis stemming from the Partition of 1947, Coke Studio allows Pakistan to exist with all its complexities, and that existence is largely an imagined one that celebrates the nation on a global scale—a sure respite from the otherwise negative reputation the country battles. The role of media in a globalized world cannot be understated, and neither can the media's role as a direct entry point into soft power. International communication that hinges upon cultural commodity exports has the potential to become a mode of soft power, and Coke Studio has exemplified this. Its popularity has stretched beyond just South Asia, in part due to diasporic interest and in part because of the sheer power and nationalism it generates as a transnational archive. Coupled with the fact that there are obvious corporate interests at play, Coke Studio exists in a space where an immensely complicated cultural project interacts with the larger economic project.

The question thus becomes: How does Coke Studio operate as a transnational archive and does the creation of such an archive serve as a mode of soft power? There is myriad literature that exists that delves into the question of the commodification of culture, transnational archives, and soft power on its own, but none that ties together all three under the umbrella of international communication. This paper seeks to establish the linkage between the aforementioned variables through an interpretive content analysis of *Coke Studio* Season 14, and discuss how each constructs Coke Studio as a transnational archive vested in corporate and state interests, and subsequently how it operates on a global scale as Pakistan's soft power.

Literature Review

To first assess how Coke Studio is a transnational archive and a mode of soft power for Pakistan, it is imperative to understand the theories of culture, commodity, and the global cultural flow that already exist.

Commodifying Culture: Trading the Intangible

Commodification has come to be defined very loosely in academia; it no longer only applies to literal material goods sold for a value that benefits capitalism. In Marxist theory, a commodity is generally anything with value (use or exchange value) that is exchanged in a relationship of trade,¹ but Karl Polanyi acknowledged that not all commodities are simply products that have property rights attached to them, coining them “fictitious commodities.”² Culture, an intangible thing, is one such pseudo-commodity. Arjun Appadurai expanded on this notion, arguing instead that anything intended for exchange is a commodity, allowing many processes to count as commodification: “Commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors. To the degree that some things in a society are frequently to be found in the commodity phase, to fit the requirements of commodity candidacy, and to appear in a commodity context, they are its quintessential commodities.”³ For the purposes of this paper, culture is a commodity on the basis of its historical heritage, and is frequently commercialized—exchanged—when it is incorporated into private sector partnerships in the form of branding.

Raymond Williams’s analysis of culture lends itself to the theory of commodification. While elites may shape or barter culture, the working class was not devoid of agency, for they created their own meanings of culture. He argues that culture was one, ordinary, and two, had a material effect.⁴ Cultural materialism, based on Williams’s explanation, allows for new interpretations of literature, art, and other forms of culture. Culture is “not wholly determined by an economic base, it plays its own role in the construction and/or reproduction of the social

¹ Karl Marx, *Wage-labor and Capital* (Createspace Independent Pub., 2019), 3.

² Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Beacon Press, 2001), 76.

³ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 15.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (Verso Books, 2016), 3-14.

totality, and inevitably becomes the site of ideological struggle.”⁵ This commodification of culture allows for it to be neatly packaged and sold to entities for a value they deem fit. Consequently, that package doesn’t necessarily remain in the box it came in. Taking it one step further, popular culture, while not entirely embedded in the market, is still commercialized and dispersed to the public, but the public can make of it what they want.

Workshopping a Globalized Mediascape

Appadurai works extensively on laying out the landscape of understanding the “new global cultural economy,” something he terms as a “... disjunctive order.”⁶ His theory hinges on the creation of five “-scapes” through which current global flows occur: ethnoscapescapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes.⁷ The answer to the question presented in this paper borrows mediascapes, ethnoscapes, and ideoscapes to center its argument. A mediascape “... provide[s] large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed.”⁸ Mediascapes are image centered and are “narrative-based accounts of strips of reality.”⁹ It tends to call into question what is fiction and what is reality, causing imagined worlds to be formed. Many people not only live within imagined communities, but these imagined worlds which allow them to “contest” and “subvert” the imagined worlds of the “official mind.”¹⁰

⁵ “Cultural Materialism,” Bertens, n.d.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 1988, 7(2-3), 295–310.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 299

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Pakistan can be defined under Appadarai's definition of a deterritorialized group, and "invented homelands"¹¹ are the mediascapes of such groups. Between the Partition of 1947, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and the ongoing struggle for Kashmir, Pakistan is in desperate need of solidifying its identity separate from the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan's ethnoscape—"the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live"¹²—finds solace in Coke Studio. The venture goes beyond just providing a good soundtrack—it is Pakistan's mediascape. It justifies its imagined world and romanticizes the identity the state apparatus wants to project.

Mediascapes are intertwined with ideoscapes—"[i]mages that are directly political and have to do with ideologies of states and counter-ideologies of movements that want to capture state power."¹³ Because deterritorialization generates new markets to disperse culture for those who "thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland,"¹⁴ the power of the diaspora in maintaining the mediascape of such an imagined world cannot be understated. While Appadurai's key point is that ideoscapes are "terminological kaleidoscopes as states seek to pacify populations whose own ethnoscapes are in motion ...,"¹⁵ it can just as easily be applied to an anxious state itself. Ideoscapes capture the ideology of states who then rent out mediascapes in an effort to shape themselves both nationally and transnationally. Coke Studio exists in Pakistan's mediascape as an extension of the nation's ideoscape; it dispatches the imagined world the state would like to be, and the ethnoscape its people want to achieve.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Paired with the aforementioned commodifying of culture, it becomes clear that Coke Studio barter a romanticized Pakistani culture (in the shape of music, but more so branding) in exchange for an aesthetic appeal of the country. Appadurai states, “Money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world.”¹⁶ What is the chase for? In this case, legitimizing a nation-state’s identity through the creation of a digital transnational archive.

Digital Archives: A Vehicle for Culture and Memory

Coke Studio is not what Abigail De Kosnik would definitively categorize as a “rogue archive,”¹⁷ because YouTube does not meet the “archive” criteria mentioned below, and nor is Coke Studio solely built by non-state institutions—or the *rogues*—but the definition of one is imperative nonetheless. Rogue archives, she says, are “constant (24/7) availability; zero barriers to entry for all who can connect to the Internet; content that can be streamed or downloaded in full, with no required payment, and no regard for copyright restrictions (some rogue archivists digitize only what is already in the public domain); and content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution.”¹⁸ Despite being a corporate scheme, Coke Studio certainly operates as a quasi-rogue archive in that it remixes, or remembers, culture in a way that a traditional memory institution can’t and makes it readily available on digital technologies that span transnationally. Its mission in essence aligns with those of rogue archivists.

Digital technologies allow for what Lawrence Lessig calls “remix culture:” the takeover and transformation of mass media texts into

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, (The MIT Press eBooks, 2016).

¹⁸ De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 2.

alternate versions, with hints of the “source” texts in these “remixes.”¹⁹ De Kosnik explains that because cultural memory has thus gone rogue “with respect to its own temporality,”²⁰ in the sense that it is easily interacted with, “[e]ngagement with cultural memory is therefore not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts, it also now often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making.”²¹ It is within this repackaging of old content where Coke Studio finds its niche, and Rafay Mahmood and Richard Davis Williams call it a “soundtrack for reimagining Pakistan.”²²

Mahmood and Williams found that Coke Studio “has a significant role in generating new narratives about Pakistani modernity.”²³ They assert that “cultural memory and national narratives can be reimagined through musical media, and then re-worked by media consumers and digital audiences.”²⁴ Coke Studio is a “private and individual” endeavor to “archive Pakistani music and South Asian poetry, which stimulates the processes of making cultural memory.”²⁵ Coke Studio’s accessibility gives it an unparalleled advantage to “become a global phenomenon, but also had consequences for how the nation and its cultural pasts are reimagined through musical media.”²⁶ The authors point to how Coke Studio chose “Hum Dekhenge,” a 1979 poem written following a military coup in Pakistan, as Season 11’s starter in 2018. 2018 was accompanied by heightened election tensions, and

¹⁹ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Penguin, 2008).

²⁰ De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Richard David Williams and Rafay Mahmood, “A Soundtrack for Reimagining Pakistan? Coke Studio, Memory and the Music Video,” *BioScope South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 111–28.

²³ Williams and Mahmood, “A Soundtrack for Reimagining Pakistan? Coke Studio, Memory and the Music Video,” 112.

²⁴ Ibid., 113.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Coke Studio's revisiting of the song was "... emblematic of the broader range of relationships forged between music, nation, and cultural memory through their music videos."²⁷

They conclude that Coke Studio diligently engages in conversations about the *imagining* of the nation. Therefore, Coke Studio does indeed serve as a justification for Pakistan's own identity as a nation-state, and exporting such music transnationally allows Pakistan to build its image via music. By revitalizing the formation of Pakistan's archive of music, Coke Studio captures Pakistan's heritage and modernity simultaneously and becomes a means of international communication. However, Mahmood and Williams find that Coke Studio's "lack of dramatic staging, costuming, or dance is an explicit departure from the spectacle of Bollywood or Lollywood, suggesting the producers' investment in 'authentic' sound rather than visual spectacle: of course, the heavily stylized simplicity is itself a form of spectacle."²⁸ This paper focuses specifically on Season 14, which took a sharp departure from the aforementioned setup of Coke Studio. Coke Studio's new approach, which includes interactive set designs, choreographed dances, and elaborate costuming, is an essential element of this paper's argument that they too allow Pakistan to create an even more romanticized image. The operation of a transnational archive is further honed in by the experimental stance Coke Studio is currently taking.

Soft Drinks, Soft Power

Coke Studio is a private sector undertaking of a digital archival project that fulfills some function of the state—which the state then uses to establish influence. It cannot be denied that Coca-Cola has as much of a stake in Coke Studio as the nation-state does. Rashmi Dhanwani found that Coke Studio is a "transnational production [and] the key actors involved include both cultural producers and global corporate,

²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁸ Ibid., 120.

with the production being used as a vehicle for branded entertainment intended at creating a stronger consumer connection while enhancing Coca-Cola Company's market share in Pakistan."²⁹ Dhanwani asserted that Coke Studio is "... a product of a highly complex global cultural process at play where the 'subaltern' is trying to project its voice ..."³⁰ She hypothesizes that, "For all practical purposes, Coke Studio is a 'production' that has assumed transnational proportions owing to the primary action by a corporate to engage with the branded entertainment model of marketing a beverage."³¹ In an analysis of the digital integrated marketing communication and brand values, M.A.S Raja concluded that, "[The new integrated marketing communications (IMC) model] has been suggested to Coke [Studio] to manage better customer experience, satisfaction and loyalty which will help to build good relationships with the end users in the digital arena."³² Paired with the fact that Coke Studio is simultaneously a capitalist operation, the authority that Coke Studio has as a transnational cultural archive is immense in the region. Pakistan acknowledged this power in 2021 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaborated with Coke Studio to publish a coffee table book, conveniently titled *Beyond the Wave: Transcending Boundaries*.³³ The then-Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said the collaboration "shares the spirit of Pakistan's true image of unity and vibrancy with the world."³⁴ He later tweeted, "History tells us that the subtle forces of cultural diplomacy

²⁹ Rashmi Dhanwani, "Coke Studio: Remapping Translocality," *Academia.Edu*, 2014, 12.

³⁰ Ibid., 16.

³¹ Ibid.

³² M. Shankar Raja, "Digital Integrated Marketing Communication (Dimc) and It's Logical Relationship With Co-Branding and Brand Values With Reference to Coke Studio," *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2020), 1.

³³ IMAGES Staff, "Coke Studio Collaborates With the Foreign Ministry to Launch a Coffee Table Book," *DAWN Images*, July 9, 2021, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1187980>.

³⁴ Staff Report, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Acknowledges Coke Studio's Role in Promoting Pakistani Culture," *Daily Times*, July 11, 2021, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/789095/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-acknowledges-coke-studios-role-in-promoting-pakistani-culture/>.

have impact and can create understanding among peoples from different backgrounds. I am therefore delighted to collaborate with Coke Studio, to bring Pakistan's true image to the world: one of optimism, youth, unity and peace." Fahad Ashraf, VP and General Manager for Coca-Cola in the country said, " ... I want to thank everyone who has contributed to the arts and culture of our nation and to Coke Studio's bridge-building legacy in the past 14 years."³⁵ The usage of the words "subtle," "true image," and "bridge-building" are indicative of the fact that Coke Studio, despite not being an official state project, still operates as the state's soft power.

As countries rapidly globalize and communication becomes much more seamless,³⁶ soft power is a much more attractive choice to establish dominance and a specific image. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, can be broadcast in three ways—one of which is culture. Nye explained, "the best propaganda is not propaganda."³⁷ When Chinese officials contacted him for "private conversations about how to increase China's soft power," he said, "China should realize that most of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government."³⁸ Pakistan, in terms of its endorsement of Coke Studio, seems to have realized this. It does not interfere in the making of Coke Studio, nor its branding; the state has allowed it to revolutionize the music scene and the space Pakistani culture occupies in the digital world because it is well aware of the boundaries it can cross.

³⁵ Staff Report, "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Acknowledges Coke Studio's Role in Promoting Pakistani Culture."

³⁶ David Morley, "Television, Technology, and Culture: A Contextualist Approach," *The Communication Review* 15, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 79–105.

³⁷ Joseph Nye, "China's Soft Power Deficit," *WSJ*, May 8, 2012, <https://wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>.

³⁸ Joseph Nye, "Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (2017).

Not only is YouTube the digital platform Coke Studio chose to make its host, but also Spotify: Coke Studio partnered with Spotify as its official streaming service for Season 14. Spotify's *For The Record* interviewed Khan FM, Head of Artist and Label Partnerships in Pakistan, and he made it abundantly clear that, "[B]oth [Coke Studio and Spotify] knew this collaboration would have various challenges, but both parties had one very clear objective: amplify Pakistani music and represent it in the absolute best way possible."³⁹ They "saw that partnering up for Season 14 had the potential to bring generations of Pakistani music to an even larger audience around the world," and that "The program itself has not only created immense pride in Pakistan, but it has also become a representation of South Asian music and culture."⁴⁰ The increasing reliance on partnerships isn't because Coke Studio's audience is waning, it's because it has expanded over the last decade. By combining capitalist interest with cultural memory, Coke Studio finds itself at the crossroads of a serious responsibility: shaping the narrative of the nation-state via music.

Hypothesis

This paper hypothesizes that by situating Coke Studio in the country's turbulent history and various identity crises, Coke Studio becomes a transnational digital archive in which it is allowed to exist with all its complexities—and that existence is largely an imagined one that celebrates and romanticizes the nation. Corporate interests become intrinsically tied to culture, which the nation then utilizes as a mode of soft power to strengthen its image. By examining Season 14, it can be anticipated that Coke Studio operates as a transnational archive because it captures Pakistan's heritage, and culture becomes its

³⁹ Spotify, "Spotify Pakistan Partnered With 'Coke Studio' This Season to Amplify Artists in the Region and Beyond — Spotify," Spotify, March 23, 2022, <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2022-03-23/spotify-pakistan-partnered-with-coke-studio-this-season-to-amplify-artists-in-the-region-and-beyond/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

‘commodity.’ This transnational archive plays into the globalized world, and Pakistan uses it as its chosen method of soft power.

Method

There are thirteen songs in Season 14, but this paper will not necessarily be devoted to analyzing the songs’ lyrics. Rather, by grouping them into themes (refer to appendix A), this paper will provide a more interpretive and thematic approach for a content analysis. A topic-based analysis and a visual analysis of the season as an entity and the songs as a whole will demonstrate the argument. The themes chosen for the songs are postcolonial, spiritual, postmodern, collaborative, non-Urdu, and new artists. Themes were chosen by viewing all thirteen songs holistically as the paper will be studying the collaborations, set designs, the inclusion of choreography, languages chosen, and artists in the lineup to present a comprehensive view of the season and the argument. Some songs naturally do overlap: for example, “GO” is under postcolonial, but could be in collaborative, non-Urdu, or new artists. It is under postcolonial because the song fits the theme best in terms of analysis and argument. The songs under the umbrella of each theme were chosen because they best represent the theme, not because the theme is the only accurate representation of the songs themselves.

Data

There are a total of thirteen songs accompanied by music videos in this season. In order of release, they are: “Tu Jhoom,” “Kana Yaari,” “Sajan Das Na,” “Mehram,” “Neray Neray Vas,” “Pasoori,” “Ye Dunya,” “Peechay Hutt,” “Muaziz Saarif,” “Beparwah,” “Thagyan,” “GO,” and “Phir Milenge.” Appendix A shows the categorization of these songs in the six themes.

Discussion

The themes chosen reflect Coke Studio's function as Pakistan's transnational archive, as they themselves suggest that Coke Studio is well aware of the weight it carries for the nation. The themes' purpose is twofold: it invokes cultural memory and helps consumers conceptualize an image of Pakistan that does not yet exist, but for which the nation-state strives for.

Postcolonial

Former colonies, understandably, find it difficult to escape the shadow of past colonization, and this is evident in a variety of ways: economics, public policy, and even the names of streets. Preserving culture in any way becomes of utmost importance, especially traditions that existed pre-colonization. The songs in the postcolonial category combine a more modern twist on tradition with a culture that existed long before the British arrived on the Indian subcontinent; this is evident through choice of instruments, set design, and even the form of music.

"Pasoori"'s set design, at its core, reveals the breaking down of binaries. Its meticulously created "communal space"⁴¹ is meant to point to Pakistan's desire to transcend binaries of ethnicity, gender, and spirituality, and reveals a typical postcolonial wish for a unified identity. The inclusion of Sheema Kermani, a leading feminist activist and famous *kathak* dancer, wearing a sari is not just for show; the political implications are manifold. One, Coke Studio preserves Kermani's legacy in its transnational archive, and two, subtly legitimizes the women's movement in Pakistan. Kermani was a symbol of resistance during the age of Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship in the 1980s, when he banned dance in the country and declared saris 'un-Islamic.' Whilst the state has taken less than favorable measures in the

⁴¹ Images Staff, "People Can't Get Enough of Coke Studio's 'Pasoori' by Ali Sethi and Shae Gill," *Images*, February 8, 2022, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189448>.

past, Coke Studio erases some of that narrative in lieu of its own. “Pasoori” helps audiences overlook the oppressive power structures of the past (and present) that very much threatened Kermani’s varying identities. The postcolonial yearning to have an aesthetic multiculturalism, or the facade of one, is not uncommon, and Pakistan is able to capitalize on Coke Studio’s ability to generate such a syncretic identity for it. The song ranked number three on Spotify’s global chart,⁴² the second Pakistani song to be included in the top ten of a Spotify ranking chart, and debuted at number one on India’s Spotify ‘Viral 50.’

Atif Aslam and Abdullah Siddiqui—dubbed Pakistan’s biggest star and Pakistan’s local indie artist to watch out for, respectively—collaborated on the season’s decidedly most hyperpop track. Between its heavy incorporation of English lyrics and synth bass, the song is an odd choice to be dubbed postcolonial at first glance. However, the very opening of the music video is a *sarangi*, a Mughal-era instrument whose usage has significantly declined in Pakistan. The inclusion of a *sitar*, another pre-colonial instrument, is also evident, but the sitar has found its way to mainstream popularity in both Pakistan and the rest of the world. The song relies overwhelmingly on the *sarangi* to set the tone, and shots cut to the instrument being played continuously. This is in stark contrast to the *sarangi* and other traditional instruments “competing with a booming R&B and pop scene in a country where more than 60 per cent of the population is aged under 30.”⁴³ “GO”’s dependency on the dying instrument proves a point; a more Western pop cannot drive out the *true* culture of the nation, it can only seek to enhance it. The fusion of Western elements is not done so in an attempt to replicate them but rather to highlight the fact that it would

⁴² Images Staff, “‘Pasoori’ Ranks Number Three on Spotify’s Global Chart — Ali Sethi Says Xulfi Predicted It Would a Year Ago,” *Images*, March 8, 2022, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189671>.

⁴³ AFP, “Sound of Mughal-era Sarangi Fading Away,” *DAWN.COM*, April 9, 2022, <https://dawn.com/news/1684125>.

be a disservice to forego traditionality in hopes of chasing the modern. The act of physically preserving the *sarangi* is difficult but Coke Studio's insistence on showcasing its entrancing ability in "GO" figuratively archives even as it struggles to find its footing in a highly saturated musical market. By recalling the past, Coke Studio reminds the nation of its roots that are constantly under the threat of slipping into oblivion by the increasing dominance of chasing virality.

Unlike the *sarangi*, *qawwali* remains a staple for music in Pakistan, which can be easily attributed to its linkage to Islam as a form of devotional music. Some of Coke Studio's greatest hits are *qawwalis*, and the enterprise acknowledges that they are its most "prized possessions."⁴⁴ The genre traces its lineage to the late 13th century, and Pakistan has produced Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, often called the "*Shahenshab-e-Qawwali*" (the King of Kings of Qawwalis), who is ranked by the likes of *The New York Times* as one of the greatest *qawwali* singers in history.⁴⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that Season 14 featured a *qawwali* titled "Thagyan"—albeit with an unexpected groovy intrusion. The song is not spiritual as most *qawwalis* tend to be. Rather, it is a song dedicated to the complications of love, and the song nearly strips the *qawwali*, save for the end. It is meant to be enjoyed by both Gen-Z and avid *qawwali* fans and it achieves this through a more youth-driven outlook on the genre.⁴⁶ The performance and energy of a *qawwali* remains intact: the party, or *humnava*, of 9 singers sits atop of an elevated stage aided with instruments such as the harmonium, *tabla*, and *dholak*. But the composition and drive of "Thagyan" is unrestricted playfulness, and while it grounds itself in tradition, it leaves room for exploration.

⁴⁴ Entertainment Desk, "'Thagyan' Is a Return to What 'Coke Studio' Used to Be, With a Twist," *The Express Tribune*, March 14, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2347871/thagyan-is-a-return-to-what-coke-studio-used-to-be-with-a-twist>.

⁴⁵ Jon Pareles, "Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Pakistani Sufi Singer, 48," *New York Times*, August 17, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/17/nyregion/nusrat-fateh-ali-khan-pakistani-sufi-singer-48.html>.

⁴⁶ Coke Studio Pakistan, "Coke Studio 14 | Thagyan | the Magical Journey," March 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrfQDlIDzSA>.

The crescendo of the song remains, at its core, in line with a typical *qawwali*; Coke Studio is not seeking to reinvent the genre, nor diminish it—it's simply allowing it to thrive in a postcolonial world. *Qawwali* is extensively documented, and it would remain so without Coke Studio, but the venture's insistence on producing at least one almost every season does communicate the nation's desire for it to persevere beyond familiarity. It diligently reorganizes Pakistan's image for one that is more creative and relatable, and tries to cement the nation as one that is capable of revolutionizing its roots alongside globalization.

To approach postcolonialism, transnational boundaries, and a nation's imagination through songs whose set, genre, and instrumentals articulate all three is Pakistan's soft power. The state apparatus does not need to indulge in propaganda or 'hard power' to achieve its influence—cultural actors are enough to get the message across.

Spiritual

In her examination of Coke Studio's usage of Sufi poetry, Najia Mukhtar found that the inclusion of the Sufi concept of love is offered by Coke Studio to “undergird a ‘good’ Muslim’s attitude towards religious difference in a discursive setting increasingly complicated by perceptions of Western ‘Islamophobia’ intermingled with fears about rising religious extremism [in Pakistan].”⁴⁷ By “... us[ing] cultural resources to offer alternative conceptions of Muslims, Islam, and Pakistan to local audiences and international observers,”⁴⁸ Coke Studio's “primarily elite, liberal producers deploy Sufi poetry in order to reclaim a “softer” Islam and reinvent a Muslim and Pakistani identity that they ‘can be proud of.’”⁴⁹ After 9/11 specifically, Pakistan

⁴⁷ Najia Mukhtar, “Using Love to Fathom Religious Difference – Contemporary Formats of Sufi Poetry in Pakistan,” *Contemporary South Asia* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 26–44.

⁴⁸ Mukhtar, “Using Love to Fathom Religious Difference – Contemporary Formats of Sufi Poetry in Pakistan,” 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

has found itself in the midst of the War on Terror and heightened religious conflict. Coke Studio grounds its reclamation of Sufi poetry in the hopes that it will promote a “soft” Islam in “global discursive contexts.”⁵⁰ Season 14 followed this same formula and achieved even greater results if one situates the two songs, “Tu Jhoom” and “Beparwah,” in the wider context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Tu Jhoom” kickstarted Season 14 and featured Abida Parveen and Naseebo Lal, two highly respected singers in their respective genres of Sufi and folk. The song is about human existence, the role of God, and ultimately the celebration of life. While previous seasons have artists facing forward with no obvious props, “Tu Jhoom” shows Parveen and Lal sitting across from each other accompanied by whirling dervishes. To begin a season with two women and a song about the submission to fate emphasizes Coke Studio’s motives behind this preferred portrayal of Sufism. It is in contrast to the violence rooted in religiosity and the patriarchy that is often seen in Pakistan. If Coke Studio’s primary goal is to present and document an imagined image of Pakistan, it succeeded with its first episode of Season 14: “Tu Jhoom” was met with critical acclaim beyond Pakistani borders and reached 1.5 million views in under a day.⁵¹ The video marks the first time Coke Studio has had choreographed dancers, dervishes no less, and the fusion of Sufi and folk combine Pakistan’s trademark musical genres as legitimate markers of Islam. The choice to start a season that departs from common Coke Studio practices is not just for commercial purposes either—it allows for the nation to express solidarity with the world through a song that is so obviously meant to “beat your

⁵⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁵¹ Mahrukh Khan, “Tu Jhoom, the First Release of Coke Studio Season 14 Is a Massive Hit,” *BOL News*, January 15, 2022, <https://bolnews.com/amazing/2022/01/tu-jhoom-the-first-release-of-coke-studio-season-14-is-a-massive-hit/>.

quarantine blues.”⁵² “Tu Jhoom” can be categorized as a journey of spirituality for everyone, especially after two years of being intensely disconnected globally. “Tu Jhoom”’s backing vocals are provided by a choir dressed in all white, and because choirs are more so seen as a hallmark of Christian hymns, it is not unfounded to believe that Coke Studio is again showing a unified Pakistani identity beyond just that of religion through “Tu Jhoom.” In a year where minority safety and rights continued to be under attack with no substantial efforts to curtail violence,⁵³ “Tu Jhoom”’s depiction of what Coke Studio brands as a “softer” Islam, or the real Islam, is intentional.⁵⁴

“Beparwah” was called a prayer⁵⁵ rather than a song by the artist, Momina Mustehsan, and the music video depicts her singing within a magical, hypnotic landscape. The song is framed as a plea to God but interestingly, its tagline is “Surrender in hope, love, and solitude,” with no mention of religion.⁵⁶ Again, Coke Studio frames spirituality in abstract, relatable terms in an effort to separate Pakistan’s reality from its reputation. The song is an intimate conversation with divinity, but the real conversation is occurring as Coke Studio premieres to the entire world on YouTube and Spotify: religion, an aspect of Pakistan that many find hard to contend with due to its ties to terrorism and violence, can be aesthetic. Through this aesthetic, the narrative is shifted to one of acceptance. This is a direct call to the ideoscape that Pakistan wants to achieve, and subtle shifts in narratives through songs such as “Beparwah” may well help the nation in its efforts to establish such a picture. The song frames dialogue with divinity in a way that

⁵² Ani, “Beat Your Quarantine Blues With Abida Parveen, Naseebo Lal’s ‘Tu Jhoom,’” *Telangan Today*, January 17, 2022, <https://telanganatoday.com/beat-your-quarantine-blues-with-abida-parveen-naseebo-lals-tu-jhoom>.

⁵³ “Pakistan,” Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/pakistan#72d33e>.

⁵⁴ Mukhtar, “Using Love to Fathom Religious Difference—Contemporary Formats of Sufi Poetry in Pakistan,” 27.

⁵⁵ Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio 14 | Beparwah | the Magical Journey,” March 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bflQoJkXtIY>.

⁵⁶ Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio 14 | Beparwah | the Magical Journey.”

combats Pakistan's tendency for jihadist movements; "Beparwah" too is a fight for God but through love, and Coke Studio (and the nation) would unsurprisingly want to archive it as Pakistan's representation.

Non-Urdu

While Pakistan's official language is Urdu, it is only 7% of the population's first language. Linguistically diverse, Pakistan insists on Urdu as its national language to promote unity as it recalls colonial-era South Asian Muslim solidarity. Provincial governments, however, may declare provincial language statuses. For example, in Punjab, the provincial language is Punjabi, spoken by almost 40% of the nation.⁵⁷ Coke Studio's adamant showcasing of the different languages of the country extends well beyond Pakistan's border and exhibits the nation's yearning for a wholly unified nation.

More importantly, the attempted harmony between languages is a direct contradiction of the events that led up to the Bangladesh Liberation War. After Pakistan and India's newly found independence in 1947, Pakistan was composed of West Pakistan (now present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). East Pakistan advocated for Bangla as an official language of Pakistan, and while its request was eventually accepted in 1956, East Pakistan was subjected to continuous othering by the central government. The Bengali Language Movement became the basis for a Bengali nationalist identity, independence movements, and the eventual establishment of Bangladesh as a sovereign state in 1971. West Pakistan, in its relentless refusal to grant East Pakistan equal status, led a genocide in the region during the war, a fact Pakistan denies. A staunch Urdu-only policy fragmented Pakistan in the past, and to repair its image, Coke Studio's choice of languages is not to be taken lightly.

⁵⁷ "Final Results of Census-2017 | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics," n.d., <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/final-results-census-2017-0>.

“Neray Neray Vas,” a Punjabi song, is not necessarily groundbreaking, as Coke Studio has a variety of Punjabi songs, but it does recall the festivity of Punjabi culture in a way that is infectious. It certainly does preserve one of the more dominant languages of the country: the *tumbi* and *matka* cement “Neray Neray Vas” as one of the more brazenly authentic Punjabi tracks of the region. The appeal of Punjabi crosses the border, as the region of Punjab was split in half during the Partition of 1947 and India is currently battling its own ethno-nationalist conflicts, including calls for an independent Punjab by Sikh nationalists. Coke Studio not only tends to favor Punjabi fusion tracks, legitimizing it as an unofficial language of the nation, but also because the language quite literally transcends boundaries.

It is “Kana Yaari” that is the epitome of Coke Studio’s performance or attempted display of diversity. Balochistan, a province in Pakistan, has been rife with regional violence, ethno-nationalist insurgencies, and terrorism; the Balochistan Liberation Army poses a threat to the Pakistani state and thus, “Kana Yaari”’s release comes at an opportune time. The song features three Balochi singers and includes a rap segment; it is sung entirely in Balochi and is a departure from what the nation sees as Balochi. The video shows two of the three singers literally pushing away walls that separate them, a metaphor for the need to shove aside common misconceptions about Balochistan. “Kana Yaari” forgoes a traditional sound and set for mainstream pop, breaking negative stereotypes associated with the region. Xulfi, this season’s producer, lovingly refers to “Kana Yaari” as “B-Pop,” and believed that “there’s no reason a Balochi pop song can’t have the same global appeal as a K-Pop song.”⁵⁸ “Kana Yaari” can be situated in a larger attempt to sidestep another repeat of 1971 through music, technology, and soft power. Pakistan not only employs Coke Studio as an international form of soft power, but regionally as well. Coke Studio can only hope to subvert the threat of violence by inducting Balochi

⁵⁸ Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio | Kana Yaari | the Magical Journey,” January 19, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlXwl2Moke8>.

and merging it with a contemporary sound. “Kana Yaari” asserts regional representation, but it is still Pakistani; Coke Studio moves beyond establishing a consolidated identity for the nation as it manifests a Pakistan that takes the utmost pride in all its heterogeneity.

Collaborative

Collaborations are a hallmark of Coke Studio and artists chosen to perform specific songs together in Season 14 serve a purpose musically or thematically. Out of the thirteen songs, only “Beparwah” was not a collaboration. While any of the other twelve songs could fit within this theme, “Muaziz SaariF” and “Phir Milenge” are not just instances of artists partnering up, but they speak to a larger trend in Pakistani music.

“Muaziz SaariF” saw siblings Meesha Shafi and Faris Shafi teaming up for a highly dramatic song. As artists, both are provocatively original and cannot be anymore different from each other. The song’s common ground is that it is, at its core, a fight song which combines Meesha’s pop with her brother’s rap that meshes together Urdu, English, and Punjabi. The Shafi family is no stranger to fame and as household names in journalism, on television, and now music, the collaboration is meant to invoke that familiarity in the entire region. Meesha is at the forefront of Pakistan’s #MeToo movement and has been the target of intense smear campaigns by her abuser, Ali Zafar, another singer. She is no stranger to Coke Studio and neither is Zafar, who has been notably absent from the platform since her allegations. To provide Meesha with a song that doubles as Faris’ Coke Studio debut is nothing short of offering a “safe space.”⁵⁹ Coke Studio again has implicitly lent support for the women’s movement in the country, and the nation takes the opportunity to use it for its advantage, regardless of the fact that the state apparatus is complicit in violence against women. Faris notes that rap’s perception in the country is slowly changing, and the

⁵⁹ Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio 14 | Muaziz SaariF | the Magical Journey,” February 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORkSVj6EqYg>.

collaboration is just as much a “sucker punch to the haters” for him.⁶⁰ While rap finds its footing in the country, Coke Studio has already done it favors; Faris, as one of the only rappers in the industry currently, has come a long way from the beginning of his artistry, and Coke Studio has managed to chronicle his journey on a global scale. Coke Studio takes notes of growing international trends in music, and makes them decidedly Pakistani in hopes of dispersing both the nation’s culture and image transnationally.

“Phir Milenge” marked the return of Faisal Kapadia, a former Coke Studio producer, in his first solo venture since the disbandment of Strings with Gen-Z rap duo, Young Stunners. The latter have weaseled their way into Pakistani music in a short period of time and their collaboration with a veteran of the industry is a partnership of nostalgia and modernism. Coke Studio attempts to pair the three together in hopes of cataloging the shift in Pakistani music—and it exceeds expectations. “Phir Milenge” is the last song of the season, and its sound, coupled with Kapadia’s signature emotional grit, produces what the nation so desperately wants to convey globally: hope. Coke Studio moves beyond harnessing talent; it does so with a purpose: to place Pakistan’s music (of the past and present) on the pedestal it deserves. Kapadia is no stranger to transcending boundaries; his band was featured on the soundtrack of *Spider-Man 2* and Young Stunners have amassed followings in neighboring countries. Coke Studio manages to marry the two in hopes that the nation will follow suit in making alliances that stretch beyond just music.

New Artists

On the tenth anniversary of Coke Studio in 2017, the General Manager of Coca-Cola Pakistan & Afghanistan, Rizwan Khan said, “We have

⁶⁰ Images Staff, “Coke Studio’S ‘Muaziz Saarif’ Is the Feisty Shafi Sibling Collab We’ve Been Waiting For,” *Images*, February 28, 2022, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189618>.

come a long way since we embarked on this challenging journey a decade ago. Looking back, we feel greatly humbled that Coke Studio has been able to achieve so much, in terms of bringing virtually unknown or little known musicians into the national limelight, re-introducing music genres like qawwali and Sufi music to the youth of Pakistan, continuing to stay true to the promise of producing quality fusion of music and practice playing an important role in reviving the music industry of Pakistan.”⁶¹ Season 14 flipped this formula on its head—it was the youth paving the way for a fresher soundtrack for the nation from associate producers, musicians, art directors, and of course, artists. The new season very much marks the rise of a youth-led mediascape in the nation and its intention to foster icons of the future.

“Peechay Hutt” checks all the boxes above. Hailed as a “youth anthem in these modern times” by Xulfi,⁶² the track is a pop-funk mix featuring rapidly growing Gen-Z artists, Hasan Raheem and Justin Bibis with an electro beat by Talal Qureshi. The video begins with video game characters of the artists, a visual testament to the song’s attempt to bridge the generational gap between music—but more largely, the generational gap in the nation as a whole, with the advent of social media, shifting politics, and growing calls for a more *modern* Pakistan. Coke Studio provides an avenue for the younger generation to make its case; the import of new artists into the regional space and the export of those same artists transnationally builds new cultural hubs and new fandoms that generate an imagined image of the Pakistani state. Coke Studio recognizes that accessibility via social media wields more influence—something younger artists are adept at.

⁶¹ Whiterock, “COKE STUDIO PAKISTAN—MONUMENTARIES,” *Whiterock*, December 22, 2021, <https://whiterockentertainment.com/coke-studio-pakistan-monumentaries/>.

⁶² Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio 14 | Peechay Hutt | the Magical Journey,” February 19, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leK9_5oKhVY.

“Mehram,” a collaboration between Asfar Hussain and Arooj Aftab—who are not Gen-Z but are fairly new to their celebrity status—achieves this same goal. Aftab won a Grammy mere months after Coke Studio’s premiere, and the sheer publicity that came first with her Coke Studio debut and second with her Grammy win catapulted her beyond both the USA’s and Pakistan’s borders. “Mehram” was the first song in Coke Studio history with a female producer and arranger, marking changing tides in Pakistan’s entertainment industry at the very least. In a country marred by its treatment of women, Coke Studio truly strives to record even the smallest victories to show globally—and to the state, of course—benefits from this documentation regardless of its reality.

Postmodern

Pakistan has long struggled with issues of modernity and threats of Westernization, as the two seem to be synonymous. However, the entertainment industry has, for decades, provided social commentary on this very problem via movies and dramas, and the music landscape in Pakistan is no exception. Cultural commodities in Pakistan seem to address the issue at hand whilst still narrating a Pakistan-oriented modernity that is careful in its reverence to Pakistani traditions and culture. Coke Studio manages to walk the delicate line of fusion through the postmodern sounds of pop, RnB, rap, and nu-metal.

“Sajan Das Na” marks Aslam and Mustehsan’s second song of the season and Aslam, as Pakistan’s resident singer, said that he wanted to “experiment” and “channel [his] energy into new sounds of music and new genres ...”⁶³ This is his rap debut, and while Mustehsan is limited to her regular pop sound in “Sajan Das Na,” the harmony of both genres harnesses their talents in a way that enhances the fact that the song utilizes non-traditional modes of music. Coke Studio is constantly evolving faster than the state, and because of this uneven race, the

⁶³ Coke Studio Pakistan, “Coke Studio 14 | Sajan Das Na | the Magical Journey,” January 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXMyfXhmir0>.

nation state has no real qualms with losing if it benefits the country's brand. The different display of genres and Coke Studio's willingness to experiment allows the state apparatus to place Pakistan's image on the same footing as the international community it competes with. What the state lacks in development, economy, and progression, Coke Studio makes up for in music.

"Ye Dunya" manages to bridge together rap, rock, and nu-metal complete with a tagline, "Embrace your compassion in an ever changing world and remember, you are not alone."⁶⁴ This three-way collaboration between Karakoram, Talha Anjum, and Faris Shafi aims to situate Pakistan within a broader context of modernity. Shafi's rap recalls Ismat Chughtai, a 1930s Marxist Indian novelist who wrote of female sexuality and class conflict, and while Shafi's own music is politically charged, Coke Studio often shies away from overt references to politics, save for patriotism. "Ye Dunya" is a culmination of the changes that are needed in Pakistan expressed through rap and rock. Even with these postmodern genres, reminders of Pakistan's identity still shine through; the song's chorus includes a reminder of God and Shafi makes a passing reference to the Shalimar Gardens, a Mughal-era landmark. The appeal of Coke Studio lies broadly in its ability to uplift the nation-state without a regression into overly saturated stereotypes. It captures the modifications the ethnoscape yearns for in a modern nation-state, and archives it for future generations—or perhaps, saves it as a reminder that the future is hopeful.

Conclusion

In this analysis of Season 14, Coke Studio does operate as a transnational archive that showcases Pakistan's largest commodity: culture. This transnational archive enters a highly globalized world, and

⁶⁴ Coke Studio Pakistan, "Coke Studio | Season 14 | Ye Dunya | Karakoram X Talha Anjum X Faris Shafi," February 12, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwJdfyDYhHs>.

by using Coke Studio as its mode of soft power, Pakistan effectively designs an ideoscape within its mediascape. Coke Studio is a romanticized construction of a Pakistan the state wants to build—or at least, the Pakistan it wants to present to the world. While the research in this paper is limited by a single season, future studies that focus on Coke Studio more broadly as an entity would serve well as an argument. Using a chronological lens, Coke Studio's position in Pakistan, and to the state, has changed since its inception, and a case study of all fourteen seasons with a sharper focus on the same themes would aid in developing the hypothesis further.

APPENDIX A

Figure 1

SPIRITUAL	POSTMODERN	NEW ARTISTS
<i>Tu Jhoom</i>	<i>Sajan Das Na</i>	<i>Mehram</i>
<i>Beparmvah</i>	<i>Ye Dunya</i>	<i>Peechay Hutt</i>
POSTCOLONIAL	COLLABORATIVE	NON-URDU
<i>Pasoori</i>	<i>Muazziz Saarif</i>	<i>Neray Neray Vas</i>
<i>Go</i>	<i>Phir Milenge</i>	<i>Kana Yaari</i>
<i>Thagyan</i>		

APPENDIX B

Dictionary (2 - 13: Translations from Coke Studio)

1. *Hum Dekhenge*: We will see
2. *Tu Jhoom*: Transcend into a greater realm to discover the soul's gem
3. *Kana Yaari*: First friendship
4. *Sajan Das Na*: O Beloved
5. *Mehram*: My own
6. *Neray Neray Vas*: Always be with me
7. *Pasoori*: Waiting
8. *Ye Dunya*: This world
9. *Peechay Hutt*: Back off
10. *Muazziz Saarif*: Honorable subscriber
11. *Beparwah*: Indifferent
12. *Thagyan*: Trickery
13. *Phir Milenge*: We will meet again
14. *Kathak*: one of the eight major forms of Indian classical dance
15. *Sarang*: bowed, short-necked string instrument played in South Asian traditional music
16. *Sitar*: plucked stringed instrument, originating from the Indian subcontinent
17. *Qawwali*: a style of Muslim devotional music now associated particularly with Sufis in Pakistan
18. *Tabla*: a pair of twin hand drums from the Indian subcontinent
19. *Dholak*: a two-headed hand drum, a folk percussion instrument
20. Strings: Pakistani pop/rock band composed of two members, plus four live band members; 1988 - 2021

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 2-3 (1988): 295–310.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Dhanwani, Rashmi. "Coke Studio: Remapping Translocality." *Academia.Edu*, 2014.
- Lessig, Lawrence. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. Penguin, 2008.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: Volume One*. Courier Dover Publications, 2019.
- Marx, Polanyi. *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Press, 2001.
- Morley, David. "Television, Technology, and Culture: A Contextualist Approach." *The Communication Review* 15, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 79–105.
- Mukhtar, Najia. "Using Love to Fathom Religious Difference – Contemporary Formats of Sufi Poetry in Pakistan." *Contemporary South Asia* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 26–44.
- Nye, Joseph. "Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept." *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 1 (February 21, 2017).
- Raja, M. A. Shankar. "Digital Integrated Marketing Communication (Dimc) and It's Logical Relationship With Co-Branding and Brand Values With Reference to Coke Studio." *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 1.
- Williams, Raymond. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. Verso Books, 2016.
- Williams, Richard David, and Rafay Mahmood. "A Soundtrack for Reimagining Pakistan? Coke Studio, Memory and the Music

Video.” *BioScope South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 2 (December 1, 2019): 111–28.

Videos

Coke Studio Pakistan. “Coke Studio | Kana Yaari | the Magical Journey,” January 19, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlXwl2Moke8>.

“Coke Studio | Season 14 | Ye Dunya | Karakoram X Talha Anjum X Faris Shafi,” February 12, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwJdfyDYhHs>.

“Coke Studio 14 | Beparwah | the Magical Journey,” March 7, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bflQoJkXtlY>.

“Coke Studio 14 | Muaziz Saarif | the Magical Journey,” February 28, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORkSVj6EqYg>.

“Coke Studio 14 | Peechay Hutt | the Magical Journey,” February 19, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leK9_5oKhVY.

“Coke Studio 14 | Sajan Das Na | the Magical Journey,” January 24, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXMyfXhmir0>.

“Coke Studio 14 | Thagyan | the Magical Journey,” March 13, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrfQDlIDzSA>.

“Final Results of Census-2017 | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics,” n.d. <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/final-results-census-2017-0>.

Web Articles

AFP. "Sound of Mughal-era Sarangi Fading Away." *DAWN.COM*, April 9, 2022. <https://dawn.com/news/1684125>.

Ani. "Beat Your Quarantine Blues With Abida Parveen, Naseebo Lal's 'Tu Jhoom.'" *Telangana Today*, January 17, 2022. <https://telanganatoday.com/beat-your-quarantine-blues-with-abida-parveen-naseebo-lals-tu-jhoom>.

Berten, Hans. "Cultural Materialism," n.d. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0091.xml>.

De Kosnik, Abigail. *Rogue Archives. The MIT Press eBooks*, 2016.

Desk, Entertainment. "'Thagyan' Is a Return to What 'Coke Studio' Used to Be, With a Twist." *The Express Tribune*, March 14, 2022. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2347871/thagyan-is-a-return-to-what-coke-studio-used-to-be-with-a-twist>.

Human Rights Watch. "Pakistan," January 13, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/pakistan#72d33e>.

IMAGES Staff. "Coke Studio Collaborates With the Foreign Ministry to Launch a Coffee Table Book." *DAWN Images*, July 9, 2021. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1187980>.

Khan, Mahrukh. "Tu Jhoom, the First Release of Coke Studio Season 14 Is a Massive Hit." *BOL News*, January 15, 2022. <https://bolnews.com/amazing/2022/01/tu-jhoom-the-first-release-of-coke-studio-season-14-is-a-massive-hit/>.

‘Pasoori’ Ranks Number Three on Spotify’s Global Chart — Ali Sethi Says Xulfi Predicted It Would a Year Ago.” *Images*, March 8, 2022. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189671>.

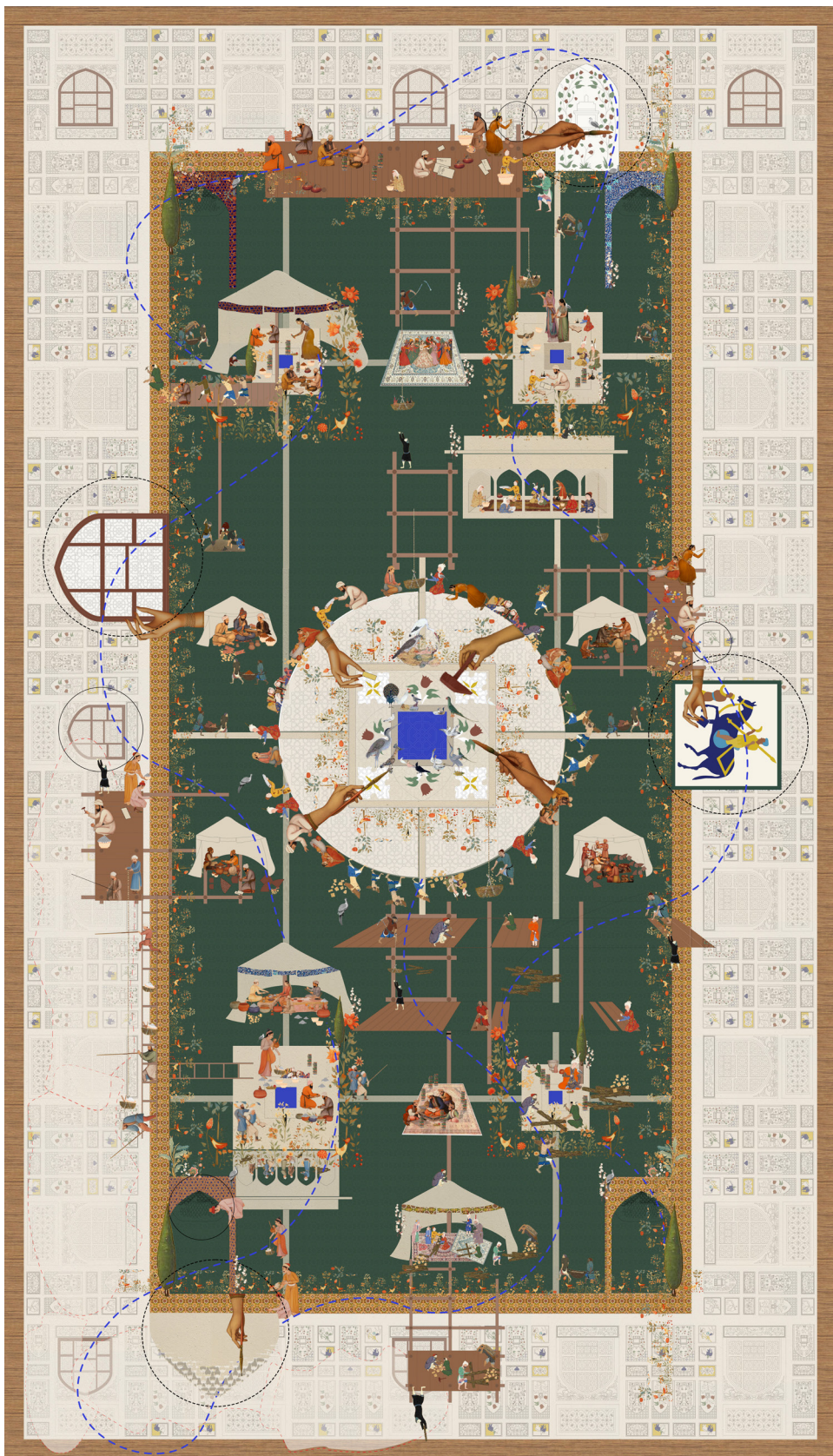
“People Can’t Get Enough of Coke Studio’s ‘Pasoori’ by Ali Sethi and Shae Gill.” *Images*, February 8, 2022. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189448>.

Spotify. “Spotify Pakistan Partnered With ‘Coke Studio’ This Season to Amplify Artists in the Region and Beyond — Spotify.” Spotify, March 23, 2022. <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2022-03-23/spotify-pakistan-partnered-with-coke-studio-this-season-to-amplify-artists-in-the-region-and-beyond/>.

Staff, Images. “Coke Studio’S ‘Muaziz Saarif’ Is the Feisty Shafi Sibling Collab We’ve Been Waiting For.” *Images*, February 28, 2022. <https://images.dawn.com/news/1189618>.

Staff Report. “Ministry of Foreign Affairs Acknowledges Coke Studio’s Role in Promoting Pakistani Culture.” Daily Times, July 11, 2021. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/789095/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-acknowledges-coke-studios-role-in-promoting-pakistani-culture/>.

Whiterock. “COKE STUDIO PAKISTAN – MONUMENTARIES.” Whiterock, December 22, 2021. <https://whiterockentertainment.com/coke-studio-pakistan-monumentaries/>.



The Magic Carpet: Crafting Paradise

Sarah Samsoudin

A Heterotopian Exploration

This piece was designed for the design studio *The Magic Carpet* (ARCH 501), conducted under the supervision of Professor Goli Jalali at the University of British Columbia's School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture as part of the Master of Architecture program in Fall 2023.

Heterotopia is a notion that French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault describes as being an embodiment of the Persian Carpet, as “an ideological concept as well as a spatial plane representing the idea of paradise.”¹ Carpets, as both commodities and moving images, emerged in the West as the result of encounters between European colonialism and South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African societies and cultures. The modern epistemological framework, rooted in colonial discourse, relied on the rigid dichotomization of modern versus traditional, occidental versus oriental, and civilized versus primitive. This framework imposed hierarchical structures based on class, race, and gender.² In response, this project aimed to counter colonial modernity's construction of the carpet as a site of Oriental otherness and rather show the hybridity and *mélange* visible in carpets resulting from centuries of cultural borrowing and exchange. The carpet is not only a static rendering of a plane surface; it is a dynamic interweaving of images and a looping of motifs which tells stories—acting as an

¹ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.

² Minoo Moallem, *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

incubator in which social, cultural and political positions can be expressed.

Juxtaposed Narratives of Spiritual Craft

My project explores this notion by conceptualizing the spatial geometry of a carpet inspired by the Islamic *Charbagh* garden, juxtaposing the narrative of the Sufi poem *The Conference of the Birds* with the ongoing restoration of the Lahore Fort in Punjab, Pakistan. The analysis centers on the re-interpretation of the spatial layout of the *Cracow Carpet of Paradise*, a Tabriz-manufactured textile from the second quarter of the sixteenth century, commissioned for Kraków, Poland (Figure 1).³ The visual representation is an exploration of the Neo-Miniature style, as an ode to the Persian and Mughal Miniature Paintings and an act of resistance to colonial dialogues, celebrating South Asian artistic legacy. This method allows for a dynamic interplay between architectural representation and poetic allegory.



Figure 1: The *Cracow Carpet of Paradise*. 2743 x 315 in, Carpet Textile. By Anonymous Artist. 1525.

³ Louvre, *Moitié de tapis à décor dit "jardin de Paradis," Tapis dit "de Paris-Cracovie,"* 2005, <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010330919>.

The Conference of the Birds, authored by the Persian Sufi poet Farid Ud-Din Attar, recites the journey of a pilgrimage of birds seeking spiritual enlightenment. Their passage through seven symbolic valleys—Quest, Love, Knowledge, Bewilderment, Detachment, Unity, and Nothingness—mirrors the stages of inner transformation and divine recognition.⁴ This narrative is paralleled with the historical and contemporary transformations of the Lahore Fort. Constructed during the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan as a Mughal imperial residence in the sixteenth century, the fort later came under the control of Ranjit Singh during the Sikh Empire in the late eighteenth century and subsequently fell under British colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century. During this period, several of the fort's Islamic architectural elements were obscured or destroyed as acts of colonial censorship. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, restoration efforts commenced to reclaim and preserve this significant heritage site. The fort was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1981, and since 2004, its restoration has been overseen by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.⁵ These restoration efforts have involved training local artisans and laborers from the Walled City of Lahore—one of Pakistan's most historically significant yet economically marginalized communities—thereby contributing to socio-economic upliftment and the revitalization of traditional South Asian craftsmanship and cultural pride.

⁴ Farid Ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, translated by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi (Middlesex, England: Harmondsworth, 1984).

⁵ UNESCO, *Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore*, 2012, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/171/>.

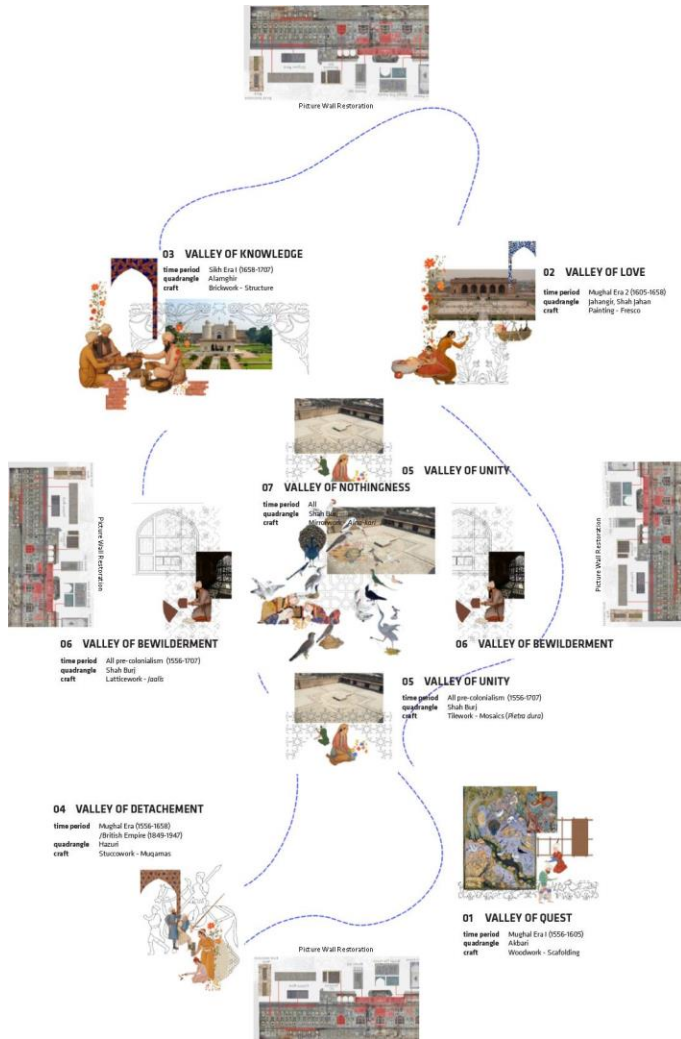


Figure 2: Process Drawing: Juxtaposed Narrative Diagram, *The Magic Carpet: Crafting Paradise*. Digital collage. By Sarah Samsoudin. November 2023.

The central narrative of *The Magic Carpet* (Figure 2) thus follows the journey of laborers traversing the quadrangles of the Lahore Fort, learning from master craftsmen across seven distinct spaces—each corresponding to one of Attar’s Valleys—while completing the reconstruction of elements of the outer border representing the

Picture Wall, one of the site's most intricate architectural features. This journey culminates in their transformation into master craftsmen, as they complete the restoration and gain spiritual enlightenment through recognition of the divine within themselves, reaching the Ultimate Paradise.

The final piece is an encapsulation of fifteen weeks of intense studying, analyzing, researching and diagramming, which resulted in a contemporary reimagining of the *Cracow Carpet* that intertwines a Sufi allegory of spiritual aspiration with the modern realities of South Asian cultural heritage and social development—an act of *Crafting Paradise*.

Bibliography

- Attar, Farid Ud-Din,. *The conference of the Birds*. Translated by Dick Davis and Darbandi Afkham. of Penguin Classics. Middlesex, England : Harmondsworth, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. 1986. “*Of Other Spaces*.” *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22–27.
- Koolhaas, Rem D. & Zenghelis, Elia & Zenghelis, Zoe & Vriesendorp, Madelon. *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture, Exhausted Fugitives Led to Reception, Project*. 1972.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.10791070>.
- Louvre. *Moitié de tapis à décor dit "jardin de Paradis". Tapis dit "de Paris-Cracovie"*. 2005.
<https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010330919>
(accessed 09 05, 2023).
- Michaud, Philippe-Alain. *Flying Carpets*: Académie De France à Rome, Villa Medici. Rome: Drago. 2012.
- Moallem, Minoo. *Persian carpets: The nation as a transnational commodity*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- The Aga Khan Trust for Culture. *Lahore Fort Precinct & Buffer Zone Masterplan*: Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme. Lahore: AKTC, 2018. Book.
- UNESCO. *Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore*. 2012.
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/171/> (accessed September 10, 2023).

