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# Sufi poets, story-telling as performance and non-violence in Indian documentary film

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## Anne Rutherford and Laleen Jayamanne interview Anjali Monteiro and K. P. Jayasankar.

Feature image: Still, *So Heddan, So Hoddan* (*Like Here, Like There)*, dir. Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, 2011. Reproduced with permission of the filmmakers.

*In a context in which inter-communal violence has wracked much of India since the riots of 1992, the pastoralist communities of Kachchh, on the border between India and Pakistan, remained peaceful. In* So Heddan So Hoddan (Like Here Like There)*, multi-award-winning Indian documentary filmmakers, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, set out to explore the role of the Sufi poetry of Shah Abdul Bhitai in the lives of pastoralist musicians in this area and its contribution to communal harmony. The filmmakers have worked with documentary for over two decades to validate the knowledges and experiences of marginalized communities, but at the same time their work constantly challenges the power structures and assumptions inherent in the documentary form. Anne Rutherford and Laleen Jayamanne spoke to the filmmakers about how they use documentary, the aesthetic influences on their work, the ways they work with camera, rhythm and editing, the political contexts within which they work and how their film seems to produce a cinematic equivalent of Sufism.*

*Jayasankar and Monteiro are Professors at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, involved in media education, research and production. They have made over 40 documentaries and have jointly won 32 national and international awards. Their new book,* A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India*, will be released by Sage in November 2015.*

**AR:** In 2013, *So Heddan So Hoddan* won the Basil Wright Memorial Prize from the Royal Anthropological Institute at the Edinburgh Ethnographic Film Festival. How do you place *So Heddan* within the ethnographic tradition?

**AM:** We've never thought of ourselves as ethnographic filmmakers or of our film as ethnographic. In fact a lot of our work stems from a critique of the ethnographic gaze. Of course ethnography itself has questioned its own premises and has become far more complex and nuanced and there are several different ways of doing ethnography. But there is one thing that underlies any kind of ethnography, however much it might question relationships of power between the ethnographer and her subjects, which is the whole idea of the image as evidence. We would like to problematise that idea and look at the image as something that is a far more diverse creature. This whole pact with evidence that has been so much a part of the documentary tradition has in many ways impoverished that tradition.

**KPJ:** But we do use ethnographic methods at times because we find them useful in terms of questioning some of the premises that the documentary comes from. It makes it more layered, and the storytelling becomes more tentative and precarious. We use ethnographic methods to question particularly the location from which the author is coming, or how the narrative is being constructed. And some reflexive practices that we engage with come more from ethnographic film.

**AR:** You have talked about this film as an encounter between your story telling methods and the story telling traditions of the community you're working with. What do you bring and what comes from those traditions?

**KPJ:** It's very tentative, we understand we are working with a medium that most of our subjects are not familiar with. They have their own traditions of storytelling and we are bringing to this encounter another kind of storytelling. So we want to question this premise of documentary film narratives made by us about them for consumption by us. How does one begin to subvert this?

**AM:** In *So Heddan* we are moving towards trying to work with the experience of time and space in that location. Because it is a very different experience of both time and space and the experience of that music, in that time and space, which in many ways opens up pathways to look at oneself and the world, and one's relationship with it. Big questions that we don't have answers to, like grief or one's own finitude or things that perhaps are confronting and uncomfortable. These traditions open up the possibility of entering those terrains. If not at a rational level, even at other levels — of the affective, and subconscious levels of one's being.

**AR:** What strikes most people watching the film is how much you translate that affective dimension into a language of the camera, the wide open space and the low horizon and the temporality, the slow unfolding of the film. The film is talking about Sufi poetry in the life of these musicians and there's a sense that you're almost trying to find a filmic equivalent of Sufism, to find a Sufi camera. How do you think about what you do with the camera?

**KPJ:** *So Heddan* is our most recent work and we've been looking for how to resolve certain dilemmas in our documentary work. Sufi poetry, probably for the first time, offered us the pathway because Sufi poetry speaks about the idea of the ephemeral, of transience, the idea of the finitude of the human being in the large scheme of things. It also speaks about many interpretations that are inherent in any text. So it opened many pathways and one could legitimately begin to look at the image differently. It emboldened one or empowered one to do things, which one wanted to do, but one did not realise were possible within the documentary genre.

**AR:** You say some of the images within the film are an embodiment of this. Could you give an example?

**KPJ:** In *So Heddan* there are many shots which allow things to happen without much intervention of the cameraperson, so we allow things to wash over. It could be an animal that walks across or a bird or a truck that passes by. We as human beings have very little control over what transpires, though we would like to have agency and control of life and the world itself. I think that's a fictitious direction in which we find ourselves headed. So, we decided to keep those shots that way, so that you get a feeling that life is something fleeting, that points to our own finitude. And it's informed by transience and grief. Grief is the most fundamental experience of human existence.

**LJ:** The music in the film conveys a rich sense of longing for some kind of plenitude. It's like in that moment of singing, of intensifying that moment, you're really aware that that moment is gone, it's going as you're watching it.

You said the image is a diverse creature, you're saying creature as if it's alive. We do believe that cinema is a form of life. From my point of view, it's alive in a strange way and through this poetry, through this encounter of the land, of their sense of tradition, of their intense engagement with the constrictions of the present moment, it's as though these have opened up something in your own practice. It's exciting to hear you speak like this about the image as having a certain power that you are in awe of in some sense. Hearing the songs, seeing that instrument and the way it's made has made a difference in your practice. We are told that each string of the instrument has a story to tell. Was there not one string that was called the tongue of the instrument?

**KPJ:** Yes, *zuban*, that's the main string, the tongue which speaks.

**LJ:** And each string is made of different material so it has a different genealogy?

**KPJ:** That's right. *Zuban* also means language. In Urdu, *zuban* is tongue, like in mother tongue. *Zuban* also means literally tongue.

**AR:** So there is a sense that the instrument is speaking even as the musician is singing the words of the poetry.

**LJ:** You're saying if you see a bird fly or walk across or an animal or a truck you observe it, engaging with that moment, deferring your instinct to cut it at a particular rhythm that you have mastered, at a particular moment. My sense of watching the film is that it's slow because it is not edited but there are speeds there — of nature, of life, of light, we can't just call it slow.

**KPJ:** How do you begin to embed this kind of different kind of time into the film, because time is an important aspect of filmmaking. When you take a shot like that, it brings with it an actual rhythm and actual time and then you don't have to bother about when to cut it, because something has entered your frame and it goes out of the frame on its own. There's a natural moment at which it gets out of the frame. You are released from the responsibility of creating dynamism through mise-en-scène.

The cut happens on its own and through the rhythm one is observing. The mastery is only in setting up that event. In the end what happens is beyond your control. You expect something to happen, but it need not, for example, in the first shot in *Do Din Ka Mela,* of four animals walking across the horizon. There's little control over what transpires. Before setting up that shot we tried taking several shots of the animals and then at some point we came to the idea of leaving the camera alone and allowing the rest to happen and it did happen and brought immense pleasure to us and also created an event in time. They all walked across at their own pace. These are *nilgais*, a family of deer. They walk across the horizon and it takes about three minutes.

**AM:** The opening shot…

**KPJ:** They are really large animals, wild animals. They just walked across and we didn't know what was going to happen. So one animal goes and then the second one comes and the third comes and is worried about the camera. Stops and looks at the camera and the animal in front also stops, allowing that animal to come near, so that they can walk together. And then another one comes. And so there is a desire to set up an image, to create an image, but there is also a desire to let go of it, let it speak to you — a desire to control and a desire to abdicate, at once. Like the Buddhist idea of the middle path — neither desire nor non-desire. Stick to a path. Those are moments when you're caught between desire and non-desire.

(http://sensesofcinema.com/assets/uploads/2015/09/Usman-Jatt-in-So-Heddan-So-Hoddan.jpg)

Usman Jatt in *So Heddan So Hoddan*

**AR:** In *So Heddan* that sense of the non-interventionist camera feels integrated with the philosophy of the film itself. That's what is remarkable about this film, there's an integration of those camera strategies and the content of the film.

**AM:** I'd like to go back to the thing you were saying about the image as a diverse creature, this immense pleasure that the image can bring. We are also inspired by somebody like Vertov and the way in which he sees the camera as opening up a plenitude of possibilities for the image that transcends what the human eye can perceive. And this whole idea of the secret life of things. A bit of plastic bobbing on a lake and gliding past would, to the human eye, be a banal image, not worthy of note or you would look at it in a different way, "Oh how dirty is this lake!" But when the camera sees that, it can become a very lyrical and poetic image that brings up a whole lot of associations, your own journey through life, your finitude, memories, a whole lot of very complex and rich associations that imbue that image with something that goes far beyond. It resonates for each person. For Jayasankar as the cameraperson, he sees an image like that and is able to see the poetry in that image. And the secret life that objects which populate our world lead behind our backs, so to speak.

**AR:** Your camera is very playful and really alive to the multiplicities of rhythm in any situation. You might talk about it as poetry or a lyrical quality but when you get it in the frame, above all else, it becomes rhythm. The rhythm is so powerful all the way through the film.

**KPJ:** In many cases the rhythm is set up, I set up a frame very carefully and I spend a lot of time looking. After having done that, in *So Heddan* I allowed things to take their own course.

**LJ:** Is that a new aspect in your relationship to the camera?

**KPJ:** No I've experimented with this all along in my work, the way that you see the world differently through the camera. Here the subject matter really worked with what we wanted to do. Sufi poetry empowered us to push it further — the fact that the main protagonist is a Haji, he's a Sufi scholar, and all the time he sees life and the world through Sufi poetry.

**AR:** In *Do Din Ka Mela*, there is a shot where you go into the dust flickering in the light and the camera goes into it and plays with it but then comes back. In *So Heddan* you take a very similar technique and go into the steam coming off a kettle but rather than pulling it back to something that is apparently more motivated, you let that drifting into the flickering steam take the viewer into the music. It's like the music and the poetry give a motivation to what you want to do with the camera. It's interesting that you say it emboldens you, it gives you space to play with that more. To me, it's in that play that the pleasure of the film emerges. It's an enormously pleasurable film to watch and part of the pleasure comes from playfulness and rhythm and that's all about the camera.

**LJ:** You said you are influenced by Mani Kaul's thinking and it strikes me that Sufis don't see the world through single point Renaissance perspective. That's a scientific way of creating subject and object so as to map the world and know and master it. The Sufi optic doesn't work on the assumption that I am the subject, the world is the object and I revolve around the sun. It's not like that.

I think the Sufi ethic is an ethic of joy. They're totally aware of the transience and play with it. This is a kind of realism about life and yet defying its very conditions with a deep awareness of everything as having its time and its duration and sensing it, this heightened capacity to sense.

This capacity to sense makes the world evocative. Some of the Sufi poets had a one-string instrument, just one string and I'm told that that comes from the carding instrument for cotton and then that became a musical instrument.

**KPJ:** In fact in Mumbai at least twenty years ago we would see people with that instrument, this is actually for carding cotton. They would take out the cotton from mattresses and do that in your house.

You asked about the relationship with the instrument. The relationship is always to do with reading. The word that I use is reading the *veena* or reading the violin. Not playing. At least in my language, Malayalam. We read a violin or read a guitar.

**AR:** The instrument is speaking to you?

**KPJ:** It's not only speaking, it's also opening up the possibilities, unfolding meanings — getting my instrument and reading it in a way that it produces a text.

**AR:** Like it's already in the instrument and you're finding it?

**KPJ:** Exactly. You read a flute, you don't play a flute…

**AR:** Do you think the instrument is understood as an animate object in itself? So that you're having an encounter with the instrument.

**KPJ:** It's an encounter, and it's sacred. It's not something that you play.

**AM:** Playing a game has this thing of who is the master. You master the instrument or you play an instrument.

**KPJ:** With the veena it's more humble…

**AR:** In English that relationship is embodied in the language — you master the instrument.

**AM:** But here there is a different relationship.

**KPJ:** It's an encounter between you and the instrument and the text that gets revealed.

**AR:** That seems to mirror the way you think about the camera and the image that you're taking. You're not mastering the image; you are in a way reading it.

**KPJ:** Reading the camera?

**AR:** Or deciphering what's in front of you with the camera. Reading what the camera reveals.

**KPJ:** I think that's a relationship that I have – the same kind of relationship an instrument has with its player. I don't know if I can say you read a camera. We do nothing to the image, we don't even do colour correction in our films. It's all as we obtain it. It is deceptively simple; it is what we get. But probably it can be read in a different way. One of the filmmakers we really admire is the Malayalam film maker called G. Aravindan. I was brought up on his writing and later his films. His films are deceptively simple. There is nothing in them that even textually could be dubbed an experimental shot. He takes a simple shot, but still raises many profound questions. So the idea of the shot with animals walking across—it is not inherently experimental. It's a simple shot that you obtain but which can lead to many quests. That's what probably Aravindan does with his films; very simple narratives and they can be read at many different levels.

(http://sensesofcinema.com/assets/uploads/2015/09/K.P.-Jayasankar-and-Harikumar-M.-.jpg)

K.P. Jayasankar and Harikumar M.

**LJ:** That's nice because it's linked to a fundamental question that interests us, about rhythm and the multiplicity of it. The minute you focus on nature, animals and the sentient world, one sees that it is the repository of rhythm. Rhythm is not what we create but rather we are part of the rhythm of nature.

**AR:** There is a sense here of actually, rather than constructing a rhythm with the camera, it's picking up the rhythms that are there.

**LJ:** You invoked Vertov, who never stopped exploring the vitality of matter. That's also the pleasure.

**AR:** When Anjali described the shot of the plastic going across the water, to me it's a pleasure in the materiality of that, the way that we experience that image. In your earlier work you talked about the calm rhythmic stillness of Chris Marker's films as an influence and you said that in this film you've come more to work with strategies or ideas that come out of Mani Kaul.

**KPJ:** Aravindan would also be a strong influence. They're very different. In Mani Kaul, you know that it's not a simple film, it is very intense, and then you watch Aravindan's film and it looks like a very simple film that unfolds, a simple story, but it's much more beyond that. I think, if I may generalise, the difference would be between Dziga Vertov and Kurosawa.

Vertov, from the very first shot, has to be approached differently; it subverts my expectations. But when Kurosawa opens a film like *Rashomon* it seems like I am going to see a story here. It pulls me in and works with my expectations and all along keeps on subverting my expectations. These, I think, are two different strategies of doing it.

**AM:** Vertov does it more in your face, whereas Kurosawa very subtly gets under your skin.

**AR:** Which is what *So Heddan* does. It is quite subversive but it is not overt.

**KPJ:** Exactly. We worked with this idea that it should look as simple as possible and work with the audience but it can subvert some expectations as it moves along. If I were to watch Aravindan and Mani Kaul, there is a difference, that's what I feel. Both work in their own way. With Mani Kaul, immediately you can say this is not a 'regular' narrative. Aravindan is more insidious, gets into your soul from a different entry point and also transforms it.

**LJ:** Tell us a little bit about Aravindan. He's from Kerala and you're from Kerala…

**KPJ:** He was a cartoonist. He did a strip cartoon, which talked about many things. It was called *Small Humans and the Big World*. It was like a cult comic strip, which appeared on the last page of a magazine for years and he was a great intellectual and a very well read person and talked about everything under the sun from poetry to art. Today people think of it as a graphic novel. It looks at the life of a middle class unemployed youth as he grows and becomes a business tycoon in the end. But that happens over many years. He also has an intellectual friend and they keep on discussing many things that happen around the world. This was in the sixties and leading up to seventies. He made his first film then called *Uttarayanam*, probably the first film I saw that touched me.

I must have been in my twenties. Then he made a couple more films, and some of these are very interesting. One film is about this person called Esteppan. He is a Christian. He just lives in the village and everybody has many stories about him. Some say that he is a saint, some say he's a thief, some say he's a smuggler. At the end of the story you never know who he was. A very simple narrative about this man, and in the end you find him just walking into the sea, into the sunset. Like Jesus Christ. They all have stories about him. It's very similar to *Rashomon*, many different narratives about the same person. And then he made this amazing film called *Kanchanasita* (about Ram and Sita). And the most interesting thing about this film is that he made it with an indigenous group of people who don't look like gods at all because in the Indian context gods are represented as very fair and wear all kinds of silk and gold. These people are dark and wear a loin cloth and they think of themselves as descendents of Ram. So he makes this film with them and it's an amazing film. It's a very simple film but it's a very profound film. And then there is also a film called *Once Upon a Time*, a very humorous film, which talks about the entry of electricity to a village which has never seen electricity before, and the kind of transformation that it brings with it. At the end there is a big tragedy and the whole village goes up in flames. But it's full of humour, it is a kind of parable for the idea of modernity. It's an amazing film.

**AM:** You have to understand the Kerala context, the complex characters… It's a very fascinating film that allows you to experience the space of the religion in a very different way. At the same time it's doing that not through a very complex story line, it's more through showing the characters and showing the way in which the electricity is entering that village and the people who come with the equipment to set up electricity and how they change that world and how things fall apart.

**KPJ:** It's an extremely gentle film, it doesn't shout from the rooftop—"Here is an experimental film", but it seizes you and then changes you. Whichever location you are coming from, it will talk to you and also change you. That's what we found fascinating.

**AR:** It's interesting that you nominate these two directors as primary influences when one of them is not a documentary maker and the other one is making very subversive documentaries.

**AM:** Both of them actually are not documentary makers. Mani Kaul made some documentaries but the bulk of his work is not documentary and even the documentaries he made, even in *Siddeshwari Devi* he uses actors, uses all kinds of other devices to explore the space of the music and to explore Benares and the experience of a woman who is both inside and outside. He takes the form of documentary and does all kinds of things with it. Particularly in an Indian context it is quite extraordinary, given the kind of horizon within which documentary was emerging, which was very much a Griersonian legacy. Mani Kaul was also making films for Films Division some of the time. And he was doing this extraordinary work that you don't know how to talk about.

**LJ:** So the difference is Mani Kaul comes from the film school, he is of the first generation of students coming from Indian film school at Pune, unlike Ghatak and Aravindan. He would be someone who knows not only the history of Indian cinema but also world cinema.

**AM:** In fact if you read Mani Kaul's writing, it is not just Indian or world cinema. He is deeply inserted into a whole understanding of Indian aesthetics, the various ways of seeing that underpin Indian philosophies. And he has a very powerful critique of the Renaissance world view and ways of seeing that it spawned. He is able to articulate it and theorise it and write about it. His writing is rich and dense and he's inspired by Bresson. He talks a lot about Bresson and Ozu.

**AR:** It's interesting that you're drawing on that aesthetic legacy in the way you work with documentary. When you describe the documentary as a diverse creature it seems that sense of what the image is and can be comes from a very diverse heritage.

**AM:** I think also both Aravindan and Mani Kaul are inserted in two modes of story telling that are quite different from — well, when you say, Western, it's also essentialising and flattening that out — but there are differences between the modes of looking at reality, looking at the performative. You're looking at narrative strategies within a lot of traditional performative modes in the Indian subcontinent, which are very different. For instance, in many ways, in the Indian context the relationship with the audience is much more dialogical and open-ended.

I'm talking about other narrative traditions like theatre, music, poetry or dance even. Mani Kaul also talks about how he is inspired by the plenitude of these different traditions and the very different ways in which they engage with the audience which is quite different from a performance in the "Western" context, where there would be a clear separation between the audience and the performer and the performer often tries to create an image of reality. Here the relationship is far more porous and shifting.

**LJ:** Whereas with any Indian singer there is a reaching towards an ecstatic state. This is common to both the *bhakti* (devotional) tradition (Hindu) and the sufi tradition (Islamic), this direct engagement with an ecstatic energy — you are drawn into it. You're moved to gesture toward and acknowledge that the musician has produced a sound that you haven't heard before.

**KPJ:** The musician will also acknowledge you.

**LJ:** It's a different energy, it's not like the west where the orchestra has the conductor and there's protocol there and musicians' bodies are erect. The Indian musicians are there, they are seated but they're moving.

**KPJ:** It's this affective dimension. They're not performing reality; reality is formed in the encounter with the audience. Somebody is singing, somebody is dancing to that, so they are not realistic performances but they are a composite of many things. In *rasa* theory, you don't portray a particular emotion but the emotion or the affect is formed in that encounter with the audience. It is not the performer himself or herself who produces it, but it's an encounter.

**AR:** So did Western classic realist theatre have a life in India?

**KPJ:** We can't really distinguish between the Western and the Indian, we are all products of this encounter. I think we are all climbing the mountain from different directions, but pre-modern traditions have always had a different way of looking at performance, the word and the narrative. It's a rediscovery; it's not some kind of nostalgia.

**AM:** Probably more than the west one should talk about a certain Enlightenment tradition, which was perhaps also contested in other Western traditions. All one is trying to say is that artists like Mani Kaul draw inspiration from certain non-dualist ways of seeing and being that have their location within certain practices, that in this case for them developed in the Indian subcontinent, which include folk traditions, classical traditions, a whole rich body of story-telling and performance that they are drawing upon explicitly or implicitly. I think all these artists are challenging certain kinds of dualities between the text and the audience, between the self and the world, and between here and there, which somebody like Bhitai is doing in *So Heddan*.

**KPJ:** Mani Kaul always maintained that there is no documentary and no fiction; there is cinema. And secondly there is a distinction that he keeps on talking about — between the profane and the sacred, which also signifies a certain attitude towards the narrative; he tries to subvert it.

In many narratives in the Indian traditions, the distinction between the author and the narrative is very thin. Also the distinction between the performer, the narrative and the audience. That distinction is being erased or reworked.

**AM:** It's a dynamic kind of space…

**AR:** I would like you to talk about this musical tradition as an oral tradition. How do you see the role of the film in relation to that tradition in this contemporary context, particularly in the lives of those musicians?

**KPJ:** There are a couple of very important moments in the film for us. One is when this Haji 's mother was pleased with him and he was asked what did he want in return. He said I want to learn this text [Bhitai's Rissalo] by heart. I can think of hundreds of other things I would have asked for. He is asking for this, which is amazing. Which also demonstrates a great faith in the text as something liberating rather than material goods or things around you. This is the most important thing in one's life. It's this devotion; it's amazing. That devotion connects with many other relationships in pre-modern ways that people have with the text. I mean they would think the text is a site of liberation, you encounter the text and then you know that there is a possibility of eman-

cipation or self-realisation. So in the Indian traditions this encounter is important. The second idea is that he speaks about how one couplet of Bhitai's text opens up 360 different interpretations, which still do not exhaust all possibilities, which we thought was amazing. So going back, in most Indian traditions that one speaks about, interpretation is an encounter between *shruti* and *smriti*. *Shruti* is literally translated as what is heard and all texts were heard and orally transmitted. So *shruti* means what is heard and I would rather translate it into English as text, because all texts were never written but oral. And *smriti* literally means recollection but I would think of it as the location of the interpreter, the ideological space of the interpreter. So when you encounter the text, the interpretation emerges. There were many interpretations possible for the text, 360 or 360 million or whatever. Then of course this question of relativism comes up—what is the right interpretation? Is it that everything goes? Is it that every interpretation is right and legitimate?

In the context of the documentary we are tied up with this idea of one structure, one meaning, linked with the idea of evidence. This is a refreshingly different way of looking at it and an image may actually mean many different things. In this case what is the right interpretation that we make of that image? As authors, we have none to offer, but if the interpretation helps you untie yourself of your own constituted self, then that is the right interpretation.

**LJ:** So that's a philosophy of the image, if you probe the Sufi idea.

It seems that when you say the image is a strange creature and ask the question, if and how the image speaks, it encodes a way of knowing the world. It's how you perceive the world. And this world is not purely the material, nor the totally supernatural, but it's something in between.

**KPJ:** If it allows you to critique this dualism of you and the real world and real self, if it allows you to question all the relationships, which are taken for granted, then the question of interpretation itself becomes an encounter, a dynamic thing. It's not that it is fixed. We thought these are also very important ideas when you talk about the documentary image because the documentary mode is being pushed sometimes in a direction in which it probably does not want to go to.

**LJ:** I want to go back to rhythm. We've talked about the oral tradition. You could be illiterate and still hear it and then it's transmitted as rhythmic sounds, a particular way of reciting a text, which is rhythmic. Recitation is essential to the transmission of the oral; it's easier to remember when something is rhythmic.

The ear is animated by the transmission which is in the realm of interpretation and translation. It's multifarious because each person's circumstances of reception are different and there are certain moments of repetition. Repetition is always with a difference. But when you have a priest saying every syllable has to be said like this, not like that, then the repetition enforces a sameness. That's why Sufis are interesting because they do not allow the priest to tell you how to recite the sacred texts.

**AR:** So the whole idea of authority is undermined?

**LJ:** Completely undermined.

**KPJ:** Particularly Kabir appropriates this idea. There is also the horizon where the texts were not available to the subaltern. The Dalits were not supposed to be reciting these texts, they had no access to them. Kabir is actually also talking about the same ideas in a language that is accessible to everyone—or Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. They're not scholars or Brahmins, who are reciting, these are weavers and pastoralists in their everyday lives and so that hierarchy of these knowledges is put to question.

**LJ:** They are in the vernacular, the poets and philosophers speaking in a tongue that everyone can understand, like the Buddha chose to speak in Pali rather than Sanskrit because Sanskrit is the tradition of Hinduism and he was critiquing Hindu practices.

**AM:** Kabir is a fascinating figure who was neither Hindu nor Muslim – he was adopted by Muslim weavers and someone who was very much inserted into the rhythms of everyday life and his poetry stems from them. And of course there are many Kabirs, not one Kabir, because Kabir is sung and recited all across central India, north India, this area too in Kachchh and everyone has their own community. Across Hindus, Muslims, and he is very strong in his critique. He makes a lot of fun of organised religion, he is always poking fun at ritual and at the same time talking about the whole idea of what is called *nirgun*, philosophy without qualities, without attributes. It's the same thing, constantly questioning a constituted self and a constituted world but in a very different way. Today one talks about something going viral in the context of the internet. When Kabir went viral, several hundred years ago, he went viral all across the subcontinent and it's amazing to see the way in which people in their everyday lives appropriate Kabir and sing and perform him across gender, class, caste, religion.

**LJ:** In the great oral traditions, whether of the west, medieval European or Indian or Australian Aboriginal cultures, what they don't pay homage to is chronology. These cultures survive because of recollection, the transmission of stories whether painted, danced or sung. They are interested in narrative as story telling, which is always performative. But modernity institutes a kind of chronological narrative and makes time into sort of an arrow. True we live, we are born and die and so our lives are irreversible and yet we live in simultaneity, we don't always go, that was the past and this is the present and that is the future. Right now we are in all of those times. So I agree that what we have to abandon is not narrative as story telling but chronology, as Kumar Shahani said. That is fundamental to my understanding of how premodern forms of story telling are still very important.

**AR:** I'd like to hear you talk about how you bring all of the things that we've talked about together — non-dualism, the non-predatory role of the camera, the role of rhythm, the role of performance of the oral tradition, the valorisation of non-instrumental images — how all of those things come together to produce a kind of politics that is not a didactic politics but is still profoundly political.

**AM:** The space that we are located in today is in some ways profoundly uncomfortable because of the growth of right wing fundamentalism all across the country, particularly in the state of Gujarat where Kachchh is located. And this religion of certainty, of dogma, creates objects of hate that enter the realm of the political in very malevolent ways. It forms a part of the horizon in which we as film makers, as human beings, are located and through which we engage with traditions that are contesting that appropriation of Hinduism or Islam or whatever. One of the problems with the way secularism was conceived in the Indian context is that it threw out the baby with the bathwater. It opposed religion, so to be secular, you had to be non-religious and in some ways that permitted the occupation of that space of the religious by a certain kind of fascist politics. As some scholars like Ashish Nandy have pointed out, it draws a lot from the violence of modernity. This is a larger project in which many of us are engaged, trying to reclaim or reappropriate these other ways of

seeing that are also part of being Hindu or being Muslim, being Sufi or just being someone. It's a way of reclaiming ways of seeing and being that have been marginalised by organised forms of religion and politics, but yet, which are very much part of the everyday of people, poor people, peasants and pastoralists and vegetable vendors in rural India. That body of knowledge, that body of understanding the self and the world, is something that inspires us to make a film like this.

**KPJ:** A film like this is important for our own practice because it questions this whole discourse of certainty, about meaning, about self, about the world, Hindu, Muslim — all that. This discourse has wreaked a lot of violence in the context in which we live and most of the violence can be attributed to this idea of "this is the right interpretation, others are all wrong". In India, as elsewhere, this has caused much of the violence. Sufi poetry opens up a pathway to question the notion of certain truths. It also provides a means to question the very project of documentary film making, because documentary film is tied up with this idea of evidence and connected to the one structure-one meaning idea. So it opens up pathways to critique both our practice of image making, as well as the political context. In that sense, we strongly believe that if you, in your narratives, can bring a questioning of the discourse of certainty, it's a significant step towards questioning all other certainties. Then it becomes a political project. If the narrative itself can be interpreted in 360 different ways, that's important and we think it's a significant pathway to question both the political and the project of documentary.

**LJ:** There is this map of the region in which your film is set and the wider cultural zone of contact. This is a very ancient map, this is Kachchh. And that's Sindh, which is now in Pakistan. So these people would walk from there to there, is it on salt flats that they would walk?

**AM:** It's called the Rann. It's a hundred kilometres of hard salt. It's not that it is completely barren; there are all kinds of animals. It has its own ecosystem.

People would walk from Kachchh across the desert and go into Sindh and come back. So these are all nomadic communities and they would take butter and ghee. So there was a very rich trade between Sindh and Kachchh.

**AR:** So under Partition these communities have been forced to become sedentary?

**AM:** They have become sedentary. Some of them continue to be kind of nomadic in India. But what happened with Partition was that some people got stranded on either side of the border. Haji talks about families being separated, some relatives here, some relatives there, and only those who have resources can cross. There are a few who do it but it is very difficult and if you cross the border illegally you could get killed and a lot of people have got killed crossing.

It is a heavily patrolled area, both by Indian and Pakistani troops and if somebody strays across the border they are picked up and could get put into prison. So, the other thing that is happening in this area is the change in the nomadic ways of life. More people are becoming settled. Also the pastoral lands which were common property are getting parcelled and privatised and taken over by the state and being given to cement factories and all kinds of industries. It's a very thinly populated area so it is easy to give away land. There will not be a lot of opposition. You will not displace a lot of people. These are common lands so they can be taken over. So there are all these processes of development that are also happening in this area — whether they are the

fishing people, the pastoralists or small farmers, they are all getting marginalised by the kind of development that the Narendra Modi government is bringing into play. Which of course the middle class and the industrialists are very happy about. That goes with a certain world view, a certainty of clinging onto an assertion of certain hard identities as Gujarati or Indian or Hindu and precisely all these notions of identity and border.

**KPJ:** And also there was a big earthquake there in 2001. Many of the houses fell down so now the government has built these concrete houses. In *So Heddan*, they actually used to live in these beautiful grass structures, reed structures, they were very light and portable. Even if there is an earthquake nothing will happen to you. That's all changed now.

**AM:** During the violence in Gujarat in 2002, Kachchh was the only area of Gujarat that was peaceful, where there was no violence.

**AR:** Why was that?

**AM:** Kachchh has very large Muslim communities; mostly Dalit and Muslims and so-called indigenous communities. I would say it is to do with these kinds of traditions, living with each other, living with difference. Everyone is marginalised so they were not inserted into those other mainstream discourses of the politics of hate and these people taking away our resources or these people being the bad ones. You do not find communities attacking each other and that kind of violence did not take place.

**LJ:** Did attacking mainly happen in urban areas?

**AM:** It did happen in many urban areas, it also happened in some rural areas. But in Kachchh there was no violence. We thought that was very fascinating. But today that is changing. So there is this kind of seeping in of Hindutva as well as some kind of hard Islamic Wahabism that's coming in. It's still relatively rural, peaceful, and these ways of seeing and being still live on.

**KPJ:** Much of the violence in the area can be related to the distinction between religion as a faith and religion as ideology. It is the latter that breeds intolerance. In these areas, it's more like faith. They were all interconnected with each other; livelihood connected them, because they would take each other's cattle for grazing. They all worked together so they depended on each other for livelihood.

**LJ:** Are these legends and stories sung by musicians known by everyone?

**AM:** Everybody knew them, whether they were Meghwals or Fakirani Jats.

**KPJ:** And there were common shrines to saints or *Pirs* and all communities went to their tombs. And with the hardening of these identities, it is looked down upon by Hindus— "You shouldn't be going there". Or they convert some of these into Hindu gods and Hinduise them. On the other hand, the more hard Islamists are now beginning to look down upon some of these shrines or also on performing music and dancing which is thought of as un-Islamic. This will all result in the disappearance of these oral texts.

**LJ:** I'd like to quote something that Annemarie Schimmel, a scholar of Sufism, says in this wonderful book *Legends of the Indus edited by Samina Quraeshi.* Schimmel says, 'legends and sagas are an integral part of culture and many of them resemble each other. The same motifs have been elaborated with details that are determined by the country's culture and social position, but fundamental feelings and great emotions seem to be the same for everywhere.'

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