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Claire Pamment

Comic Performance in Pakistan

The Bhānd

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Claire Pamment
The College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, USA

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Dedicated to Hajji Munir Hussain (1949–2016)

Foreword

By chance, in 2007, I was able to attend *Desi Natak*, a performance festival/conference in Rawalpindi sponsored by the National College of Arts. The event was spearheaded by Claire Pamment, who was at that time in the midst of the project that has resulted in this book. The meeting was full of excited scholars and performers from activist and popular theatres of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. There were feminists of the modern political theatre who were mocking the 'burqa-ization' of Pakistani women, and dancers asserting in their performance a woman's right to shimmy and joke on the popular stage. There were aged presenters who had participated in the Punjabi language popular theatre prior to partition, and others who were busy lampooning the current government corruption and impasses.

Scholars who had grown up in the 60 years since partition on Indian and Pakistani sides presented and recognised, as if for the first time, that theatres they researched separately within their own borders, were historically and ideologically linked: nationalist thinking/funding lines/visa impossibilities had obscured their common ground. The religio-political impasses—religious and political explosions of the 1947 partition, the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, everlasting Kashmiri border disputes, political fractures of 2001, communal religious rioting and ongoing toxic uses of religion in the politics of both India and Pakistan—have built tension into terror. These forces often make it hard for scholars to look across the national borders. Scholars at that conference found themselves laughing together and recognising joint roots of performance modes that had been severed. They were speaking openly of the religio-political forces

and caste divides that compartmentalise Muslim and Hindu or elite and 'low-class' performance realities. Claire Pamment has been zigzagging in the years since that festival across the troubled borderlands (geographic and ideological) of South Asia. She has sifted through a long history of shared strategies of comic performance. She sees humour as a celebratory release, critique and prod directed at the forces of class and power. In the process of writing, she upends the many preconceptions/misconceptions that plague Euro-American understanding of Muslim performance. Her work offers analysis of structures, histories and potentialities of comic performance in Muslim South Asia.

Pamment does three important things. First, she gives a structural analysis of the *ranga-bighla* ('straight man'–clown) pairing that we find as an important feature of popular performance from North India through Persia that has particularities (character types and slapstick) that are shared in many comic forms of Islamic areas. For example, *ruhozi* improvised theatre and *khemeih shab bazi* puppetry in Iran, as well as Rajasthan's *kath-putli* string puppetry and *bahurupiya* improvised comedy in India show significant commonalities. The pairing of the authoritarian and wise fool characters arguably ground improvised performance genres that flourished from North India through Turkey historically. Pamment helps us see this model of Muslim comic performance that historically and ideologically illuminates a wide cultural area.

Second, she taps literary and historical sources to show that the Brahmin jesters of Sanskrit literature and the wise fool of Sufism are parallel, and, arguably, two halves of a related phenomenon of South Asian comic practice that has persisted over time. By focusing on comedy, an aspect that historically and aesthetically gets short shrift in academic literature, she takes readers beyond the strictures of elites to a view of the people on the ground looking up. Historically, lower-class views are better represented in comedy than in the better-studied 'serious' genres. This work helps to fill in important history of South Asian comedy, both past and present, and does not see religion (Hindu or Muslim) as a significant dividing line in the way too often presented in contemporary political thinking. This lack of dichotomous thinking about religion historically applies to large parts of the Islamic world. I can certainly point to many parallel processes in Islamic areas of Southeast Asia where Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have generally co-habited where I have researched the arts (Indonesia and Malaysia).

Third, Pamment traces continuities from popular performance of Punjabi theatre to contemporary stand-up comedy and/or political lampoonery in modern media. Hence, she gives insight into contemporary Pakistan, showing the critical political and social conversations that animate present discourse. This extends understandings of a current geopolitical 'hotspot', offering data that social science researchers should be processing. She takes us into wedding parties and popular performances, and shows how comedy is a barometer of current concerns. The clowns with their slapsticks remain hard at work. They have a lot to talk about in contemporary Pakistan—which is much in need of healing humour. The *ranga* and *bighla* continue to respond to fractured lives and use comedy to seek redress in distressing times. She reminds us that these are comics with a mission when she quotes Munir Hussain: 'A *fankar* (artist) is a *fakir* (wandering ascetic).' As they wander they rap us with their slapstick and shock us into understanding as we laugh.

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Entertainments working groups; the Graduate Asian Studies Conference at University of Austin at Texas; De Montfort University's 'Playing for Laughs'; Association for Research in Popular Fictions at Liverpool John Moores University; and Yale University's South Asia Brown Bag Series. Pakistan National Council of the Arts, National College of Arts and Asian Study Group, provided meaningful platforms for sharing my research in interactive sessions with *bhānds* and comedians of the popular Punjabi theatre, along with the general public in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad, that were vital for ensuring the research remained grounded in the lived realities of performers and their work. I am particularly indebted to the participants of the Second International Seminar on Drama and Religion in Tehran (2010), whose excited conversations around the Sufi wise fool, and enabling interactions with *siyah bazi* performers, greatly enriched my thinking of clowning in the broader Islamic region. Thanks to faculty of Theatre and Performance Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University for inviting me to a short residency in 2009 where I was able to interact with *bhānds* in Delhi, and to Moti Lal Kemmu and M.K. Raina for generously sharing their insights and experiences of *bhānd pather*. I would also like to acknowledge those who have lent their expertise pertaining to related practices in the broader region: Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, Veronica Doubleday, Jamil Ahmed, John Emigh, William Darlymple and Shiva Massoudi.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the feature film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* (2005), directed by and starring the American comedian Albert Brooks, the US government sends the comedian on a mission to India and Pakistan in order to discover what makes Muslims laugh. While this mockumentary is not really about Muslim comedy, but rather a humorous take on US foreign policy's failure to come to terms with its 'Other', Brooks does not find anything funny in Muslim South Asia, or at least nothing he can comprehend. He dispassionately asks random passers-by on the streets what makes them laugh, and glances out of his car window, looking for comedy. The Red Fort where the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor Akbar once held court with the incisive wit of his jester companion Birbal, passes in the background, unnoticed. Brooks instead prepares his own gags as *the* thermometer for measuring what makes 300 million Muslims in the region laugh. In his characteristic trademark of performing narcissistic failure, Albert Brooks presents a stand-up gig in New Delhi, which, with its improvised set that replaces audience suggestions with his own stock jokes on Asians, instils an eerie silence in the auditorium. Because they do not laugh at his jokes, Brooks concludes, with lashings of irony, that comedy is not to be found in the Muslim world.

Published within months of the film (30 September 2005), the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, which sparked protests from Muslims throughout Copenhagen and all the way to Lahore (Klausen 2009), led to similar conclusions of comic absence, without the

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accompanying irony. Since then, the question has been taken seriously in mainstream debate: 'Does Islam have a sense of humour?' (Khan 2007) In response, there has been an upsurge of Muslim comedians in the West, ranging from Usman Azhar (of 'Allah Made Me Funny' fame), Sadia Azmat, Dean Obeidallah to Shazia Mirza (see Bilici 2010; Amarasingam 2010; Michael 2013; Spielhaus 2013), who are redressing stereotypes of Muslim sobriety and the accompanying Islamophobia. Yet, even these comedians are often discussed as inserting themselves into a medium which is outside of the jurisdictions of Muslim culture. As Amarasingam sees it, they are participating 'in a quintessentially American activity—standup comedy' (2010, p. 463). This perspective overlooks the diverse expressions of comedy in Muslim worlds, present and past. Though this field is too expansive and geographically varied to treat here, even extending as far back to the formative years of Islam in Arab lands are humour treatises and substantial evidence of jokers, jesters, buffoonery, comic poetry and farting contests (Rosenthal 1956; Landau 1958; Moreh 1992; Marzolph 2006, 2011). Comedy evidently thrived, and, as Ze'ev Maghen (2007) argues, was probably central to the founders of Islam, with various *hadith* (accounts of the Prophet) mentioning that Prophet Mohammad laughed so intensely that his molar teeth were visible (Maghen 2007; Marzolph 2011, p. 174). Much of this gets ignored, in favour of imagining a generic gravity, which is reinforced by John Morreall (1999) in his inadequately pithy summary: '*We* take pleasure in each other's company through music, singing, dancing, and sharing food and drink. In Islam, by contrast, life is *fundamentally* solemn.' (my italics, p. 127) The fundamentalism that Morreall draws attention to is not in the forces of political Islam, such as strains of Wahhabi-Islam that have narrowed spaces for artistic expression in many Muslim regions. Instead, his fundamentalism lies in the epistemological 'Othering' that here privileges a dominant Occident (We) against an inferior Orient (Islam) (Said 1978, p. 1–3). As Edward Said argues, Orientalism—with its legacy in colonialism's processes of domination—continues to shape discourse, producing such notions of the fundamental absence of comedy in Muslim worlds.

My own search for comic performance in Pakistan was initially met with similar narratives of absence. In my work in British theatre (2000–2004), I was frustrated by the dearth of South Asian Muslim culture on the stage, which when given space, entailed a stock repertory of violent butchers, volatile aunties, and religious fanatics. I was seeking alternative representations. Given an opportunity to visit Pakistan by the British Council in 2003, and

subsequent university postings in Lahore, I began looking for *bhānds*—wandering comedians, generally known in the Punjab as a slapstick-wielding male comic pair, who engage in witty repartee and perform in wedding festivities. The *bhānd* is frequently described as a *lok* or 'folk form', mentioned in its vast regional diversity in encyclopaedia entries on South Asian theatre, and often discussed as a facet of a bygone era in the sparse scholarship that exists on theatre in Pakistan (Leiter 2007, p. 52, Ahmed, Ahmed and Peerzada 1998, p. 356; Jaywant, Singh and Chaturvedi 1998, p. 131; Sinha 2004, p. 58–62, p. 490; Brandon 1993, p. 81, 211; Afzal-Khan 2005, p. 3; Erven 1992, p. 165). Correspondingly, my enquiries amongst friends in Pakistan's theatrical establishment led me to believe that 'folk' performance, such as the *bhānd* in Pakistan, had died out with Muslim nationhood, which accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947; whatever fragments may have survived were put into a coffin with General Zia-ul-Haq's rigid Islamicisation policies (r. 1977–1988). This is the mainstream narrative of theatre in Pakistan, which parallels dominant discourse that performance is anathema to Muslim culture.

John Emigh and Ulrike Emigh in their article on an Indian Rajasthani *bhānd-bahurupiya* performer (lit. many faces, an impersonator), aptly describe the *bhānd* as 'a joker in the deck, a "wild card" in an otherwise carefully labelled pack [who] serves as a reminder that even in the most rigid societies, identities are not fixed' (1986, p. 128). My search for the *bhānd*, was a search for the dynamics of the comic practice, with an acknowledgement that, like Emigh and Emigh's 'wild card', performance identities are not fixed but shape shifting. My first encounter with the *bhānd*, therefore, was not in a traditional 'folk' context, but in the contested illegitimacy of the popular urban Punjabi theatre. During my initial visits to Lahore (capital of the Punjab province, Pakistan) in 2003, this theatre was facing police raids, arrests of its performers, a government-imposed ban against women dancing, accompanied by newspaper reports that condemned its 'obscene dancers' and 'vulgar comedians'. In trying to understand the background of these actions, I approached practitioners from the parallel theatre. The parallel theatre movement began in agitation to the anti-art and anti-women policies of General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorial regime (1977–1988), and continues to pride itself on protest, social change and free expression. Knowing of their own struggles with theatre censorship, I expected to find some solidarity with the popular theatre artists. Instead, they only echoed the statements reported in the press, defaming the popular theatre's 'obscenity', 'vulgarity', and 'cheap thrills'. As Fawzia-Afzal Khan notes in her scholarship

on the parallel theatre, these practitioners with their Marxist leanings have looked down on the Punjabi theatre because of its commercial orientation (2005, p. 3), and early theatre practitioners of the Arts Council in Lahore (1960s–1970s) have regarded it as 'a "corrupt" form of the folk theatre of yesteryear' (2005, p. 3). Similar sentiments are found in Eugene Van Erven's chapter on the parallel theatre, which dismisses the popular theatre for its 'appalling sitcoms' (Erven 1992, p. 164). In the sparse contemporary literature on Pakistani theatre and performance, no study has explored the popular theatre's formal modes, organisational structures or history, let alone the *bhānd's* presence within it.[1]

The first full performance of this popular theatre that I attended was with my theatre students of the newly launched private Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, in 2003, who at the time were otherwise being primed in American and British drama, and 'the origins of theatre' in an Aristotelian vein. It was also their first time in the popular theatre; until then, their spectatorship had been limited to the two legitimate types of contemporary (upper) middle-class urban theatre. On the one hand, they had seen plays 'about women's rights' from the parallel theatre, and, on the other, *Moulin Rouge* (2003) and *The Vagina Monologues* (2003) from Pakistan's English theatre, with its predisposition for replicating British West End and American Broadway farces and musicals. Their parents called me repeatedly (before and during the performance): 'Are you sure it's safe? […] She [my daughter/sister/niece] has to leave!' Starting at 11.00 p.m., and attended by a mostly male audience from the lower-middle classes, this theatre runs in the shadow of endorsed life in the city. Its improvisational comedy and raunchy dancers are considered lowbrow by the elite and the upwardly mobile.

This theatre closely mirrored what little I had read about *bhānd* performance in Abdul Ghaffur Darshan's (unpublished) 1979 ethnography, *Lok [Folk] Theatre*, hitherto, the most detailed work on the Punjabi *bhānd*. It featured agile improvisations, rich repartee with Punjabi wordplay or *juggats*, pairings of authoritative characters and low-status comic types, and the activation of status interactions that subverted hierarchical positions. The play itself, *Eik Tera Sanum Khana* (*Your Place of Idols*, Jee 2003a, b), presented a meta-discourse on global capitalism that I had previously observed as shaping the other theatres: the contemporary parallel theatre being largely funded by international donor agencies and the English theatre by multinational corporations.[2] In brief, the plot revolved around a Euro-American agent who bribes local militia and then a dwarf to kill their

feudal ruler in an attempt to steal his village lands. The foreign agent and inner conspirators finally face defeat by the local *khusras* (a transgender community [in Urdu: *hijras*] who, since 2011, have been officially recognised as a distinct gender category, as *khwajasaras*, by the Pakistani state). They rebut the prevailing powers with the *bhānd's* fruity Punjabi *juggats* and the *khusras'* fluid gender transformations:

> MOTI KHUSRA: Don't throw your words at me, you unripened guava!
> […]
> AGENT: Empty this land!
> MOTI KHUSRA: Empty this land?
> A land that gives us food when we dance on it! *You* will have to leave this land, not us.
> AGENT: No man nor woman can stand in front of me.
> MOTI KHUSRA: What are men and women!
> The land's juices are in this *khusra*! (Jee 2003b)[3]

The quick-witted, gender-fluid, dancing *khusra* characters (here performed by cross-dressing male comedians) presented a counter to the ban on female dance that was still being enforced at the time of production. As opposed to suggestions that the *bhānd* was obsolete and the popular theatre a 'corrupt' form of a past 'folk' theatre, the *bhānd's* performance modes, offered a trickster-esque 'wild card'. The *bhānd* defied a fixed identity and played at the intersections of tradition and modernisation, forming a highly relevant dialogue with feudalism, neo-imperialism, state corruption, gender politics and performance restrictions of the period. In contrast to the narratives of absence, the *bhānd* was very much present in contemporary culture.

This story highlights several key themes, approaches and aims of this book. First, the presence of the *bhānd* and his art in the urban Punjabi theatre indicates that the *bhānd* is not bound to traditional or 'folk' performance contexts, but, on the contrary, presents exciting opportunities to map a living tradition that flows into diverse contemporary arenas. Second, as with the contemporary stigma attached to the popular theatre, the scarcity of *bhānd* and related performance practices in historical and academic texts implies cultural discrimination on account of rigid social status hierarchies. A fresh reading is necessary to understand and transcend the biases of the past with their markers of (il)legitimacy and (in)authenticity. Third,

in explaining how the *bhānd* and *bhānd*-like art move through contemporary and historical contexts, I extract what I call the *bhānd* mode, entailing a repertoire of performance content, patterns and processes that reappear across a range of comic genres. As a mode, the *bhānd* jostles the power hierarchies to expose and destabilise their ideological underpinnings. In so doing, the *bhānd* engages in self-transformation, adapting to changing forums and socio-cultural structures.

The *Bhānd*: a Living Tradition

In Pakistan, the *bhānd* phenomena is centred in and particular to the Punjab province—the main site of my research—but *bhānds* are also found in contemporary India's Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan and Kashmir.[4] The form varies with each region, adapting to specific socio-cultural contexts. In the Punjab, *bhānds* comprise a comic male duo: one, the *ranga*, an authoritarian 'straight man' who holds the *chammota* (a leather slapstick); and the second, the *bighla*, a chaotic and more radical clown.[5] The two engage in *juggat*: a snappy comic dialogue, rich with metaphoric wordplay. This basic structure finds diverse expression in a variety of sites. From performances in festive gatherings or *mehfils*, rural and urban weddings, *melas* (fairs), village variety shows known as 'drama parties', and in open village grounds and public streets, *bhānds* also inhabit newer fora and media, including, as previously mentioned, the popular urban Punjabi theatre and, more recently, mainstream television. This book traces the *bhānd's* presence in these contemporary locations and across various political eras, including: wedding *bhānd* performances in 2007, amidst anticipation of national elections (2008) which would mark the transition from a military to a democratic government; the popular theatre during the military President General Musharraf's (r. 1999–2008) liberalism; and the satellite television *bhānd* boom that arrived with the rule of the democratically-elected Pakistan Peoples Party (2008–2013). Based on my ethnographic fieldwork with wedding-*bhānd* performers in Lahore in 2007 (with follow-up interviews extending into 2015 in Lahore and in other Punjabi sites), I will briefly outline the tradition claimed by these performers, offer an overview of how their performance in the wedding event functions, as well as sketching its movement into other arenas.[6]

Present-day Pakistani *bhānds*, like contemporary Indian *bhānds* of Rajasthan, Kashmir and East Punjab, are often, but not always, Muslim.[7]

Hajji Munir Hussain, a senior Lahori *bhānd*, and one of my main informants, describes *bhānd* as *fakirs*, wandering Sufi ascetics, who venerate saints such as Shahbaz Qalandar, Madho Lal Hussain and Bulleh Shah, with their affinity towards Malamati Sufism, a branch of Sufi-Islam which invites social opprobrium. Munir relates that Bulleh Shah would say: 'the more blame a *fakir* takes upon himself, the closer he is to Allah' (in Hussain and Waseem 2015).

Pakistani *bhānds* often associate themselves with what is generally described as a *jati* or *zaat* (caste), the *mir aalim* (lit. learned men) or *mirasi* (custodians of heritage).[8] These titles are now often regarded as a general slur to performing artists and used for a wide variety of endogamous itinerant ethnic performance groups in Pakistan (McNeil 2005; Lybarger 2011), including: *doms*, *bhats* (genealogists, see Snodgrass 2006), *nats* (actors and acrobats), *naqqals* (mimics and storytellers), *bahurupiyas* (impersonators), musicians and bards. Margaret Mills, who, in pointing out that similar 'low' generic terms are in circulation throughout the wider region, argues for the inadequacy of these designations and notes 'the names groups use for themselves, the ethnic identities they claim and their conjectural histories differ.' (2003, p. 164)[9] In Pakistan, many performers who have migrated from wedding performance contexts disassociate themselves from the *mirasi/mir aalam* identity. Although wedding *bhānds* often use the *mirasi* nomenclature themselves, they stress that they have no caste (in Hussain and Waseem 2015). Performers explain that *mirasi*, a title derived from the Arabic *miras* (inheritance), was once an honorific title bestowed upon court performers who entered South Asia with Muslim conquerors and rulers (from the eighth century). While this may be the case, the first acknowledgement of the *mirasi* as a caste is in British colonial ethnographies (Ibbetson 1916 [1883], p. 234; Crooke 1896, p. 496–7; Rose et al. 1911, p. 106) in which a range of performers including musicians, storytellers, genealogists, *bahurupiyas* and *bhānds* are described as being 'exceedingly low' (Ibbetson 1916, p. 234; see Chap. 2).[10] This low-caste designation continues to be pervasive in contemporary contexts. As the Indian sociologist Ramkrishna Mukherjee describes, the caste system was 'invaginated […] into the class structure evolved in colonial India' (1999, p. 1759).[11] In Pakistan, the *bhānd* and other performers that are aligned with the *mirasi* continue to be designated as low status in the closely intertwined caste and class structures—what I denote the caste/class hierarchies. While I do not intend to replicate the racist typologies of colonialism,