

Where the Twain Shall Meet

Kitte Mil Ve Mahi: Where the Twain Shall Meet. Produced by Ajay Bhardwaj, edited by Sachindra Bisht. DVD, color, 70 minutes, 2005. Punjabi with English subtitles. Distributed by India Foundation for the Arts.

Rabba Hun Kee Kariye. Thus Departed Our Neighbors. Produced by Ajay Bhardwaj, edited by Tenzin Kunchok. DVD, color, 65 minutes, 2007.

Although ostensibly about two different themes, these two documentaries by Ajay Bhardwaj reveal the way in which the Partition of Imperial India in 1947 continues to shape the lives and memories of communities in Punjab to this day. In *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* Bhardwaj focuses on the Dalit (lower caste) communities that took over the care of Sufi shrines on the Indian side of Punjab after 1947. He examines the ways in which the spiritual life of these communities functions as the site of their political and social aspirations. In *Rabba Hun Kee Kariye* Bhardwaj interviews old men who witnessed the violence and killings that accompanied the partition. In both documentaries the narrative is constructed through the recollections, comments, and observations of the subjects rather than through a disembodied voice-over, thus creating a more intimate connection with the viewer. This technique is enormously useful in setting up the core themes of each documentary but also places great demands on the viewer. Bhardwaj's subjects articulate a view of the recent past that speaks eloquently of the ways in which Dalit voices and the regional Little Traditions associated with rural shrines have been silenced in the increasingly communalized narratives and histories of the nation-state, and he seeks to open up a space within which these voices might be heard.

The growing Dalit movement in Punjab has received little attention from scholars or filmmakers. In *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* Bhardwaj attempts to trace both the intellectual genealogy of radical politics in rural Punjab and give a sense of how Muslim Sufi shrines function as sites of a new articulation of Dalit politics in Punjab. Interviews with the late activist poet Lal Singh Dil of Samrala and Baba Bhagat Singh Bilga of the anti-colonial Ghadar movement help to establish the deep roots and continuity of agrarian struggles in Punjab, first against imperial rule and later against the elite land-owning castes that continued to dominate Punjabi politics after Independence. Interspersed with these recollections are extensive conversations with the Dalit caretakers, musicians, and *pirs* of numerous shrines affiliated with the Chisti and Qadri Sufi orders. It is through these conversations that Bhardwaj suggests the anti-colonial Ghadar movement

as well as the radical politics of Naxalite poets such as Lal Singh Dil were inspired by the egalitarian values found in popular Punjabi musical and literary traditions. The translated lyrics of songs sung by Sufi Qawwali singers in English subtitles form the threads that join these various sections of the film together.

In one scene Baba Bilga reminisces about how a fellow revolutionary in the Ghadar party underlined parts of Waris Shah's 18th-century poem *Heer-Ranjha* that questioned conventional views of religious authority and hierarchy. He notes with irony that such nationalist figures, themselves secular and Marxist, are today appropriated as heroes by the Hindu Right. To emphasize the ways in which conventional understandings of "Hindu" and "Muslim" fail to capture the worldview of nonelite Punjabis, Bhardwaj intersperses Bilga's comments with sections in which the Dalit caretakers and musicians of the Sufi shrines explain their own deep emotional and spiritual connections to the Sufi *pirs* or masters whose graves they now tend. The popular history of these shrines is recounted to explain why the Muslim *pirs* granted their seal of authority to Dalit disciples, including women, in order to recognize their devotion and service to the Sufi *pirs*. These sections of the documentary are particularly interesting, as Bhardwaj's camera often looks back to show the modest dimensions of these modern shrines, the popular calendar art on the walls, and the large crowds that gather during the *urs* festivals held at the shrines. The caretakers and musicians of the shrines emphasize the spirit of collaboration and service that has preserved these communities. All the buildings shown in the documentary were built with voluntary labor and donations. Similarly, the musicians explain their own contributions to services as a form of honoring their teachers' memory. As rich as these sections are, they also raise a number of questions that the film does not address: How does the language of spiritual subordination and *fana* (annihilation) of the Sufi musicians accord with the radical questioning of all hierarchies by contemporary poets such as Lal Singh Dil? Do these Dalit communities see the connections between their own struggles and those of earlier middle-class revolutionaries of the Ghadar movement which Bhardwaj underscores? The film does not provide a broader social context for understanding the Ghadar and Naxalite movements in Punjab, or the ways in which Dalits are mobilizing today, except in passing references. For a viewer who is not familiar with the broader historical contexts of these issues the significance of the comments made by Bhardwaj's subjects will likely pass unnoticed.

Some of the problems that hinder a richer understanding of *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* are fortunately less obvious in *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye*. The interviewees in this documentary sketch out the broader contexts for understanding the violence that occurred in 1947 as they recount their own experiences. What is particularly striking are the ways in which this documentary captures the intimate scale of the violence in small rural communities—in which victims knew their killers. The reminiscences of the three men that form the core of this film allow for a degree of detail that lets Bhardwaj examine both the scale of the genocide and the rupture of the dense social ties that had once held these communities together. For example, a section in which one of the men recounts the murder of a Muslim *mirasi* family (members of a caste of bards and genealogists) by their Sikh patrons is followed by a section in which Sikh landlords attempt to protect

their Muslim tenants from a Sikh mob. In between these segments Bhardwaj inserts an account of the modern Muslim *Qawwali* singer, Puraan Shahkoti, who speaks with great emotion of the bonds that connect him with his natal town in Punjab. His music forms a backdrop to the rest of the film, reminding the viewer that despite attempts to refashion Urdu and Sufi cultural traditions as somehow alien to East Punjab, they remain an integral part of Punjabi culture today.

Both films have rich possibilities as instructional media, well-suited to classes in South Asian history, religious traditions, and social movements. Both present glimpses of rural life and local politics in East Punjab that are difficult to access through other texts or films. The subtitles offer figurative translations, successfully conveying the cultural sensibilities of the poems, songs, and spoken words used in the films, which a more literal translation would have obscured. Although an instructor would have to be careful to lay out the larger context of a documentary such as *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi*, in the end Bhardwaj's decision to let the subjects of his films speak for themselves is a wise one, as it provokes an engagement with the material in a fruitful way. In both documentaries the informal conversational approach of the narrative allows the engaged viewer to identify the aspirations, tensions, evasions, and silences of those interviewed, and connect the larger themes of the arguments that Ajay Bhardwaj presents.

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