

INDUS BLUES: A SHORT COLLECTION OF IMPRESSIONS ON AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTARY

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Abstract

This is a spontaneous review discussion about the ethnographic film 'Indus Blues', produced by Jawad Sharif in 2018 and it has won many awards on several occasions. Nine reviewing persons were asked to write some lines about their first impressions, which were then discussed and summarized. The review discussion mainly contains the data provided.

Keywords

Ethnographic film, Pakistan, Film aesthetics, Musicians, Instrument makers

INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic film 'Indus Blues' was watched and widely discussed as a potential contestant to be shown at a local festival in China, the 2nd Exhibition of Ethnographic Films that was conducted in China's Fuzhou Province, in December 2021. The following views were collected and then analysed. Every participant of the review discussion was asked to jot down in short, their first thoughts about this ethnographic film, and whether the film made them reflect on the presented issues. The ethnographic film itself was a documentary about traditional musical practices, being presented in an attractive way to visitors. It was shot in 2018 under the leadership of Jawad Sharif at approximately 15 different locations in Pakistan (<https://dafilms.com/film/11632-indus-blues>). The underlying concept was the controversy of Islamic fundamentalism and the viewpoint towards music and dance. Here are the impressions of the colleagues who were asked about it in an overview of data.

1. SHUBHA CHAUDHURY

"It's a nice one, musicians and the makers together. I appreciate especially the instrument makers and the film producers trying to get space for themselves and the musicians. Unfortunately, nothing much about the music and thin on ethnographic details, for specific reasons. It is good for information but not on plans and further engagement. For me interesting as I have worked on the border areas of Kutch and Western Rajasthan with people who share instruments and the Sindhi culture."

2. JOE PETERS

"I watched the documentary. I suppose journal you refer to is for musicologists? My voice disappoints the majority. Anyway, here it is: "Music outside the simple major-minor tertian system has to find new routes through the vast and complex digital technologies to provide instruction to listeners at the very point of the sound timeline. Early musicologists like Jose Maceda (Philippines), Tran Van Khe (Vietnam) and Jaap Kunst (Indonesia-Holland) dedicated their lives to capturing (meticulously)

¹ The authors are as listed members of the International Council for Traditional Music and connected institutions, they have different professions dealing with sound, media, and popular cultures spread over the entire world. They are all interested in ethnographic anthropology of the given region and the study of different societies. Corresponding author and convenor of this review essay is Gisa Jaehnichen (reachable via gisajaehnichen@web.de).

sound and data for the generations that followed them. We too have to follow-up by going beyond tangential articles or documentaries that do not pontificate the same survival banter all the time. World music-systems need expert attention – much like climate change and other similar pending disasters. Artificial barricades between musicology, pedagogy and technology must be broken down. And journals must write about real work – like they do in medicine, engineering, law and more disciplines.”

3. CHINTHAKA PRAGEETH MEDDEGODA [චින්තක ප්‍රථීන් මැද්දෙගොඩ]

“I watched the documentary ‘Indus Blues’. It is a very good film from the viewpoint of making a film. Very lively and imaginative. Some critical remarks: I am wondering why only the poor and middle-class people are shown. It indicates somehow that only they want this music to survive, which is questionable. There are rich bureaucrats, aristocrats who love music and think that this music should survive. They may have different reasons though.

Also, I am wondering why so many people in Pakistan enjoy music and dance by watching them through smart phones, cinema, and TV. The religious upper class wants Muslims to not make music but obviously they are allowed to watch others doing that. Isn’t it?

I think the documentary has chosen only the down side, of which many complaints are made. The film makers have hidden many good things that Muslims may do for music. This hegemony over practicing music is a good thing on one hand. Music lovers tend to find different ways to do music. There will be new music practices created. On a second note, the more the musicians are restricted to do music, the more they want to do music. That might be the message and that is what I have to say about that documentary ‘Indus Blues’.”

4. FULVIA CARUSO

“Shot in over 15 locations across Pakistan, the documentary Indus Blues consists of two sections. The first intends to present the richness of Pakistani folk artist, through an overview of the diverse musical instruments present in the country, while the second deals with the struggle that musicians and artisans wage daily to preserve their art from Islamic fundamentalism.

Interestingly, the documentary is built on interviews to both musicians and instrument makers, as both are part of a unique and inter-related system.

Although the instruments and their construction, and even more the musics related to them, are presented in a rather superficial way, the documentary returns an incredible musical richness through a magnificent shooting and an outstanding photography.

Also, showing the variety of Pakistani real life, the documentary clearly denounces how much the music crisis in Pakistan is linked not only to fundamentalism, but also to issues of globalization and national identity, which bear with difficulty the cultural diversity present in the country.

In their webpage, Jawad Sharif Films, declare that “We aim to make a significant social impact with our films”. Indus Blues goes in this direction.”

5. SUKANYA GUHA [सुकन्या गुहा]

“The legion culture of Sindh where the folk musicians and their craftsmen rapidly being eradicated from today’s society is a concern. It seems that in spite of the uniqueness of thriving cross-culturalism across the Indus-river and the deep roots going back centuries, the present generation is not interested nor inclined to learn the music or the craft of constructing music instruments. Some say that if they can learn to play keyboard, guitar, drum or other similar instruments then why to learn complex instruments like sarangi, suroz, boreendo or banjo? It seems less significant. The income is also meagre. The musical feature documentary Indus Blues as I understand is that folk musicians and

craftsmen of Pakistan are at peril and at the state of dying especially when today's modern musical instruments are dominating and most influential."

6. MU QIAN [穆谦]

"Indus Blues provides a rare chance for people outside of Pakistan to look into the situation of traditional folk music, especially of ethnic and social minority groups, in a society that has been suffering from Islamic ideologies intolerant of music. The film becomes even more pertinent today, as the Taliban takes over Afghanistan and poses greater threats to the region's musical traditions. As a researcher of Uyghur music, I can relate to stories told by musicians in the film, as some Uyghur musicians are facing similar problems. Thanks to the filmmaker Jawad Sharif for the documentation. Ethnomusicologists share this obligation of documenting endangered musical traditions, if we cannot do more than that."

7. GISA JÄHNICHEN

"Indus Blues meets the right atmosphere and expectation among the audience that might know a bit, not too much, yet still has some preconceptions of musically intolerant administrators and state officers, about the hard life among musicians and instrument makers and about the unimaginable beauty of landscapes that are not widely shown around. Sindh is beautiful once people can read the signs of beauty. It is not a movie that invites to travel or to deal with cultural features. It is to satisfy aesthetic expectations and moral justifications of outsiders. I feel that all things have to be questioned, also the purposeful settings of recordings, the interwoven pictures and the ambitious claims being made by the people. Why then, one may ask, they still try to do it, if it is so difficult? Why is there still a need for this music? Why not just putting down the instrument, the woodwork, the bow? Why not turning to the agrarian fields and office halls, if that would be so much better? The movie creates more questions than answers in me. One is, what if all so called ethnographic films would have this kind of purpose-driven background? What if these professional movies, made by professional ethnographers and music knowers, would be just similar romantic justifications? The movie made my vision skills more realistic. And this is a good point of it."

8. ANDREJ KOCAN

"In the documentary we follow the musicians of the traditional musics of Indus valley, which is a huge area, with many different local 'cultures', mostly unconnected with each other, but we could position them into one greater 'cultural area', and what does connect them is among other things Islamic culture. However, we find out that the radicalization of the religious life is threatening the original music heritage. The musicians are also threatened by the dire economic situation that is worse compared to the musicians who are willing to 'modernize', or 'westernize'? We do not learn whether those musicians who take the 'easy' route do face the same threats against music. The director chose to focus on the traditional musicians who, I am convinced, are in the worst situation. In the beginning I had the feeling I will be served the romanticized version of 'reality', but as the film progresses and we get to hear the musicians' stories I did get the feeling that we, the viewers, are being shown the real-life situations, although we are jumping quite fast between the characters and are not able to catch the full depth of their life stories. But we do get the point. The cinematography is beautiful, catching many details of 'life as it is' and I thoroughly enjoyed the pace, and I especially enjoyed that the quality of recorded music is on a high level which is very rare in a documentary genre that we could call ethnographic. Of course, we see that many scenes are staged, with dancers in beautiful dresses dancing in the middle of the desert with shots made through drones. I see this as the intention of the director to strike a balance between an overly monotonous hard core ethnographic film and a film that looks like a documentary, but is a fiction in reality. It is intended for a general audience who wants to see and hear the joy of local musics and be entertained at the same time. However, we do get to see the glimpses of the hard reality. And since the whole movie team is basically made of locals

who have to live in the country, where situation might get worse very quickly, long after the movie is made and received all the possible awards on the international stage, I understand that they did not wish to go into more confrontation with the authorities. They showed quite clearly the situation and made a movie that is also very enjoyable to watch. And I think they deserve all the praises and awards. The movie opens many questions and they should be further addressed in the discussions with the makers of the movie, with anthropologists, with local people, and in the classrooms. And as it seems, by reaching a wider audience, the makers have succeeded in doing that.”

9. MATTHIAS LEWY

“The pictures are of course very impressive, the sound and music are also wonderfully recorded, so, everything is professional. Those who like drone videos are sure to get their money's worth. Sometimes it is a little too much film aesthetics for me, so that the musicians and one dancer are a little neglected, but that is certainly a matter of opinion. The topic of the conflict between music and haram issues would certainly have to be dealt with in more depth, but it is well presented so that an initial understanding can be quickly conveyed. All the interviewed people have their say. Here too, I see it from the intermediary side. If one wants to know more, they have to go deeper into it because one can't explain everything in an hour and 15 minutes.”²

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

In summary, most observers claimed that the adapted aesthetics of the ethnographic documentary enhanced the likability. At the same time, doubts occurred whether the documentary documented the things that were needed most. If criticism of inappropriate dealing with music, musicians, and instrument makers due to lack of understanding their human potential seen through a hostile ideological gaze was at the heart of the documentarists, the documentary was a success. If the expectation was a multi-perspective review of stimulating events and behaviours within this society, the documentary was incomplete and less informative. Each of the answers could have given a hint of exactly that outcome. Nevertheless, all statements given show an interesting mosaic of approaches and expectations. One single view could not suffice.

Finally, what all would agree to is the fact that not only the musicians, instrument makers, and dancers, but even the documentarists themselves have shown their deep love for music. The spectacular scenes and possibly arranged appearances did not harm this basic idea of the documentary. It is an art work about art work. The documentary may have given a signal to always be alerted towards beauty and immediate categorizations that are always under discussion, when addressees occupy similar knowledge cultures and assume to understand each other. The discussion and collection of impressions also show that an academic dealing of all the issues named may have to leave more space for differences in the whole, or to be more precise, academic writing needs to be more inconclusive in order to become more inclusive.

REFERENCES

<https://dafilms.com/film/11632-indus-blues>, last accessed February 19, 2022.

² Original text: Also die Bilder sind natürlich sehr beeindruckend, auch Ton und Musik sind wunderbar aufgenommen, also alles sehr professionell. Wer Drohnenaufnahmen mag, kommt sicher auf seine Kosten. Es ist mir zuweilen etwas zu viel Filmästhetik, so dass die Musiker und die eine Tänzerin ein wenig zu kurz kommen, aber das ist sicherlich Ansichtssache. Das Thema Musik-Haram-Konflikt wäre sicher noch tiefergehend zu bearbeiten, aber es ist gut dargestellt, so dass ein erstes Verständnis schnell vermittelt werden kann. Die interviewten Leute kommen alle bestens zu Wort, auch hier sehe ich das von der Vermittlungsseite. Wer mehr wissen will, muss sich halt tiefergehend damit beschäftigen, denn in einer Stunde und 15 Minuten kann man nicht alles erklären.