

Syed Ali Mehdi Zaidi
Lahore University of Management Sciences /Gender Initiative at LUMS

Title: *Roohi mai hamai Azadi milti hai*; Masculine Performances, Place-Making in Cholistan Desert

Abstract: From Amargarh, a village near Rahim Yaar Khan, some men get on their bikes to travel deep into the Cholistan desert to spend time in the open wilderness. These trips have become something of a tradition amongst some men in the former nomadic, Hindu community of Cholistan. But they are not simply trips into the desert. They are representative of a broader connection with the desert sustained through these physical trips and other discursive practices.

This paper attempts to answer two questions: First, why does the desert, as a space, come to occupy such an important place in the lives of these men? Second, how is it that the desert is endowed with the meaning that it currently has for these men?

Part 1 - Introduction

The dunes of the desert pull on the strings of my heart

Tell me something,
How will this connection be formed?
You live in the city,
I live in the desert!

Ashok Kumar is a young man in his late twenties who operates a bike repair shop in Amargarh, 12 Kms away from Rahim Yaar Khan. Ashok's shop is something of a community centre. All day long, various people come and just lounge on the two wooden benches placed near the entrance of Ashok's shop, reading the daily newspaper or engaging in conversations with other people who are also lounging around. Two shops down from Ashok's, is Dharmendar's shop. Dharmendar is around 19 years old and looks even younger. At first look, it would be hard to imagine that anybody as boyish as Dharmender was capable of running a shop all on his own. But Dharmender doesn't simply run a shop - he also owns it. Over time, he has hired different people from his family so that he doesn't have to come to the shop at 9 AM. But what makes him that much more impressive is his knack for entrepreneurship. Not content with one shop, he has recently started construction on another one. Of course, the entire construction is done either by him or his family members. Also in the pipeline is a basic textile mill. In order to get his basis covered, Dharmendar occasionally travels to Karachi to figure out all the logistics. In order to make sure that he, along with his friends have a place to hang around, Dharmender has acquired a room above Ashok's shop that serves both as a storeroom and a meeting place. Almost every night, the place is alive with conversation and card games.

I met these guys when I went to Rahim Yaar Khan to visit Preetam whom I met at a concert we organized in LUMS. Preetam is something of a local celebrity. An occasional writer for Express news and director of a community NGO named Kabir foundation, Preetam is very well respected. His father, Mohandas Laal was the first one to get the Hindu community to

organize themselves and come together as a group. Although Preetam is fifty years old (he looks 30 - a blessing apparently everybody shares in his community) Preetam and I get along quite well. Initially, I visited him in the hopes that his community would be a viable community for me to work with for my senior thesis. After several nights on Ashok's roof however, the distinction between research trips and social trips became increasingly blurry.

My initial plan was to study the effects of social exclusion on the Hindu community in Cholistan (although the community now lives in a village near Rahim Yaar Khan, they were former nomads in the desert). All that changed when Preetam asked me to accompany him on a trip to the desert. Forever fascinated by new places, I simply could not say no. But nothing could have prepared me for what was going to happen. About 8 people, all of whom were Preetam's friends, got on 4 bikes with everything needed to spend about two days in the desert and drove for about four hours (almost 150 KM) to reach the very centre of Cholistan desert. There, under the second clearest sky I've ever seen (the first was on top of Shimshal pass) we spent the night followed by another day.

Over the course of the two days spent in the desert, it turned out that this was not the only time these guys had made the trip. Preetam, spends almost 100 days in a year in the desert. Addu Bhagat, a local singer and the most extraordinary drinker I've ever met, spends 200. From that point onwards, the focus of my research shifted from religious exclusion to place making. Two questions emerged: 1) Why had the desert, as a space, come to occupy such an important place in the lives of these men? 2) How was it, that the desert was invested with so much meaning so as to warrant spending so much time in it, without any apparent benefit: economic or otherwise?

This story, that I am about to tell, is about this group of men who find themselves occupying two different worlds - one in the desert and one in the village. This story is about men who were, almost two generations ago, part of Cholistan desert. It is the story of a few men, for whom, the desert has come to occupy an important place in their lives; both imaginatively and physically. It is about these men and why they have built this relationship with the desert. More broadly, this story is my attempt to write a history of the Cholistan desert. I chose to record it as the story of a few men whom I met. Their story can be used to think about how the desert as a space is experienced; imaginatively and physically. How do men negotiate with this space in their everyday lives? What is their relationship to the desert? How is that relationship maintained when people are forced to abandon the desert? Why did they abandon the desert? By imaginative, I refer to the memories associated with the desert which offer a glimpse of a world that is no more. The sense of unfamiliarity in the village underpins most of these stories. In many ways, it is the need to make sense of an unfamiliar world which makes memories so crucial. These memories make these men conscious of a past that is no more and a present that is their lived reality. Physical experiences of the desert are what drive this story; that is one of the ways of 'knowing' the desert. Which, in turn, makes sense of the world for these men. This story then, is a story of masculine constructions of the desert - imaginative and performative - and the role performed by these constructions.

This is a story from and about the margins. This story is also about exclusions and silences. The nature of the exclusion can be understood on multiple levels. First, the subjects of

this story occupy a world that is hard to make sense of; especially given the memory of the desert. For them, the contrast between the world they knew - in memories - and the world they know now could not be starker. The difference between the past and the present is a constant theme of this story. Second, accompanying the memory of the desert lifestyle, is the sense of exclusion from space and time. Third, men in this story belong to the Hindu community in Cholistan. Surrounded by a Muslim majority, they are both seen and treated as different. And because of this difference, the community is marginalized in multiple ways. And finally, there is an element of class in this story. Part of the formerly nomadic community, the resources required to 'buy space and time' to make their new surroundings familiar are not available to these men. Their position as suspended between these two worlds, is in some ways, a direct consequence of their class position.

At the heart of this story are two protagonists: a memory and a few people who deal with an unfamiliar world through a memory. The reason for centering of these two protagonists is simple. The memory I refer to can be thought of as a 'cultural memory'. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka (1995) identify six key features of cultural memory. The first two are as follows:

1) "*The concretion of identity*" or the relation to the group. Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive ("We are this") or in a negative ("That's our opposite") sense. Through such a concretion of identity evolves what Nietzsche has called the "constitution of horizons." The supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not, i.e., between what appertains to oneself and what is foreign.

...
2) *its capacity to reconstruct*. No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that "which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference." Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance. (Assmann and Czaplicka, 130)

Thus, cultural memory fundamentally dictates how a group conceptualizes itself. But more than that, it 'constitutes the horizon' within which a group can think of itself as 'itself'. Hence, when a 'contemporary' situation arises which pushes a group into a category outside the horizon, the group necessarily has to negotiate between its cultural memory and the present situation. Put differently, the memory at the heart of this story constantly constitutes and shapes the behavior of the individuals it pertains to. Culturally memory, to put it simply, creates the individuals.

Let us look at our two protagonists:

The Memory:

The memory is of a desert, and life lived in it. It is a communal memory. It is a memory of fathers and forefathers. It is a memory of a connection. It is also a memory of loss.

About 30 KMs away from the small city of Rahim Yaar Khan, lies the desert of Cholistan. But even this is contentious. About a century ago, the entire region of Rahim Yaar Khan and some parts now associated with Bahawalpur were part of the desert. Around 1933, the then Nawab of Bahawalpur, initiated what is called the Sutlej River Valley Project. Under this project, some 2 million acres of land was brought under permanent cultivation. The areas that came under cultivation through this projects are known - to the people who remember: who don't have the luxury of forgetting - as the *chotta* Cholistan (smaller Cholistan). The rest of the desert, still broadly unaffected by irrigation is known as the *barra* Cholistan (bigger Cholistan).

Under this project, the physical area of the desert was reduced. It is interesting that when we think of irrigation, we don't think about what the land was prior to it being irrigated. It is almost as if - the language used with regards to irrigation demonstrates this - the land being irrigated comes out of nothingness. When we irrigate, we 'reclaim land', 'populate it', 'make it productive'. And the underlying assumption is, of course, that this land stood empty; useless land that needed to be brought into use. But for the people of the desert, the memory of irrigation comes with a grain of salt; irrigation only creates once it destroys. But surely, it is impossible to destroy anything in the desert; what can one possibly destroy in the vast 'empty space of the desert'? People who live in the desert are mostly nomads. And to be a nomad, the principle requirement is a vast open area. Nomadism depends, for the most part, on the rearing of animals. To rear animals, you move them through the desert, the animals eating whatever they can find. With the reduction of the area of the desert, there is less area to move around in. Or put differently, there is less for the animals to eat. Thus, what irrigation destroys is the food supply of the animals being reared by the nomads, making it increasingly difficult to be a nomad.

Almost at the same time in 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned into two states; India and Pakistan. This story is concerned with West Pakistan. The primary story of partition to be told with regards to West Pakistan is, of course, the partition of Punjab; the rest of the provinces actually remained as they were. West Punjab - where Cholistan is now officially located - went to Pakistan and East Punjab became a part of India. In most partition narratives, if not all, the story is told of the 'populated areas'. What is often forgotten, is the fact that Cholistan was linked by what can be called a desert highway with the Rajasthan desert, now a part of India. The memory of this connection, in both official narratives and popular discourse is all but forgotten. But its importance cannot be stressed enough. As I've been told time and again during field work, life in the desert is fickle and, more often than not, dependent on the whims of nature. *Baairsh hogai tou moujaien hain, nahi hou tou azaab hai* (if it rains, everything is good, if it doesn't, it is hell). Naturally, people developed mechanisms to deal with the whims of nature. One of those mechanisms was the interdependence between Rajasthan and Cholistan. Separated by a significant distance, the rain patterns in the two deserts were different as well. Thus, nomads

in one desert would come to the help of the other in times of scarcity; through exchanges of gifts and materials. In extreme cases of scarcity, which were rare, nomads of one desert might migrate to the other until the hard times were over.

The connection with Rajasthan however, was not simply about economic cooperation. One of the first sites I was taken to was Derawar Fort. In the popular imagination, Derawar fort exists only in relation to one thing: Cholistan Jeep Rally held every year by the Tourism Development Corporation of Pakistan. In their promotional posters (figure 2), the fort features in the background. This jeep rally was started about a decade ago by the Punjab Government in the hopes of promoting some sort of tourism in the Cholistan desert. Cholistan itself, in addition to the Derawar fort, exists in the popular imagination only in relation to the desert. In other words, Cholistan is where Derawar fort is and that is where the Desert rally takes place every year. Save in relation to the jeep rally, the desert and the fort are a non-entity in popular imagination.

TDCP
TOURISM DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
PUNJAB LTD 2010

11th CHOLISTAN JEEP RALLY
Feb 12-14, 2016
Powered by
TOYOTA

RALLY FEATURES

- Cultural Show/Fire Works
- Camp Stay at Cholistan
- Camel Show
- Tour of Royal Palaces & Forts
- See the Stunning Jeep Rally

SPL#253

Tourism Development Corporation of Punjab

LAHORE
151-Abubakar Block,
New Garden Town Lahore.
Ph: 042-99231007
Web: www.tdcp.gop.pk

BAHAWALPUR.
Old Press Club Building,
Stadium Road, Bahawalpur,
Mob: 0307-8682126,
Ph: 0622-874241

COMMISSIONER
www.govtjobsinpakistan.pk

Figure 2: Courtesy of Tourism Development Corporation of Punjab

However, the story - a fantastical one - of the Derawar fort, as it is told in the 'Hindu' community, takes a special significance. It tells of how a Prince of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan escaped to Bahawalpur. The Prince, in order to establish himself, is the one who is said to have built the fort. About 200 meters away from the fort resides, what is believed to be the first settlement of the community. The story of Derawar fort then forms something of an origin story for the community. Because of its role for the community, two points of the story are reinstated in every telling: the Prince who escaped was religiously, Hindu. And this was a story of a time much earlier than the arrival of Muslims in the Bahawalpur region. To this day, members of the community recount how they have 'relatives' on the other side of the border, in Rajasthan. The

connections then went far beyond the need for survival. A system of gift exchanges and inter-marriages fundamentally linked the two communities; to say nothing of the exchanges in culture. For the Hindu community in Cholistan, there was an even more fundamental link; religion. Rajasthan was a crucial link to the Hindu sacred places in India; especially the Ganga.

The memory - the protagonist of this story - then is of a time when the changes brought about by the two factors - partition and irrigation of Cholistan - weren't fully felt. As is usually the case, this change came about gradually. While the subcontinent was ostensibly partitioned in 1947, the connection between Rajasthan and Cholistan continued until the 50s. It was only in the late 50s that the first physical barriers were erected to stop the movement between these two deserts. This memory is of a different world. When things were better, when people cared for each other, and when sectarian hatred was something that happened elsewhere and was not a lived reality. It is also a memory of a familiar world, juxtaposed against a now unfamiliar world that the men, whose story this is, now occupy.

On one of the trips into the desert, I asked a member of the little group why he took the trip; what connection, after all, did *he* have to the desert given his grandfather was the last one of his family to be nomad? He replied: *Hum isiliye tou aatay hain, kiounke hum kabhi nahi rahai. Hum aakai dekhtay hain keh hamaray baap dada kaisay rehtay thai* (This is why we come, because we've never lived [in the desert]. We come to see how our fathers and grandfathers used to live). Other times, when asked the question of how they identify, one of the answers that is given is *Hum Roohi keh loug hain* (We are people of the desert). What this illustrates is a particular 'horizon' marked by a memory of the desert. And that particular horizon is spatially marked. Gupta and Jameson remind us that despite the increasing 'de-territoriality' of identity, "Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world. "Homeland" in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings" (Gupta and Jameson, 11). I argue that the collective memory of life in the desert becomes crucially important for the community especially after the displacement from the desert. Like most memories, it is also a memory that cannot be verified as Truth; truth with a capital T. This is to say that this story does not aim to make claims of Truth based on these memories. Rather, it is a documentation of things I have heard and seen over the course of my interactions with the Hindu community in Cholistan.

Michel Rolph Trouillot, the Haitian historian, in his now famous book, *Silencing the Past*, writes: "Even when the historical continuities are unquestionable, in no way can we assume a simple correlation between the magnitude of events as they happened and their relevance for the generations that inherit them through history. The comparative study of slavery in the Americas provides an engaging example that what we often call the "legacy of the past" may not be anything bequeathed by the past itself" (Trouillot, 17). In another place, describing the problems with the 'storage model' of conceptualizing memory, he writes:

If memories as individual histories are constructed, even in this minimal sense, how can

the past they retrieve be fixed? The storage model has no answer to that problem. Both its popular and scholarly versions assume the independent existence of a fixed past and posit memory as the retrieval of that content. But the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I *am here* (Trouillot, 15).

This memory then, that I speak of, is only significant because of the present; because of certain anxieties encountered by few men - of the desert - in the present. And, like all memories, this memory too is not independent of those who hold it. For the older members of the community, the desert belongs to the past; they belong to the present. There is an almost militant instance within the older members of the community that the life is good as it stands now. *Jou jahaan hota hai waheen khush hota hai* (One is happy wherever they are). Ironically, the act of reminiscing, traditionally associated with the old, is performed in this community by the relatively young. Manan Asif, writing about stories of the partition in his family says: "Stories had to be told, so that memory could live, and memory needed to live, to act as a judge" (Asif, 10). In a similar vein, the memory of the desert is told and retold so that it can 'act as a judge'; as a vector against which satisfaction of the present can be judged. This memory then, at least on some level, becomes worthy of being recounted because of the present. This is where our second set of protagonists come in.

The People:

The few men who are the centre of this story are so because of a particular reason. For these men, aged between 20-50, the desert is supremely important. They routinely take trips into it, riding on a bike for a hundred, two hundred kilometers to spend a few nights. Interestingly, these trips serve no economic purpose. In fact, on the face of it, they serve no purpose at all. They sit around, imbibe some intoxicant or the other, talk, play cards, sing and come back a few days later. Cumulatively, some of these men end up spending 100-200 days in the desert on what can be described - inaccurately - as leisure trips. This is of course not to say that all men of the community take the trip - they don't. Or that of those who do, all spend 100-200 days of the year in the desert; some might go once in 3 months. What is significant however, is the importance the desert has come to occupy either in imagination, or in action, or both.

These few men belong to a Hindu community that used to be nomads in Cholistan two generations ago. The name I assign to the community - Hindu - is problematic. For although, they ostensibly identify as Hindus but their belief systems - to record the details of which requires another paper altogether - are more syncretic than that. Followers of Hindu belief systems, Kabir Das, *Panjetan Pak*¹ and other ostensibly 'Muslim' Sufis all at the same time, the community defies easy religious categorization. And that is not my aim here. Nevertheless, I refer to them as the Hindu community based on Barth's conception of 'ethnic' - the same can be said to apply to religious - identities. He writes:

First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other

¹ the five venerated figures mostly followed by Shiism: Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Bibi Fatima, his son-in-law and cousin, Imam Ali and his two grandsons Imam Hasan and Husain

words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories. Secondly, one finds that stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence (Barth, 10)

Hence, despite the various cross-religious interactions and exchanges, the distinct 'Hindu' identity prevails. Of course, the distinctness of this identity becomes sharper in the present as I will show. Nevertheless, the point that needs to be remembered is that religiously, the community as a whole is seen to be different from the vast majority of Muslims around them. And that is how it is identified: both by the majority and themselves.

This relegation to a different community - a Hindu community - is itself a process of historical development. Prior to partition, at least in memory, religious distinctions did not matter as much in the nomadic communities. And while one can engage in a process to check the veracity of this claim, the fact that this is seen to be the case regardless of its truth value is useful. The sectarian divides, in memory, became pronounced and sharper after partition. Reasons for this follow a similar trend to the stories told about partition in South Asia. A discourse developed which earmarked India for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims. The presence then, of a Hindu community in Cholistan became less and less welcome. This story then becomes important precisely because it is a story of an excluded, marginalized community.

The unwelcomeness combined with the reduction of the area of the desert, made the nomadic lifestyle unsustainable for this community as a whole. Of course, the two factors are inter-related. Several ethnographies in South Asia conducted by Nicola Khan, Nida Kirmani, Oskar Verkaaik, to name just a few, have traced the relationship between the rise of communal hatred and economic difficulties. The increasing reduction in the land of the desert can be seen as playing a causal role in the increasing hatred towards the Hindu and the Muslim community. The community was then pushed towards the villages and the cities. Naturally, not everyone settled in the same place. Families of this community settled across the region, some nearer to the city, others less so, but almost all of them did settle down. Very few members of the community remain nomads to this day. This story is about the anxieties of the unfamiliar world they then occupied.

One of the stories that can be told is of integration into a cash economy. During nomadic days, exchanges were based on barter but it wasn't exchanges of things that were equal. Naturally, this system of exchange developed a particular kind of relationship between people: cooperation, in some ways, was a necessity. For, to survive in the desert, one necessarily had to rely on others; and others had to rely on you. This also developed a particular kind of

community. The new world that the community inhabited, had none of this. Of course, things changed slowly. Cooperation continued for a long time in different shapes and forms, until that too became, primarily because of economic pressures, unsustainable.

The space of this new world was also different. Compared to the city and the village, the desert is endless. There is a particular lifestyle that is of the desert. And that lifestyle, what can be called the 'rhythm of the desert', simply cannot be replicated in the cities or villages. During the trips I made between Lahore and Rahim Yaar Khan during this research, I once saw an old man come out of the Daewoo bus. And almost without warning, he began to undo his *shalwar* and position himself on the outer wall of the bus station; to the amazement of the small crowd around him. Before the man could relieve himself a Daewoo personnel guided the man to the restroom -- inside the station. For this old man at the daewoo station, the idea of a dedicated space to relieve yourself, build *inside* a building was alien. If we extend our imagination a little bit, his behavior would seem not odd at all. For if you have relieved yourself your entire life *outside* the building, in fields, in grounds, the idea of using a restroom begins to look odd. In much the same way, the desert is a space that has a different way of doing things from the urban or even the rural environment. The desert has its own rhythm which people of the Desert understand. It has its own language. It is an autonomous world of its own. The way of 'being' in the city, in the villages, can be and is, completely unfamiliar to somebody not from there.

This is a story then is about alienation, and the mechanisms used by a few men to deal with this alienation.

Methodology

Much like any other story, there is a final protagonist to this story and one that is perhaps the most nefarious and more often than not, remains hidden; controlling the narrative as it unfolds but forever hiding behind it. The story I'm telling is not my own. I'm separated from this story by language, class, religious and socio-cultural barriers. I'm an outsider looking in. As my friend Narsing sang in Marwari on my first visit:

Tell me something,
How will this connection be formed?
You live in the city,
I live in the desert!

And as such, my own subjectivities are a crucial part of this story. This one story then, is my telling of multiple stories I heard and collected over various visits to Cholistan. In many ways, my hope is to tell a history of the desert through these stories. The history of Cholistan is full of absences. In histories already written, the absence of Cholistan in general and the Hindu nomadic community in specific is striking. This absence is particularly striking in so far as histories of partition are concerned. Located right at the border of India and Pakistan, Cholistan was one of the most affected regions during partition. The primary reason for this was the interconnectivity between the now separated regions of Cholistan and Rajasthan that I've already talked about. Yet, most histories of partition fail to take into account the destruction of lifestyles and

displacements - on multiple levels - that took place within the nomadic communities; especially the Hindu nomadic community. This story then is my attempt to fill in that absence. The primary concern is to not only to highlight what happened during partition, but how the legacies of various historical processes - partition included - continue to have resonance today. James Baldwin, in his famous essay, *Stranger in the Village* wrote: "Joyce is right about history being a nightmare -- but it may be a nightmare from which no one *can* awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (Baldwin, 167). In Cholistan, history did not happen - it continues to happen. It sits at *charpais* and screams under the heat of the desert.

But how does one write a history of the desert? How does one write a history of a lived reality - and not events? As a historian in training, the first challenge was the question of archives. Insofar as textual archives go, they were hard to come by: for multiple reasons chief of which was precisely the silences that pervaded around this particular Hindu nomadic community. This absence from the archives eventually proved to both a challenge and a blessing. The challenge came from using various different techniques to put together one particular story. And so, what initially began as a project of collecting oral histories of the desert, transformed into a combination of oral history collection and ethnographic research. My primary archive for oral history then became a collection of legends, folklores, songs, music, stories. Added to this were the travels to various significant locations within the desert with the community. In total, I spent somewhere in the region of 4-5 weeks travelling and collecting stories. The blessing of not having a specific archive has been the freedom that I've been granted. The history that I'm telling developed almost simultaneously with my own archive. Not constricted by the limit of the archive, the questions I could ask expanded enormously. Why is the desert important? What historical processes have brought the desert into sharper focus? How is the desert remembered? All these questions came up in the process of collecting stories. And as such, the process of writing this history has been somewhat different. Instead of a pre-existing archive dictating what history could be told, I could expand the archive based on the questions that came up as the archive developed.

The other reason, apart from absences, for choosing stories over traditional archives was the aim of changing positions. In the official discourse, the nomadic communities appear as nuisances and there little room for any nuanced investigation. The violence that is inherent to the process of archive production, especially with regards to those on the margins, was a big factor in focussing on stories. In many ways, over the course of this project, it has become obvious to me that even if official textual archives were to exist, this particular history would have been impossible to write. Or put another way, the direction this history takes is due to the sources it consults. Of course, in the process of telling a history through stories, these stories have obviously changed in their form. My own interpretations and arrangements are as much part of this history as the stories it is based on. The questions that give it direction and form are obviously, my question. Nevertheless, I have made every attempt to make sure that I stay true to the stories that I've heard and let the stories guide the history. It is primarily because of this that I've chosen to tell this history as a story - a story of displacement and some men's attempt to deal with that displacement.

Much like any story - or any history - this is one of many that can be told. I'm cognizant

of the limitations of this story. In particular, I'm conscious of the fact that women remain absent within this story. That, in many ways, it is told only from the perspective of a few men. This absence is not willful. The silence of the female narratives in this story is for a couple of reasons. One: I, being a male, was not allowed to interact with the women of the community. The female perspectives on these memories, or the anxieties which they are related to, were not accessible to me. But perhaps more importantly, many of these memories and anxieties are indeed colored by masculinity. And so, this story is primarily a story about masculine constructions of places and why they happen. However, positively speaking, this study highlights the need to explore female narratives with regards to the Cholistan desert.

Part 2 - Time, Space and the Desert

Roohi mai hamai Azadi milti hai (We find freedom in the desert).

Time is "in" the universe; the universe is not "in" time. Without the universe, there is no time; no before, no after. Likewise, space is "in" the universe; the universe is not "in" a region of space. There is no space "outside" the universe. (Hewitt, qtd. in Harvey, 211)

On the trips I took with the community into the desert, I was always struck by the motivation that underlay the arduous journey of hours on a bike. And time and again, I heard of the freedom that the desert offered. But freedom from what and from whom? For, if you travel to, or remember the desert to be free, implicit within this is the assertion that life in the city or village, is not free in some fundamental way. Language becomes really important when we consider how this notion of freedom is expressed. At the heart of the idea of freedom, are two perhaps paradoxical figures; the *Darwesh* and the Nomad. In conversations, both these figures are invoked to underscore and explain what the desert is all about.

In stories that are told within the community, the image of the *Darwesh* figures prominently. A mystic, sufi, destitute, man of god that devotes his life in search of his beloved; God. Important in the story of the *Darwesh* is the notion of freedom from the material wants. He (or she, but mostly he) is free from material wants precisely because he has devoted himself to the search of god; his destitution is proof of his utmost devotion. The trips into the desert and the connection with the desert then are explained in mystical terms. *Hum Darwesh hain* (We are Darwesh) somebody remarked, as the *handi* was placed on the desert sand as everybody gathered around to eat. The act of eating out in the desert, under the sun without proper provisions, is explained as following in the tradition of the *Darwesh*. Almost simultaneously, is the image of the Nomad. The Nomad - man of the desert - offers a less mystical form of freedom. He is the man, free to defecate, have sex, drink, move, sing - basically, do whatever he wants. While the *Darwesh* is pulled from stories and legends, the Nomad appears more out of cultural memory. Assmann and Czaplicka point towards the importance of symbols and images:

The relation to a normative self-image of the group engenders a clear system of values and differentiations in importance which structure the cultural supply of knowledge and the symbols. There are important and unimportant, central and peripheral, local and

interlocal symbols, depending on how they function in the production, representation, and reproduction of this self-image (Assmann and Czaplicka, 113)

Given this, the image of the Nomad can be seen as a 'normative self-image' of the group. And it is easy to see why. The cultural memory posits the community in the desert and within the desert, it is the nomad that is representative of the community. How then do we answer the question that I began with; from what sort of imprisonment does the desert offer freedom?

During my trips into the Desert with the community, I often felt deeply uncomfortable not because of anything that happened - but because of the abundance with which nothing seemed to happen. Breakfast would be served at around 6 AM - some *salan and roti* along with some tea. From 6 AM to about 10 AM, no activity was either planned or performed. People would just sit or lie in the sand, chat for a while, lie down again until it was time to prepare lunch. Once lunch was done, the same schedule would repeat itself until it was time for dinner. During the days in the desert, there were stretches of as long as 6 hours in which nothing was supposed to be done - at best, somebody would pull out a deck of cards - but how long can one play cards without getting tired? So that too would soon be abandoned. And the same cycle of lying around and talking would continue. Surely, something must be planned for all times!

Yet, this very idea of needing to spend time efficiently and productively is generated in a particular environment; in particular material conditions. Why is it that my conception of time is the way it is - dictated by the need to be efficient and productive? David Harvey, in his essay titled *The Social Construction of Space and Time* argues:

Social constructions of space and time are not wrought out of thin air, but shaped out of the various forms of space and time which human beings encounter in their struggle for material survival. For example, night and day, the seasons, lifecycles in the animal and plant world, and the biological processes which regulate human reproduction and the body, are typical encounters with various kinds of temporality. (Harvey, 211)

If space and time are socially constructed on the basis of material conditions, then my conception of time, even more strikingly - why I think time exists, is necessarily also socially constructed; dictated by my material conditions. And it doesn't take too much to deconstruct and understand the origins of my own conception of time. E. P. Thompson in his famous essay *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* traces the rise of the clock-time. In it, he also comments on how time came to be seen, in 19th century, as a 'precious commodity' that needed to be expanded productively. "Puritanism, in its marriage of convenience with industrial capitalism, was the agent which converted men to new valuations of time; which taught children even in their infancy to improve each shining hour; and which saturated men's minds with the equation, time is money" (Thompson, 95). Of course, this puritanical idea of time equals money, is not simply limited to 19th Century England. Jinnah's now famous 'advice' to the *All India Muslim Students Conference Jalandhur* in 1942, of 'Work, work and only work' can now be heard almost across Pakistan. This conception of time can be called 'work-time'. And this conception of time, remains true for most people: thanks to the increasing homogenization of time - including for the *Roohi* (desert) community when it is not travelling into the desert.

Yet, this conception of time, places upon us certain demands: that we structure our lives around work. Henri Lefebvre, in his essay, *Production of Space* writes: “With the advent of modernity, time has vanished from social space. It is recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are as isolated and functionally specialized as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest- with the exception, that is, of time spent working. Economic space subordinates time to itself” (Lefebvre, 4). The subordination of time to economic space is visible within the everyday life. For many of us, the longest part of our day, and perhaps, even the most important, is spent engaged in work. Not only do we devote our time to work, but it seems that we form identities based on work. In everyday conversation, we identify not with anything else but with work; teachers, bankers and musicians are both professions and personal identities. The fact that our lives are organized, structured and driven by work with little or no choice given to us can be fundamentally limiting. The question then becomes; if it is so fundamentally limiting, why is it that none of us actually feel oppressed by this structuring - this, lack of choice, as it were?

There can be multiple answers to that question. Necessarily, any construction of norm is both challenged and accepted. This is the case with construction of time as well. Everyday, this construction of time is pushed back against. Thompson remarks how “One recurrent form of revolt within Western industrial capitalism, whether bohemian or beatnik, has often taken the form of flouting the urgency of respectable time-value” (Thompson, 95). While not necessarily ‘flouting the urgency of respectable time-value’, many of the men who take the trips into the desert, and other people, intentionally, avoid paying jobs. In fact, hardly any of the men I speak of have jobs with given working hours. Some of them have their own small scale businesses (bike repair shop, small store etc). Others work as local musicians, freelance journalists and NGO workers. There is a specific insistence on averting any profession that would temporally and spatially bind them. James Scott in his now famous essay *Everyday forms of Resistance* argues that “... as is sometimes the case, the same results may be achieved by everyday resistance, albeit more slowly, at a vastly reduced risk, then it is surely the more rational course.” (Scott, 35). Although not at the level of peasant resistance, the community's insistence on eschewing regular jobs can be read as a form of everyday resistance. This becomes even more convincing when we consider the fact that the the figure of the *Darwesh* and the Nomad are used to explain these men’s insistence on not taking these jobs.

For the Hindu community in Cholistan, I argue, there is a broader anxiety about time. Whenever I inquired about what they think of life in the city or indeed in the village, the one response which was oft-repeated was; *Hamai shehr mai ghuttan hoti hai* (We feel claustrophobic in the city). To understand this claustrophobia, it is important to understand the alternate conception of time that persists in memory. What is the nature of this alternate conception/structuring of time; how does it operate?

Thompson, while talking about an alternative conception of time calls it *task-oriented*, as opposed to *labour-oriented*. He identifies three features of this alternative conception of time.

Three points may be proposed about task-orientation. First, there is a sense in which it is more humanly comprehensible than timed labour. The peasant or labourer appears to

attend upon what is an observed necessity. Second, a community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between "work" and "life". Social intercourse and labour are intermingled - the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task - and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and "passing the time of day". Third, to men accustomed to labour timed by the clock, this attitude to labour appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency. (Thompson, 38)

In collective memory of the desert, a similar operation of task-oriented time can be seen in the Hindu community of Cholistan. Days in the Desert, for a nomadic community are not structured in the way we imagine days to be structured - there is no division within hours and certainly not in minutes. In fact, life in the desert operates much in the same way as Bourdieu describes the attitude of Kabyle peasants in *The Attitude of Algerian Peasants towards Time*: "An attitude of submission and of nonchalant indifference to the passage of time which no one dreams of mastering, using up, or saving... Haste is seen as a lack of decorum combined with diabolical ambition" (Bourdieu, qtd in Thompson, 59). You wake up at dawn, take the animals out, roam around wherever there is grass and finally, end the day at a *Toba* (A water reservoir). Within the day, the only structure is given by the next task. As such - if the need arises, you can sit at one spot for the entire day (provided there is food available for the animals). But more importantly, there is no set direction which needs to be followed - if the need arises for example, to take a detour to visit a relative, it is quite possible to do so. Similar conceptions of time can be seen in other contexts as well. Kathleen Pickering describes Lakota conception of time in the following way: "They attend to observed necessity. When you need money, you engage in a wage job. When you don't need money, you engage in other activities that may or may not appear economic from the viewpoint of the federal government, but nonetheless secure future access to and participation in social ventures that generate material necessities of life. There is a seamless relationship between work and life. The length of a workday expands or contracts depending on the task at hand. Work happens where the people are, rather than in an exclusive setting designated as the "work" (Pickering, 92). Time in other words is not structured around work because there is no separate category of work. The entire lifestyle, from the mobility to the food you eat is so synchronized with the economic activity that there is no need to devote specific time of the day to work. There is the least distinction between "work" and "life", as Thompson would put it. Of course, it is ultimately the integration into a capitalist economy that brings about the constraints of 'work-time'. One man, during field research, remarked how needs have now increased. This increase in needs too is seen to be factor of moving away from the desert. The life in the city, with increasingly complexity, also demands more material things. *Ab bike bhi chahiyay hai, phone bhi chahiyay. Pehlai thora yeh sab chahiyay hota tha* (Now we need bikes and phones. Before, we didn't need any of this). The integration into a cash economy is fundamentally, what places the constraints of time upon the community. The increasing complexity of economic activity demands that more time be allocated to work-time. Combined with the division of time into distinct sections within a cash economy, little room is left for everything else.

It is the memory of the alternate conception of time, a time which was yours, or what can be described as desert-time, that forces these men to especially feel the limitation of work-time. Stories are often told of the time when people used to care for each other - if one person fell sick,

the entire neighbourhood would come to take care of him - people used to inquire how you were doing. *Aik zamana tha jab agar baraat aati thi tou poura muhalla ous ka khayal rakhta tha* (there used to be time when during a bridal festival, the entire neighbourhood would take care of the bride's family). All this is seen as representation of sincerity, in personal relations. However, there is now a recognition that the form of cooperation and *khuloos* that persisted in the past has ended: *logoun mai khuloos khatam hogaya hai* (people are no longer sincere). I asked the obvious question; why don't people take care of each other the same way? And time after time, I got the same reply; *agar hum aik doosray ka khayal rakhain gai, tou khaien gai kahaan sai?* (If we take care of each other, where will we eat from?). This can be summarized as follows; If we take care of each other, where will we find the time to make money? Kathleen Pickering argues that " ... through task orientation, the social dimensions of economic activity are explicitly acknowledged. Human relationships are visibly integral to all aspects of physical and social production and reproduction, making investment in society a profoundly economic act" (Pickering, 85). It is this conception of the relationship between work and life that is fundamentally altered with the integration into cash economy. In some ways, the idea of cooperation and communal care stems not from morality but from cultural memory. And is seen to be a marker of nomadic identity. The loss of this form of care is a direct cause of this newly created distinction between "work" and "life". I argue that it is escape from this fundamental oppression of time that is sought in taking a trip to the desert and reclaiming, at least for a while, a task-oriented conception of time; or desert-time.

This is however not to argue that desert-time is a primordial entity - out there - that can simply be occupied by moving into the desert. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* highlights spatial practice as being a fundamental part of any space: "*Spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practices ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific performance" (Lefebvre, 33). Any social construction of time, much like that of space, subsists because people perform them. These men then, perform the time they seek to bring back from collective memory. The desert - its geography, materiality and the fact that is the site of the nomad in collective memory - allows an opportunity, a choice to perform a certain kind of time and space. This is primarily the reason why this story is particularly gendered. If any construction of space and time has to be performed, to be of significance, women especially in this community exist in a different dynamic of time altogether. I can only comment on the dynamics of this time based on observations from the outside. While these men occupy directly the space where work-time dominates in the way we imagine it, women occupy the domestic sphere; where the dynamic of time - though affected by work-time - follows a rhythm of its own. I suspect, that time in the domestic sphere is governed by the needs of the men; the fulfillment of which becomes the purpose of the domestic sphere. Cooking, cleaning, looking after the children can all be seen as ultimately serving the needs of the men. Of course, it would be simplistic to assume that this is accepted absolutely; or indeed, that the role of the domestic sphere is limited to these activities. To study the roles performed in, and challenges to, that patriarchal construction of time in the domestic sphere would require another in depth study. In any case, we can make the broader

point that the opportunity to challenge time is driven by one: the space one occupies; that is, the public and the private. And second: the power dynamics that govern that space. For, as we discussed, this broader challenging of time - by maintaining that connection with the desert - is contingent upon certain challenges already having taken place (and privileges). Part of it is based on the economic activity performed, but part of it is also the nature of control exercised. For men, finding the room where subsistence can be achieved without constraining time fully, is possible. The nature of (male) control exercised on women makes it impossible.

Of course, if the operation of time in the desert is different from the one in cities and villages, then the same is true for space. The spaces we inhabit have a causal relationship with how time is experienced. The reverse, is also true; how time is experienced, impacts the spaces we create. Put differently, there is a simultaneous relationship of interdependence between space and time. The places that we create, that is, the city, is fundamentally built to serve a certain conception of time. Invariably, the 'best' cities divide themselves according to time: Commercial areas for work time, residential areas for home time, parks for leisure, and so on and so forth. And while in a city like Rahim Yaar Khan, or in a village like Amangarh, this distinction becomes muddier, the logic of it remains the same. Space does tend to become organized in a systematic way even if it is on the most basic level. For these men, this spatial organization - the village where they live and the city where they work, for one - becomes the cause of *ghuttan* (claustrophobia). As Henri Lefebvre writes;

Spaces are strange: homogeneous, rationalized, and as such constraining; yet at the same time utterly dislocated. Formal boundaries are gone between town and country, between centre and periphery, between suburbs and city centres, between the domain of automobiles and the domain of people. Between happiness and unhappiness, for that matter. And yet everything ('public facilities', blocks of flats, environments for living') is separated, assigned in isolated fashion to unconnected 'sites' and 'tracts'; the spaces themselves are specialized just as operations are in the social and technical division of labour. (Lefebvre, 6)

The division of the city, into zones of time, can then be mapped onto the domestic sphere as well. It is impossible for us to think of a 'syncretic' space - the desert - where home, restroom, work, leisure, domestic all morphs into one spatial entity.

For these men, the *ghuttan* is experienced on the level of both space and time. The constructed space of the city and the village is something they despise. For these guys, the desert offers a kind of 'free' space. And free is defined on multiple levels. The least free, for obvious reasons, is the city; followed by the village near the city. On some level, the settlements or the villages, far away from the city, essentially on the middle of nowhere are freer still. But it is only the desert, that is 'free' in the true sense of the word. As I have already hinted, it is not only the lack of space that is a problem. During one of our trips into the desert, I was taken to a *mazaar* of some local sufi peer. The *mazaar* (figure 3 and 4), apart from the actual site of the grave and a female section only had an outer wall that was constructed. The wall was built at enough distance to allow an average sized political rally to be held inside the *mazaar* area. Yet, as soon

as we stepped in, one of the men remarked *yeh pehlai buhat khula hota tha, ab thora taang hogaya hai* (It was used to be open before, now it's slightly closed). The person who said this was referring to the boundary that was built later. In some senses then, anything that restricts mobility, at all, hinders with the 'openness' of a space. But why is this?



Figure 3. The area of the *mazaar*. The white building on the left is the grave, the constructed area on the right is the female section. The boundary wall can be see behind the tanker. The grounds are a part of the *mazaar*.



Figure 4. Preetam and Aadu Bhagat in the *mazaar*. The *mazaar* features a boundary wall only on three sides. This side is left open. The small raised platform (on the right of the picture) is built for musical performances.

Anatoly Khazanov says: “... pastoral nomadism may be defined from the economic point of view as a distinct form of food-producing economy in which extensive mobile pastoralism is the predominant activity, and in which the majority of the population is drawn into periodic pastoral migrations. Perhaps one can also add that pastoral nomadism, in common with the other main forms of economy, is associated with a particular level in the development of technology. This level characterizes the period between two revolutions (including their consequences): the Neolithic and the Industrial.” (Khazanov, 17). Obviously, pastoral nomadism develops in a particular context because of a particular landscape. In effect, it is the landscape of the desert which demands that one economic activity - pastoral nomadism - become the dominant one. Landscape then, “... is a living process; it makes men; it is made by them” (Inglis qtd. in Inglod, 162). Lack of rain, impossibility of agriculture are just two of the features of the desert landscape which necessitate constant movement. Everybody moves. Even within the cities and the villages, mobility is a fundamental part of life. There is however something particular about mobility in the desert. Inglod, puts this idea in detail:

In its material aspect, nomadic movement is that component of actual ‘on-the-ground’ movement occasioned by the displacement of the point of arrival from the point of departure ... where the points of arrival and the point of departure are the same, there is no nomadic movement ... Now, since on arrival motions gives way to rest, and on departure rest gives way to motion, the punctuation of an overall itinerary by successive

destinations corresponds to the temporal alternations of periods of motion and of rest. (Inglod, 175)

As we already discussed, collective memory, provides certain 'horizons' within which the identity of the group is seen to exist. For the Hindu community of Cholistan, there are certain markers of a nomadic identity. First, is obviously the desert. The second, and an important one, is the constant mobility of the kind described above. *Jab gaaien roohi mai baadal dekhti hai, tou roti hai. Hum kaisay na roien?* (When the cow looks at the clouds over the desert, it cries. How can we not cry?). The cow cries, Dharmender explains, when it sees the rain pouring over the desert. It knows that rain means greenery and that means food. But it does not cry for food: it gets as much food as it needs in the village. It cries for freedom. It cries for the ability to walk through the desert and find its own food. The claustrophobia is explained in exactly the same terms. It is this kind of mobility that becomes the defining feature of a masculine, male nomadic identity. And it is precisely this mobility that the city and the village denies.

The fact that this identity is a male identity is not insignificant. Judith Butler remarks how " ... gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* (Inglod, 519). For these men then, to claim a male nomadic identity, certain actions have to be performed. I began with the language of freedom and the figure of the *Darwesh* and the Nomad. The desert then offers freedom from the constraints of both time and space. These men can, in the desert, be free much like the *Darwesh* and the nomad. What is important is that both these figures are free from the very constraints that bind these men in the cities and the desert. At the same time, both these figures are masculine figures. The Nomad goes where he wants to go, he defecates where he wants to defecate, he has sex when and where he wants. The *Darwish* on the other hand is the *man* who thinks: freed from the material necessities of life, he roams the lands thinking about the bigger questions of life. Both at the end of the day, supposedly masculine endeavors. The connection with the desert then, allows these men to reclaim these figures. In the city or the village, they are shopkeepers, workers, mechanics, and reporters. In the desert, they are *the Darwish* and *the Nomad*. The two factors - 'imprisonment' of time and space in the city and these figures - play into each other. The restrictions of time and space fundamentally challenge the agency of these men. They can't possibly act in the way they want to within the cities. In some ways, these figures represent the fullness of masculine freedom. The desert then, allows these men to reclaim that freedom.