Punjabiyat and the music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

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Undoubtedly, one of the most popular singers of South Asia, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, individually, and as part of his Qawaali party has been neglected in the academic literature. Rectifying that situation, this article locates his biography and music in the context of another under-theorised area of scholarly work, that of Punjabiyat. In exploring Nusrat’s biography, the connections between a non- essential notion of Punjabiyat and musical performativity are illustrated and examined. The various forces that operate to sustain musical and cultural continuity are presented in an oscillation between the normatively demarcated zones of East Punjab, West Punjab and the Punjabi diaspora.

Keywords: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; Qawaali; Punjabiyat; Punjab; music

*Par par aalam faazal hoya Kadee apne aap nu parheya nay Ja ja warda Mandir maseeti Kadee apne aap wich warrya nay Ehvain roz Shaitaan naal larda*

*Kadee nafs apnay naal larrya nay*

Reading the texts you became a scholar You never managed to read your self Rushing into the Mandir and Mosque You never entered your own heart Fighting with the devil pointlessly

You never challenged your own ego.1

(Attributed to Bulleh Shah as rendered by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Party ‘Ni Mai Jaan

Jogi de naal,’ ‘I am going with the Jogi’)2

Since Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s (NFAK’s) untimely death in 1997, his reputation and popularity does not seem to have waned. Indeed, whilst many members of the original Qawaali party also passed on, his nephew, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan continues to sing the families repertoire to critical acclaim. In Pakistan and North India, almost all Qawaali groups sing at least one ‘Nusrat number’ when performing live and many have re- recorded various parts of the NFAK repetoire. Nusrat’s style has been imitated with artists such as Hans Raj Hans (formerly a folk singer) taking up the mantle of a

commercially successful, ‘Sufi Music’ (Manuel 2008). In Britain, the musical impact of

NFAK continues to be felt. In 2013, the BBC aired a two-part radio documentary titled

‘Guru of peace’ documenting the singers life and featuring perspectives from a range of artists discussing Nusrat’s influence on their own work.3 Indeed, from the evidence of Youtube views and record sales,4 NFAK still maintains a strong presence in the world music scene and amongst South Asian diasporic artists. The range and depth of the eulo- gies in the BBC radio documentary bear further testimony to the legacy. Despite this pro- minence, his life and musical contribution have been relatively neglected in musicological studies of Qawwali and in general cultural studies accounts relating to South Asian culture. Though by no means a comprehensive redress to this situation, the intention here is to present NFAK’s family and musical biography to explore two aspects of a varied and complex career. First, the role that he played in reflecting a common Indo-Pak cultural terrain, most prominently, perhaps, in his work in Bollywood

– singing on film tracks – but more intensely in the Punjab. It is this latter cultural work that is, I will argue, most usefully conceptualised in terms of the notion of Punjabiyat and perhaps most potently performed in the Qawwali, *Ni mai jana jogi de naal*, attributed to Bulleh Shah and one of the tracks on Nusrat’s first studio recordings.5 The second issue of concern is the way in which this notion of musical Punjabiyat, as represented by NFAK, is one (perhaps the only) key way in which the Punjabi diaspora is able to frame itself outside of dominant fractures of religion, caste and nation.6 Indeed, writing the Punjabi diaspora requires a double undoing of the national narrative, implicit when dia- spora is evoked but more prominent when the group in question is itself split across two nation-states (Kalra, Ibad, and Purewal, 2013). These two issues by no means exhaust the rich source of musicological and cultural insight that NFAK provides, rather they are indica- tive and hopefully generative of further analysis.7

Studies of the Punjabi diaspora as a specific entity are few and far between, rather the existing literature is dominated by a methodological hierarchy that prioritises the nation- state as the basic unit of analysis disaggregating to religious groups (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Thus, numerous volumes cover topics such as the Indian diaspora or Sikhs in Britain or South Asian Muslims all of which contain elements of what might putatively be called a Punjabi diaspora.8 Depending on starting point, East or West Punjab (India or Pakistan), the other is left out of the analysis and to compensate, for this absence, greater attention is made to other aspects of identity such as religion. Though there are certainly clear arenas such as that of marriage or piety in which a singular focus on caste or religion would make entire sense, sites of Punjabi commonality based on language and culture are neglected.9 Perhaps, the trajectories of the nation-states of India and Pakistan are suffi- ciently divergent to make the case that difference not commonality is the better way of viewing Punjabis settled in diasporic settings. This would perhaps be to overly privilege the impact of the postcolonial states on intellectual debate, rather the institutional contexts in which diaspora and immigration are studied are closely related to and derive from a his- torical perspective on Punjab which focuses on discrete religious groups and commu- nities. In a strident critique of the state of academic scholarship on Punjab in Indian Universities, Surinder Singh and Ishwar Gaur describe it as ‘Sikh-centric’.10 The result of which is a ‘ ... dispensation [that] refuses to conceive Punjab as a region which experi- enced a specific socio-cultural evolution. It views the eighteenth century as a Sikh – Muslim (religious) conflict’ (Singh and Gaur 2009, 33). They go on to examine the devel- opment of the history syllabus and conclude that a student of medieval Punjab would have little to no knowledge of the role of Sufis in the making of the social and cultural orders. In parallel, the role of non-Muslims is either ignored or viewed negatively in history books in Pakistan.11 In summary, where the Punjab is most studied as an entity, it is almost entirely through a lens which focuses on the role of Sikhs. Thus, embracing the logic of colonial conflation of religion with language and culture (Mandair 2009). The formula being, Urdu:Muslim:Pakistan, Hindi:Hindu:India and Punjabi:Sikh:?. The question mark being subsequently filled by the call for Khalistan. It is this logic that betrays itself in much of the literature on the South Asian diaspora which attempts some focus on Punja- bis. Boundaries and borders are as much maintained by scholarship as they are disrupted. There are Sikh studies Chairs in Universities in America, Iqbal Fellows at the University of Cambridge and Oxford and a plethora of departments devoted to the study of Islam. Yet there is no single department or research centre which attempts to consider Punjab in its totality. The parochial nature of academic institutions in East Punjab, with portentous names such as Punjabi University only belies there deep embodiment within Sikh hege- mony, at the local state level.12

A significant attempt at moving beyond this colonial conflation of language and reli- gion erected is offered in the edited collection by Malhotra and Mir (2012). Utilising the idea of cultural history as a way of (re)connecting the disparate national/religious bound- aries that keep apart potential commonalities, the editorial introduction to the book Punjab Reconsidered foregrounds the shifting and multiple terrain that encompasses a useful con- ceptualisation of Punjabiyat. For Malhotra and Mir, this is a: ‘loosely defined term often used to describe a sentiment of belonging or attachment to Punjab and/or the foundations of shared, cross-religious, cross-caste, cross-class culture’ (2012, xv). It is the latter defi- nition that is of most interest in the present context and rather than viewing Punjabiyat as a classification it is, like the term diaspora, used here as a critical tool with which to inter- rogate claims to exclusivity and bounded identities. It is at the level of creative expression that this reading of Punjabiyat is most visible and it is therefore no coincidence that it is those chapters in the book Punjab Reconsidered that focus on culture, where boundaries begin to overlap and merge and the conceptualisation of Punjabiyat as a critical tool emerges. It is in the sphere of culture that the contribution of NFAK, as part of his Qawaali party and in his individual musical contribution, can be most usefully located. Ostensibly connected to the tradition of Qawaali that is associated with the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya in New Delhi, NFAK’s popularity with an international audience only served to enhance his placement within a particular rendering of Punjabiyat. Rather than abandon his roots as he emerged as a ‘World music’ and Bollywood star, he sought to embellish and enhance them via a routing in his families musical tradition. This diasporic Punjabi imaginary emerges from the traumas of partition as well as the attempt at healing that rupture through musical continuity. In that sense, it is not migration to the West that instantiates a diasporic consciousness and sensibility in NFAK, but a rec- ognition that his musical tradition is open to a certain kind of translation that is already tested by the India/Pakistan border and which would subsequently appeal to a Punjabi dia- sporic audience. In that sense, NFAK transcends any narrow notion of Punjabiyat, as his music always appealed to a wide(r) audience. These issues are explored via a biography of Nusrat drawn from popular texts and a series of interviews he gave to various television channels in the 1980s and 1990s. These vignettes serve as markers from which an explora- tion of the concept of Punjabiyat in relation to music is undertaken.

Partitions of music

Hailing from a small village, Basti Sheikh, now part of Jalandhar city, NFAKs’ family were already well known as reputable Qawaals in pre-partition Punjab. Whilst they were not affiliated musically with one shrine, their family Pir’s dargah was Tala Sharif, near Dasua, Hoshiarpur and the family belonged to the Sabri-Chisti order. Like many other Qawwal groups, they made their living primarily from performing on Thursday evening’s at shrines; at the annual Urs/mela celebrating the death anniversary of the Pir; and at private functions. It was the changing political environment in Punjab, from the late 1930s onwards, that had the main impact on Fateh and Mubarek’s, Nusrat’s father and elder uncle, respectively, musical practices. In the turbulent political climate, the brothers became involved in the development of Iqbaliat, which were songs inspired by Allama Iqbal’s poetry, and created to support the political campaign- ing of the Muslim League (Qureshi 1992/1993; Baud 1996). Indeed, one of the stories about the pre-partition family relates to how Hindus were desperate for the brothers to stop singing their propaganda for Pakistan as their musical talent was harnessing so much support for the Muslim League (Baud 2008). In the same period, Bombay Qawaals were, in contrast, increasingly singing heterodox and Indian-centred Sufi texts, in support of the Indian National Congress (Qureshi 1992/1993).13 Like so many other of the Punjabi Qawaal groups, during partition, the family moved from Jalandhar to Lyallpur (Faislabad) and re-established themselves in the new nation. In keeping with their dual engagements, they lived near the shrine of Lasoori Shah, in the central city of Lyallpur, and this is where NFAK first performed. At the same time and perhaps due to their affiliation with the Muslim league, the brothers Mubarak and Fateh Ali were able to gain lucrative employment as Radio Pakistan grade A musicians. Despite this engagement with the world of radio and studios, they did not undertake any commercial recording and never produced a studio tape.14 This should not indicate a static response to the music or changing times, as the development of Iqbaliat Qawaali demonstrates. Indeed, their migration from Jalandhar into postcolonial Lyallpur and the need for a national music for Pakistan led to them develop the Qawaali genre for specific types of state sponsored public per- formance (Rubi 1992).

Dominant accounts of Qawaali locate it either within the broader Islamic-Sufi musical world, stretching from Syria through to Indonesia (Frembgen 2008) or in the long historical line of a 700-year-old tradition based at Nizamuddin’s shrine in Delhi (Qureshi 1995). The scholarly neglect of Punjabi Qawaali in this context may be due to the process, pithily described by Jacoviello: ‘the original spiritual genre underwent both a process of desecration in Punjab and a process of profanation on its way to the West. “Desecration” means the progressive loss of sacred value’ (2011, 325). Contemporary accounts, keen to locate Qawaali within the format of ‘tolerant’ Islam are unable to undertake the jarring journey to Punjab, where the boundaries between folk and reli- gious music, in their blurring imply a ‘desecration’. In the final shift to the diaspora, the genre loses all connection to (religious) origins and is rendered into a commercial, com- modity. This critique of Nusrat’s music was made perhaps most poignantly by Lahore- based film-maker, Farjad Nabi, in the documentary: ‘Nusrat has left the building ... but when’.15 Yet these readings of NFAK are deeply entrenched in a narrative of authenticity that any, even superficial, understanding of the context of Qawaali and in particular NFAK’s role within the genre would find difficult to sustain (Kalra 2014). The issue of ‘authentic’ Qawaali form has provided ample opportunity for confusion. For example, in pioneering research, Sakata (1994) analyses the performances of over 20 concerts that NFAK’s group gave in a variety of Pakistani and diasporic contexts.16

The conundrum for the music professor simply being the extent to which Qawaali can be seen as a spiritual music, even though what might convey this religious element is not clear from contexts of performance or the often ambiguous lyrical content. In breaking down sites of performance into either sacred and secular, Sakata (1994) concludes that it is not clear from the context which behaviour might match the distinction established by Qureshi (1986) between religious and commercial Qawaali.17 Rather, Sakata (1994) argues, Nusrat’s performance in the sacred setting of the Urs of Data Sahib in Lahore is more demotic and carnivelesque than at the secular state sponsored Lok Virsa Institute in Islamabad. It is the audience that deter- mines the mood in both cases. Indeed, the most sober and attentive audience was that at Washington University, where the concert audience was the most mixed in terms of religion, ethnicity and gender. In a sense, the Western context provides the most religious context (where sobriety is defined as religious) and the Lahori the most demotic. In an in-depth interview,18 with the Lok Virsa Institute in 1989, Nusrat himself presents the music as the main appeal to non-South Asian audiences, which is logical given that they would not understand the texts and that it is the emotions present in the music which are the attraction and the message.19 It is this approach to the music which provides the consistency across the various contexts in which he performs, rather than any identification of sacred and secular. It is this diffi- culty of classification, perhaps, which may also account for NFAK’s absence in accounts of Sufi music or in historiographies of Qawwali.

Nusrat reflects on his own music outside of static definitions and binaries, for example, making a much softer and fluid distinction between the religious and secular stating that there are ‘soulful’ and ‘romantic’ moods which are reflected in the performance.20 Even the international stature that NFAK rose to is related by him back to the world of popular spirituality in the Punjab, rather than to any long tra- dition. As he states: ‘Whatever I am, is due to the grace and faith of these elders (buzorgoan), I am nothing of myself, it is all their doing. Following in their footsteps is my duty’ (NFAK in Baud 2008, 25).21 It is ‘elders’, in the specific sense of Nusrat’s father and uncle, who also provide the other site for Nusrat’s legitimacy in the world of Qawwali. Many Qawwals in contemporary Punjab trace a musical lineage that stretches back four to five generations, but of more contemporary significance attempt to estab- lish a connection with NFAK’s family.22 Locating NFAK in the context of Faislabad, West Punjab and Pakistan might lead to a framing that evokes partition, Islamic ideol- ogy and anti-Indian nationalism. Considering NFAK’s considerable musical output an indication of some of these strands can certainly be found.23 However, it is also clear from the circulation of his music in North India and from the videos of his concerts per- forming in the UK that his appeal transcended the confines of religion and nation. In particular, when performing Punjabi tracks, he certainly appealed to and arguably enabled the evocation of Punjabiyat. It is the affective role that NFAK’s music played which enables a critical assertion of Punjabiyat, a role that is exemplified by Singh and Gaur in their volume on Sufism: ‘Essays in the present volume constitute a “transgressive” text in the sense that they transcend the conventional boundaries and communitarian standards of writing the history of Punjab’ (2009, 35). Nusrat’s music is able, in the absence of cross-border transnational, political or social move- ments and institutions, to slip through the gaps of border control initially via cassette copying and now via digital technologies.24 In her insightful book, Bhangra Moves, Roy makes a similar argument: ‘In the process of engaging with the variety of subject positions it unfolded, Punjabiyat is transformed. The Panjabi identity con- structed in relation to Bhangra disengages ethnicity from nation and religion and returns it to language, region, culture and the body. Unlike Sikh nationalism, which South Asian Diaspora mobilised religion and language to appropriate Punjabiyat for sikhi, Bhangra Nation manipulates primordial ties attached to the bioregion, biology and everyday conduct and rituals in reaffirming an inclusive Punjabiyat’ (2010, 222). In the broader cultural domain, Punjabiyat is (ab)used in different ways, for example, in the bedazzling, commoditised world of Bollywood movies, Punjabis are sometimes represented through the valorisation of upper caste/class Khatri business families, marginalising Sikhs and dalits and sometimes through the figure of the male, turbaned, bearded Jat Sikh. This latter hypermasculine figure comes in the form of the bhangra dancer, the warrior and ultimately the Indian soldier. A similar bifurcation between neglect and caricature is also present in Pakistan where the

‘true’ Punjabi is considered to be the Jat male with accompanying values of loyalty, erratic but passionate emotions and unbridled masculinity.25 Conversely, the disregard- ing of Punjabi can be seen in the presentation of Qawwali on Pakistan (public and private) television channels where only Urdu and Farsi texts are broadcast.26 It is there- fore a specific framing of Bhangra that offers a space for Punjabiyat to do the work of subverting national boundaries and unifying sectarian divides.27 This critical use of the concept does not belie its lived sense as Malhotra and Mir succinctly state:

We have not only empahasised the amorphous ad shadowy nature of our nodal idea of Punjabiyat, but also underlined that for all its ambiguity, the notion is real in so far as it exercises people’s imaginations, emotions, experiences and sense of self. (2012, Ii)

But it is necessary to be careful when considering this ‘real’ aspect of Punjabi identity as it is equally able to be utilised for narrow, sectarian politics as for cosmopolitan border crossings. Punjabiyat, as a critical tool specifically refers to the oscillation between that which is rooted in tradition and routed through creative engagement. This conceptualisation is usefully evoked in the way in which Nusrat placed his own music in relation to its past.

In a series of interviews given from 1989 to 1999, Nusrat develops a musical lineage which brings together the two great strands of music related to Moghul patronage in the sub-continent: Dhrupad and Qawwali. In one of his first extensive interviews with the Lok Virsa Institute, in Islamabad, he talks about his gharana tracking a lineage to Behram Khan and to the Dagar Bani of Dhrupad.28 This relationship to tradition is not static as it is clear that NFAK’s father and uncle were successful precisely because they were able to respond to the changing climate in British India. In that sense, Nusrat’s forays into the world of commercial recording and ultimately into the world of film (Hollywood and Bollywood) is continuous with practices of innovation. Nusrat maintains that the tradition of Qawaali retains an ideal place, which given the stature of Mubarak and Fateh Ali, for him could not be matched. The changes that NFAK’s group bought about were therefore different to the inherited tradition but none- theless maintained integrity.29 NFAK’s initial innovations in Pakistan were to introduce folk notation and to change the ways in which notes were expressed, often resulting in faster beats and punchier melodic lines. These musical changes followed from shifts in instrumentation in North Indian music as a whole from the use of Sarangi and Shenai at the beginning of the twentieth century to violin and clarinet by the middle and then to the hegemony of the harmonium. Thus, introducing other western instruments and studio sampled sounds were not outside of the continuous processes of change which were part of Nusrat’s musical upbringing. This change is not expressed in terms of decay or decline by Nusrat but rather as central to three socio-musical projects.

First, in the Pakistani context, the desire to attract a wider audience to Qawaali, which he perceived was lacking due to the overtly classical nature of the musical offerings. Second, in the South Asian diaspora to enable a connection, for Punjabis in particular to the stories of Heer Ranjha and other epic love poems. Finally, to make his music appealing to an international musical public, he sang in many different genres, such as world music and bollywood.30 These reflections on musical practice were fundamen- tally informed by Nusrat’s success in Europe and North America.

Coming to London

If partition of British India instigated a division of people that fragmented and fissured a common sense of Punjabiyat, then ironically migration to the imperial homeland recre- ated that lost social space. In the factories, mills and foundries of 1960s urban Britain, male workers from India and Pakistan found commonality in the songs of Hindi film and the folk tunes of Punjab. As part of the development of urban diasporic spaces, shops selling music became a feature of inner-city high streets throughout the UK (Dudrah 2010). Ayub Khan, owner of Oriental Star Agencies, one of the first retail outlets for South Asian music in Britain, relates his first encounter with NFAK:

In 1978, a friend of mine from London, Haji Rayatullah, who used to bring music for me from Pakistan ... bought a recording for me (on big reel to reel spools) and said you must listen to this. When I heard it, I felt like the voice of the soul has come into my heart. I felt like I was listening to a voice that would one day become famous throughout the world. From that day, I wanted to bring this voice, that of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to the world.31

In 1979, NFAK came to Birmingham for the first in a series of concerts, which took place in various halls and sometimes Public houses (very appropriate mehkhanas).32

The group’s first, video recorded, concert took place in the Luxor Cinema in Birming- ham and subsequently NFAK performed regularly in the UK at public and private func-

tions. In these early concerts, NFAK was deeply integrated into the local domains in which the lines between the cultural and the political, the social and the economic

were fuzzy. For example, a musical performance, a public meeting or a religious

event were not so spatially segregated in this time. In 1985, NFAK performed at the Farcroft Public House in Handsworth in Birmingham. This was the same year that public disturbances, of migrant youth against the police, raged through the area (Cottle 1994). The Farcroft itself was the venue where the Indian Workers Association, a long-standing institution fighting for social justice as well as communal harmony, held public meetings (Gill 2013). It is not surprising that in these spaces, Nusrat’s reper- toire would extend beyond the Qawaali genre to engage with other spiritual music texts, such as devotion to Mata devi or in praise of Kabir.33 The interaction across religious boundaries was enabled by the diasporic context (unlike postcolonial Punjab) and thus in 1989, NFAK performed at Slough Gurdwara, near London, singing texts from the Sikh tradition.34 The space of diaspora created the conditions to re-imagine a nine- teenth-century Punjab in which the role of musicians was not delimited by their reli- gious identity, rather they were the main purveyors of what Mir (2010) has termed a parallel piety, but I would label Punjabiyat. In 1980s Britain, NFAK was clearly capable, despite being born in post-partition Lyallpur of engaging in a range of genres encompassing Sikh, Hindu and Muslim musical traditions. This inter-religious diasporic music space also emerges in another version of Ayub Khan’s first encounter with NFAK that he related in another interview:

I remember we were three people in that room. Me, my brother and Sam Sagoo ... and we put this reel on and all of a sudden everyone was mesmerised when we heard that first take, ‘Haq Ali Ali’. That was Nusrat’s first introduction to us and I thought this is a won- derful energy and voice, which we must introduce to the world. The world should benefit from this great singer.35

The purpose of repeating another version of this story is to note the presence of Sam Sagoo in this physical musical entry of NFAK into 1970s Birmingham. Oriental Star Agencies offices provide us with another imaginary: the studios of All India Radio in Jalandhar in the 1930s, where Punjabi musicians, regardless of religious background interacted in the creation of new musical forms, in response to the new technologies of recording and transmission. Sam Sagoo is the father of Bally Sagoo, one of the leading early producers of a distinctive British Bhangra sound, who would go onto record Nusrat in the 1991 album Magic Touch. Sam Sagoo still DJs on a radio station and at one point owned an Indian music shop, but it is Bally Sagoo’s relationship that exemplifies the way in which NFAK crossed generations in terms of his appeal. In an inter- view after NFAK’s death, Bally Sagoo tells:

I knew about Nusrat, but had not heard his music or knew much about it. [By this time, Bally Sagoo had recorded some best selling bhangra remix albums]. When he came to the studio, he just sat down and in two hours recorded vocals for six tracks. No arrangement or anything ... .After the album was complete I became a big fan and so did lots of other kids who heard it for the first time ... Everywhere you went young people were playing Magic Touch, in cars, in colleges, clubs ... 36

The diasporic story about the importance of the musical culture that developed in the UK in the 1980s has been well examined (Sharma, Hutnyk, and Sharma 1996; Dudrah 2007; Roy 2010). This has mostly been a sociological story couched in the language of youth subculture and identity but not as much attention has been paid to the musical cross-fertilisation that the diasporic context enabled. Bally Sagoo, Malkit Singh and a range of artists from East Punjab, East Africa and West Punjab were given the opportunity to interact with Nusrat through the auspices of Oriental Star Agencies. This led to a number of remixes of NFAK’s music, primarily with dance music but it also provided a space for East and West Punjab to meet and for Sufi, Bhakti and Gurbani textual traditions to interact again.

Outside of the South Asian diaspora, Nusrat is best known due to his engagement with Peter Gabriel and the World music scene that propelled him on to the international stage.37 This collaboration began in 1985 and resulted in NFAK gaining a wide non- Punjabi audience and arguably much greater recognition in the sub-continent. Some commentators have argued that Qawwali was a dying form, confined to the time of the Urs/mela and unattractive to younger audiences.38 By receiving the endorsement of Peter Gabriel and as a corollary of a Western audience, this increased Qawwali’s status thus enabling new audiences a potential to relate to the music. Whilst there is no doubt that NFAK drew on his international fame as a way of increasing exposure and prestige to the Qawwali form, he also maintained his engagement with the Punjabi diaspora. Indeed, his popularity with this audience maintained a significant impact on his musical innovation. This point is articulated in this 1993 interview on Zee TV:

The new generation born in the UK, growing up here, they do not know what Heer Waris

Shah is, who Sassi/Pannu are. These old, traditional things ... [such as Bulleh Shah’spoetry] .. . to attract them to these things, I had an idea, which I mulled over for a long time about a certain type of experimentation. Those who like English, Western music, if we sing to them in our own way they won’t be able to tolerate it. My experience has been to use western instruments with our classical style, the old tunes that are coming from the past, in Pahari or in Bhairvi, or other tunes that we could use in a new composition. In that way this would promote our culture ... and this was a new experience for me.39

What is critical here is the way in which Nusrat places himself in relation to what is perceived of as a ‘lack’ in the diasporic population often articulated in terms of religion. Given the way in which Qawaali is being marketed at the time in the World music market as ‘spiritual’, there would be a case for emphasising the religious aspect of the tradition. Yet this is not the argument put forward by Nusrat, rather it is those popular love stories, Heer Ranjah and Sohni Mahiwal, that transcend formal social boundaries of religion, sect and creed, which are chosen to engage with the diasporic audience. In one sense, these are the ideal texts to anchor Punjabis in a context where they are engaged in reformulating social relations in new settings and NFAK is keenly aware of this. In describing these new musical forms, he states:

This is a new form of music, I would not call this Qawaali, as that has its own basis and foundation, that is the art that we get from our elders and it is also our family art, we know what the requirements are for Qawaali and if you leave them then it is not Qawaali. We could call this an ‘experience of sound’, not Qawaali. The tradition of Qawaali is a com- plete thing and I would not say that an individual like me could change that. What I have done is bought in new rhythms. Looking at the atmosphere here, I saw what people wanted, what does the audience like to listen to ... 40

In the volume Dis-Orienting Rhythms and subsequently the book, A Postcolonial People the argument that British South Asian popular music should be seen as a form in its own right, not derived solely from South Asia, but related to a number of transnational nodal points was put forward (Kaur and Kalra 1996; Ali, Kalra, and Sayyid 2006). NFAK in this interview, in a sense makes a similar point, not framed through the assertion of identity, but rather as central to a particular type of creative process, rooted in the Punjabi qissa tradition but routed through a mosaic of musical forms.

It is with this perspective that NFAK was able to transcend the divide between musical genres and the borders of political identity appealing to multiple audiences at several levels. His ecstatic reception in Bollywood in the mid-1990s led the way

for many Pakistani artists to follow, with his nephew Rahat Fateh Ali Khan now

almost entirely based in Mumbai. In the British context, NFAK crossed over from playing in Pubs and community centres into the emerging British Asian music scene of the late 1980s. My own encounter with his music came as part of the organising com- mittee of the first National Festival of Asian Music held in Nottingham in August 1988. This open air event held over a weekend, heralded the beginning of the Asian Melas that are now a feature of the British summer.41 NFAK performed a two hour set of his best-known Qawaalis, predominantly in Punjabi, enthralling the crowd of 5000 young people and families. Two years later, I was fortunate to see NFAK again, this time performing in a seated auditorium in Nottingham, to an invited audience. The sponsor of the event introduced the evening and also notified the audience that the evening would only consist of Persian language Qawaali. Whilst this may have come as a surprise to many of us sitting there, who had been bought up on NFAKs Punjabi offerings, the performance was still mesmerising. This ability of NFAKs music to cross musical styles and performative spaces is perhaps best illustrated by my third anecdote. In 1991, the Paradise Club in East London hosted one of the first public Lesbian, Gay and Transgender South Asian nights. DJ Ritu played the latest Bhangra tracks and when Kinna Sohna, Nusrat’s track, remixed by Bally Sagoo from the album Magic Touch was played; the floor was cleared by Naseer, a young man dressed in a flowing skirt (ghagra) and bindi on his forehead. He proceeded to dance to the track, Kinha Sohna, miming to dramatise the lyrics: *Kinna Sohna tainoon rab ne banaya, dil kare vekhda ravan* (How beautiful God made you, I feel like spending all my time looking at you) is a Punjabi track, with simple lyrics that come to life with the Latin rhythms that Bally Sagoo’s remixing combine with the powerful vocals of NFAK. In each of these performance space, the mela, the auditorium and the nightclub NFAK’s enduring appeal is in fore fronting the centrality of the creative process in his musical work where any narrow or closed sense of identity is abandoned.

Looking for Punjabiyat

The Punjabiyat that Nusrat’s music evokes does not circulate in the realm of insti- tutional and public politics, rather it reflects a process of becoming, a critical inception, rather than a fixed classification determined and maintained by the contours of the nation-state. This framing of Punjabiyat emerges outside of a social science/humanities discourse that is unable to cross the impervious Indo-Pak border or one that is solely focused on recovering or recreating a common culture. In Surjit Patar’s poem, ‘My Language is Dying’, the lack of learning in the Punjabi language is contrasted with the economic and status requirements of learning English. The state and formal education system is dismissed as a possible saviour for the language, because for Patar, Punjabi was never something that king’s or bureaucrats took kindly to, indeed, he lists the language’s saviours as: ‘Spiritual figures, poets, prophets, lovers, warriors, my people’ (Shah 2004, 177). Indeed, despite NFAK’s popularity, in the small academic literature on Qawwali he is ignored as being too commercial or too concerned with music to be considered a true Qawaal of the shrine. Perhaps this is because he fits better into the epithet of poet, lover or prophet, rather than authentic representative of an ancient tradition. The containers of Sufi music or Muslim culture that have gained currency in Western liberal circles are unable to hold the irrepressible energy of an NFAK singing: *Dha de Masjid, Bhan de Mandir* (Demolish the Mosque and break the Temple). Rather the focus is on those elements which resonate with a manageable and consumable commodity of religious music, regardless of whether it relates to a tra-dition or not. In this sense, NFAK’s music like Punjabiyat remains on the margins of mainstream academic concern whether in India, Pakistan or the diaspora. This status of marginality, though, provides the concept with a critical edge which is enabling rather than paralysing and insightful rather than bland. Descriptors which apply equally well to the musical gifts that NFAK gave.

There are a few artists such as poet Surjit Patar and documentary film-maker Ajay Bhardwaj, who evoke Punjabiyat in a critical mode, but none as popular as NFAK. Ajay Bhardwaj’s documentaries, filmed from 2003 onwards and based in East Punjab takes us into a deep exploration of the meaning of Punjabiyat.42 In these films, a land-owner cries when reading about the partition, a woman devotee refuses to be filmed, a soldier of the Indian National Army describes his families shrine.

These characters are not presented as romantic figures resisting the overwhelming crushing forces of modernity, nor a comfort for those seeking nostalgia or refuge in the past. Rather, Punjabiyat emerges as the resilient space in which those wishing to express their humanity in the face of relentless degradation are able to speak. Hope arises in Bhardwaj’s films in the music of those who perform at shrines across East Punjab, B.S. Balli Qawwal Paslewale, a group of musicians taking up the form only in the twenty-first century, a bagpipe player entirely concerned with his performance as a devotion to his pir and the examples go on. Bhardwaj alerts us to and is also subject to the charge of romanticism in the wake of the conceptualisation of Punjabiyat offered here. A critique that of all forms of identification no matter how conceived ultimately conceal and congeal other differences and in this context most notably that of gender and class/caste. Despite the taking of the female voice in many of the song texts (Abbas 2002), the universe of a critical Punjabiyat remains dominated by male performers. A video of a school girl singing Shiv Kumar Batalvi on the Facebook site, *Wasda Rahey Punjab*,43 raises comments from the viewing public about the location of the girl in terms of being in India or Pakistan. The Facebook site, *Wasda Rahey Punjab*, is ostensibly targeted at those who can read the Shahmukhi script which is used to describe the group.44 This gives rise to the assumption, as explored in the various comments, that the girl is singing in the courtyard of a school in West Punjab. This confusion is confounded by the generic nature of the girl’s uniform, the common rural government class room setting and in fact the musical intonation and expression in the performance. Gender and class work in ways which play with the music listeners ability to neatly categorise and classify. A girl of this social class could still be in either a remote East or West Punjabi village, but once subjected to the scrutiny of those who can only see through the lens of the nation or religion Pun- jabiyat quickly disaggregates.45 Rather it is the problematic of a girl singing or the impossibility of her living in a Muslim society that becomes the focus. Indeed, it is male voices that have been prominent in this article’s narrative and Nusrat himself only drew one categorical boundary in his interviews and that was around the inappro- priateness of women singing Qawwali.46 Punjabiyat subverts one set of borders and asserts others and it is in the musical biography or NFAK that these processes are made most apparent.

Notes

1. Transcribed and translated by article author.

2. Taken from, recording on, NFAK, Vol. 8, 1985, Oriental Star Agencies (VHS). This par- ticular couplet has been performed by many other artists most notably Sain Zahoor.

3. 5/3/13 BBC Radio 2: Guru of peace: An introduction to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Nitin Sawhney.

4. NFAK has a single video with over 10 million hits, for example, whilst Fareed Ayaaz Qawwal’s most popular is just over 800 K (Youtube November 2012). In personal com- munication with Mohammed Ayub, director of Oriental Star Agencies, he stated that NFAK still remains one of their best-selling artists.

5. According to Mohammed Ayub, Nusrat’s first album recorded in 1973 featured the track *‘Ni mai jana jogi de naal’.*

6. Alternative sites might be sport (but this tends to be competitive in terms of national bound- aries, i.e. India vs. Pakistan) or films (again these tend to be narrated within the frame of national competitiveness, such as Dil bole Hadeepa, though Waris Shah – Ishq da Waaris

by Gurdas Maan is a notable exception) or even food (though issues of halal and jhatka again divide along religious lines).

7. It is also significant that formal musicological analysis is not included here though for those interested in this aspect, see Kalra (2014).

8. Prominent examples are the books: Sikhs in Britain by Tatla and Singh, Salaam America by Mohammed-Arif and The Indian diaspora by Jayaram, though there are numerous other

examples.

9. This is despite the fact that diaspora researchers do not suffer from the problems that

researchers based in India and Pakistan have in terms of obtaining visas to carry out research in each other’s countries.

10. The volume Sufism in Punjab is dedicated to the memory of Nusrat and contains this

epithet: ‘Who stood as a bridge between West (Pakistani) Punjab and East (Indian) Punjab. Who emerged as the greatest cultural icon of the Punjabi diaspora that is spread in all continents of the world’.

11. Mostly, the role of West Punjab is completely ignored in Paksitani textbooks in favour of a national/religious combine. See Rosser (2004).

12. There are of course notable exceptions. The work of the Advanced Centre for Punjabi has been a remarkable contribution to the advancement of cross-border communication; however, this institute is primarily interested in technological innovation rather than

studies of diaspora. For tools that can transliterate between Shahmukhi, Gurmukhi and

Devanagri, see <http://s2g.learnpunjabi.org/login.aspx>

13. Though the distinction between heterodox Sufi and Allama Iqbal is tendentious and relates solely to the description of this period in the literature on Qawwali.

14. There are perhaps only three or four live recordings of Mubarak and Fateh Ali, most

notably ‘Naa Maar Naina De Teer’ features Mubarak Ali and the young voice of Nusrat can also be heard. Accessed 8/11/2013. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyQx\_](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyQx_4gyREg&amp;amp%3Blist=FLVhAUacNAu-vGN0B2UosLdg)

[4gyREg&list=FLVhAUacNAu-vGN0B2UosLdg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyQx_4gyREg&amp;amp%3Blist=FLVhAUacNAu-vGN0B2UosLdg)

15. Mateela Films, 1997. Accessed 2/4/2013. <http://vimeo.com/8202106>

16. Sakata played an instrumental role in organising a residency at the University of Washing-

ton ethnomusicology department for Nusrat.

17. For those not familiar with the texts of Qawwali, those that do not explicitly refer to the Prophet

(and would therefore be called naat) are in their best form focus on love which is ambiguously

positioned between the sacred and the secular (see Gunninder-Singh for examples).

18. All interviews are either in Urdu or Punjabi and translated by myself.

19. <http://www.nusratfan.com/an-exclusive-interview-with-the-legend-nusrat-fateh-ali-khan/>,

1989.

20. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, The Last Prophet, Jerome Missolz Film, 2003. [http://www.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl_iIr51uyGhw)

[youtube.com/watch?v=bl\_iIr51uyGhw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl_iIr51uyGhw)

21. Baud partially captures the meaning of word Bazurgon in the translation, ‘saints’. But in an interview in the film the Last Prophet, NFAK used the word bazurgon, to refer to his father, uncles and other ancestors in the musical sense. It is those, who’s footsteps Nusrat is fol- lowing in.

22. Interviews conducted with five of the main Qawwal groups of Punjab; for more details, see Kalra (2014).

23. The video to the track ‘Mera piya ghar aya’ worked on an anti-Indian nationalism through the figure of the lost soldier.

24. Though there are notable internet groups such as Asiapeace and the work of many small organisations such as the Institute for Peace and Development in Lahore. See Purewal (2006).

25. The Pakistani Punjabi films Kartar Singh and Maula Jat are good examples of these caricatures.

26. This is based on general viewing of the channels PTV and QTV during 2008 – 2010 and then systematic analysis of three months of Qawwali programming on these channels in which (excluding live coverages of an Urs) there.

27. Like any cultural form, music can also be used to enhance and reinforce division. The use of music by the RSS and the burning of cassettes and CDs by the Taliban are cases in point.

28. Lok Virsa Institute, 1989.

29. Lok Virsa Interview, 1989.

30. The use of a Qawaali for a rape scene in the film Natural Born Killers takes place without Nusrat’s knowledge as part of the generic selling and buying of music in Hollywood.

31. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8srWWca_Uk&list=PL02C16C4815BEBF41>

32. In certain Sufi poetry, the mehkhana, literally house of wine, is the place in which the devotee/lover drinks to replicate the intoxication of love.

33. Hai Raj Dulara Mata Da in OSA Vol. 8, Birmingham Video, 1985, performed in the Facroft Public House on Soho Road in Handsworth. See Koi boley Ram, Slough Gurdwara, OSA.

34. This was ultimately released as an audio CD by OSA in 1995 under the title Shabad Vol. 13, a youtube video of the event is available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rDpONbOL8U) [6rDpONbOL8U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rDpONbOL8U), accessed 7/1/13.

35. Accessed 3/3/1013. [http://www.desiblitz.com/content/muhammad-ayub-founder-oriental- star-agencies](http://www.desiblitz.com/content/muhammad-ayub-founder-oriental-star-agencies)

36. Accessed 17/1/2013. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-EQecLSOcE&list=PL02C16C4815BEBF41](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-EQecLSOcE&amp;amp%3Blist=PL02C16C4815BEBF41)

37. The idea of world music has been rightly critiqued in terms of musical exotica (Hutnyk 2000).

38. See <http://www.nusratfan.com/an-exclusive-interview-with-the-legend-nusrat-fateh-ali-khan/>, 1989.

39. Zee TV Interview. Accessed 9/1/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PP7jJOfDlMQ>

40. Zee TV Interview. Accessed 9/1/2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PP7jJOfDlMQ>

41. Every major British city hosts an Asian mela with a formulaic combination of music, stalls and fun fair. These melas were initially funded by the state, but have increasingly become privatised. The BBC Asian network still funds a season of melas throughout the UK, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork/events/melas/2012/>for example. Religious groups have also started to hold melas, with the Birmingham Vaisakhi mela and Eid mela being particularly large. These events also involve marching around the city, providing an inter- esting perspective on the geography of diaspora in the inner city.

42. *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* (Where the Twain Shall Meet), 2005; *Rabba Hun Kee Kariye* (Thus Departed Our Neighbours), 2007; Milange Babey Ratan De Mele Te (Let’s Meet at Baba Ratan’s Fair), 2012.

43. Accessed 3/4/2013. https://[www.facebook.com/pages/Wasdaa-Rahay-Punjab/105165399647031](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Wasdaa-Rahay-Punjab/105165399647031)

44. The English rendition of the group’s aims is as follows. In this page, we try to highlight the beautiful punjabi culture, which is a soil of five rivers, we hope that you like our page and our posts, thanks for joining us,we belong to a Punjab city, Mandi Burewala, Punjab, Pakistan.

45. Though the vast majority of the 1300 or so comments were complimentary and praising the child’s voice rather than focusing on geographical location or religion.

46. Lok Virsa Interview, 1989.

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