A Soundtrack for Reimagining Pakistan? Coke Studio, memory, and the music video

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Abstract:
Since 2007, Coke Studio has rapidly become one of the most influential platforms in televisual, digital and musical media, and has assumed a significant role in generating new narratives about Pakistani modernity. The musical pieces in Coke Studio's videos re-work a range of genres and performing arts, encompassing popular and familiar songs, as well as resuscitating classical poetry and the musical traditions of marginalised communities. This re-working of the creative arts of South Asia represents an innovative approach to sound, language, and form, but also poses larger questions about how cultural memory and national narratives can be reimagined through musical media, and then further re-worked by media consumers and digital audiences.

    This article considers how Coke Studio's music videos have been both celebrated and criticized, and explores the online conversations that compared new covers to the originals, be they much loved or long-forgotten. The ways in which the videos are viewed, shared, and dissected online sheds light on new modes of media consumption and self-reflection. Following specific examples, we examine the larger implications of the hybrid text-video-audio object in the digital age, and how the consumers of Coke Studio actively participate in developing new narratives about South Asian history and Pakistani modernity.

It is 1982, and the distraught heroine, played by Shabnam (Jharna Basak), has knocked her head against a wall, allowing the skin of her forehead to crack open. Dazed and bleeding, she slides down to the floor, reaches out in silent anguish to a Sufi's grave, and faints. This vignette unfolds within a montage of images set to music in the movie *Sahāre* ('Support', dir. Nazir Ali), slicing between her self-harm; the movie's hero, Mohammad Ali, as he listens, bewildered, to a *qawwālī* performance; and painted images, photographic stills, and documentary-style footage of pilgrims in Makkah. The rapid, dramatic alternation between different scenes—from the Ka'bah to Shabnam's rucksack—is held together by the music, and the stirring facial expressions and hand gestures of the *qawwāl* singers, the brothers Ghulam Farid Sabri (1930-1994) and Maqbool Ahmed Sabri (1945-2011) (Chishti, 2005). Their dark locks coiling over white *sherwani*s, they sit on a minimalist dais before a black banner, upon which the words '*Yaum-i-Ṣābir*' ('Day of the Enduring') cut a stark silhouette. The brothers' audience has been staged, dressed in colour-coordinated costumes, and choreographed in synchronized swaying and embodied responses to the music. The featured song, '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' ('King of the Sanctuary'), had been released in 1975 and had propelled the Sabri Brothers to fame and ultimately stardom (Malik, 2019). While *Sahāre* proved to be relatively unsuccessful with audiences, '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' had a lasting impact, and the Sabri Brothers later restaged it for PTV Global as well as releasing a studio recording (Sabri Brothers, 1996).

It is 2015, and Atif Aslam is recording a cover of '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' for Coke Studio Pakistan. Standing slightly removed from the other musicians, he sings against a digital screen of shimmering rolling clouds—billowing in Coca-Cola red—and the iconic neon Coke Studio logo. The eclectic studio spreads before him, littered with carpets and acoustic guitars, and illuminated through lampshades and flaring spotlights. His vocals soar over a range of musicians and instrumental ensembles—a harmonium set across from a glossy white piano—and a set of *qawwāl*s besides three guitarists. In many ways, the song is typical of the arrangement and aesthetics that Coke Studio viewers have grown accustomed to since the show premiered in 2008. The song has been designated for Season 8 Episode 1 and is distributed via the Coke Studio website, its YouTube platform, and is made available

for free download. However, the song also stands out for its exceptional popularity: on November 2, 2017, Coke Studio tweeted that it had become the first Pakistani video to cross 100 million views on YouTube.

At the same time, Atif Aslam's version of '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' was not without its critics, and debates erupted across social media and digital forums over the song's qualities, often making negative comparisons to the Sabri Brothers' original. As these debates unfolded, viewers, listeners, and consumers went online to explore the lyrics of the song, research the original poets behind the words, and to discuss the imaginaries the music evoked. These discussions across YouTube comments, Facebook, and Quora encouraged users to upload references and other resources, including recordings of the Sabri Brothers' versions from live concerts, PTV, and *Sahāre*. Without having to search for a physical cassette, film reel, or CD album, Coke Studio's audience could compare versions of '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' across the decades, excavate musical memories grounded in personal and collective experiences of Pakistan's recent history, and create their own participatory media responses to the song.

Coke Studio has rapidly become one of the most influential platforms in televisual, digital and musical media, and has assumed a significant role in generating new narratives about Pakistani modernity. Coke Studio's music videos re-work a range of genres and performing arts, encompassing popular and familiar songs, as well as 'resuscitating' classical poetry and the musical traditions of sidelined communities. This raises questions about how cultural memory and national narratives can be reimagined through musical media, and then further re-worked by media consumers and digital audiences. The music video is not watched in isolation, but becomes the kernel of a 'media swirl' (or 'media ecology') of different digital formats, genres, and aesthetics (Vernallis, 2013; Goddard, 2014). Digital modes of accessing and listening to Coke Studio cultivate particular aesthetic and ethical attitudes, and the conversations that unfold around each song develop forms of affective community and citizenship. The Studio explicitly curates a particular vision of Pakistan, branded as 'Sound of the Nation' and, in Season 11, as 'One Nation—One Spirit—One Sound'. This curation feeds into private and individual endeavours to archive Pakistani music and South Asian poetry, which stimulates processes of making cultural memory (c.f. Siddique, 2019). In this article, we argue that while Coke Studio represents a culturally elite and corporately-sponsored initiative, the wider public's engagement with the online music

videos suggests a form of creative participation both with the media and the cultural memory of Pakistan.

This is an especially significant development, given the historiography of Pakistan, the anti-historical elision of the nation's past from nationalist imaginaries, and the difficulties around recollecting and framing pre-1947 Indo-Islamicate cultural history. Reflecting on the 'antihistorical legacy' of the Muslim league, Faisal Devji has suggested (Devji, 2019, p. 228):

> For historical consciousness and imagination one would have to look either at regional and even local narratives, as we have seen, or at popular culture, and in particular the literature, music, or films whose aristocratic, saintly, and other subjects or references also tend to have little connection with a national history. Interesting about these vernacular pasts, therefore, is their transient character, which makes them the stuff of fantasy as much as freedom from the quest for Pakistan's perfection.

Commenting specifically on Coke Studio, Ayesha Jalal has suggested how recent currents in the creative arts of Pakistan gesture to 'an ongoing tussle between an officially constructed ideology of nationalism and relatively autonomous social and cultural processes in the construction of a "national culture."' (Jalal, 2014, p. 394) In this article, we consider how digital debates inspired by Coke Studio's music videos provide a platform for alternative forms of historical engagement (c.f. Gupta, 2016) and cultural memory to state-oriented, overtly political narratives of Pakistan (Qasmi, 2019).

Coke Studio

Coke Studio is a TV and internet show that started airing from Pakistan in 2008 (Mukhtar, 2016). Funded by Coca-Cola Pakistan, the show was conceived by Rohail Hyatt, who had begun his career as the keyboardist and co-songwriter in the boy-band Vital Signs. The concept of the show is loosely inspired by the British TV concert series, 'Live From Abbey Road' (est. 2006), whereby a group of musicians jam together to either develop new songs or revamp old music. Each season is released as a series of episodes featuring three to four music videos, accompanied by Behind The Scenes (BTS) videos. At the end of each season, close to thirty new songs and their accompanying music videos are uploaded on Coke Studio's YouTube channel. The same videos are then shared on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and made available on other free and paid streaming

services such as Spotify and the local application Patari. A collective digital footprint of more than 15 million users makes Coke Studio one of the most popular and influential digital platforms in Pakistan, given that it is only updated during the three months following the release of the first episode.

Coke Studio started as a broadcast only TV program, capitalising on the vacuum left for music-related programming after the closure of MTV Pakistan (formerly known as Indus Music). Coca-Cola Pakistan buys air-time as per the respective advertising rates of TV channels. The episodes are aired on the same day but at different time slots across almost fifty Pakistani TV channels, from relatively small and vernacular language broadcasters such as the Sindhi language channel KTN to highly rated, mainstream Urdu news channels such as GEO News, Ary News and Samma TV. Episodes are usually aired on the weekends and incorporated with the evening prime-time programming.

Coca-Cola Pakistan's marketing and brand team worked with Frequency Media—a production company jointly owned by Hyatt and his then wife Umber Hyatt--to develop the creative aspects of the show, ensuring that the final product was in line with the greater ideology behind their product (Mirza-Ashraf, 2013, p. iv):

> Coca Cola and music share essential common elements; both living to the task of bringing people together by being inclusive, authentic, connected, and uplifting. Coke Studio is the natural existential footprint of this ideology that music can bring people closer.

The company finds a seamless connection between the ethos of the music show and their brand identity. Coca-Cola Pakistan markets itself as producing drinks that unite people across classes and cultures, and appeals to the romantic idea that music is a universal language (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 77). Hyatt has been often termed the 'genius' behind Coke Studio and thus responsible for a musical revival in Pakistan. After completing six seasons, the last of which also explored music from Central Asia, Scandinavian countries, and other parts of South Asia, Rohail decided to leave the project in 2013. Pakistan's famed pop band Strings was then hired to produce the show for four more seasons. Having received their fair share of criticism and after expanding Coke Studio's digital outreach further, Zohaib Kazi (Former GM Coke Studio) and Ali Hamza (One half of the popular band Noori) took over as the producers of the show but did not stay on for more than a year. Their approach to the show was met with intense criticism, particularly for the cover of one song called '*Ko Ko*

Korina' that received more dislikes than likes on YouTube. Infamously, Pakistan's Human Rights Minister, Shireen Mazari, called the song a 'massacre' (Asher 2018). Despite the criticism, Coke Studio's popularity and outreach has increased drastically over the years. 2019 saw the show's twelfth season and also Hyatt's much-anticipated return after five years. Coke Studio is now recognised globally for bringing Pakistan's traditional music to the fore and promoting the country's 'soft' image.

This image of Pakistan has been curated through the Studio's fusion aesthetic and self-branding as the 'Sound of the Nation'. Coke Studio's mixed-genre catalogue of songs includes both well-known and obscure musicians trained in a variety of styles (from Hindustani classical to pop-rock to regionally specific pieces) coming together to collaborate: these jamming sessions and musical conversations are staged as worldly or cosmopolitan, blurring the boundaries between traditional and modern, provincial and international. Crucially, audiences are not expected to be expert listeners in any given genre: consumption is intended to be an easy-listening, pleasurable experience. This accessibility has allowed Coke Studio to become a global phenomenon, but has also had consequences for how the nation and its cultural pasts are re-imagined through musical media.

Mediating Memory

The nature of the digital video has had significant implications for how audiences engage with Coke Studio's music. While the auditory experience of music might have taken precedence in earlier forms of recording technology (listening to a cassette or a CD), most users will encounter a Coke Studio song through multiple media and senses. Moving beyond the televised music video (Frith, 1993; Cook, 1998; Vernallis, 2004), in the digital age, the audio object is conjoined with the video, but also tethered to YouTube comments, WhatsApp conversations, Facebook likes, and weblinks to related videos, sounds, and other sites. The experience of the media swirl is not passive, as the digital viewer-listener becomes a prosumer, participating in the circulation and mediation of the music video and generating new allied content of their own (Vernallis, 2013, pp. 149-152). This participatory experience is cultivated across social media, from sharing files and links to online debates. Communities of listening and engagement rely on 'small media' technologies, from personal computers to smartphones, which, Martin Stokes suggests (2016, p. 43),

have mystified, effaced, and reduced the scale of the social. They have supplied compensatory imaginations of autonomy (the self at the center of a network of "friends" or of fabricated social worlds). They have enabled new forms, however limited, of spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic participation (approval by "liking" on Facebook, written response to YouTube clips, and so forth), and thus of community.

Responding to Coke Studio's songs, individual viewers participate in online communities and collectively reflect upon an aesthetic definition of Pakistani-ness.

These reflections come to the fore in Coke Studio's covers of past hits and rearrangements of classical poetry. The new song is a layered palimpsest of past hearings, personal memories, and traces of musical and literary histories: hearing a cover of the Sabri Brothers might evoke the specific times and places where one had heard the original, but also activate ideas about Sufism, personal religion, Persian poetry, and the historical pasts of the subcontinent (c.f. Shelemay, 2006). These latter shades of meaning, relating to collective experience, have been much contested in debates about Pakistani historical, religious, and national identities. Earlier work on music and memory has assumed that listeners respond to music they have heard directly and in person, or from a recording but as part of a social experience. Viewing the music video online, however, is distinctive: the listener may be engaging with the song privately and in isolation, yet also responding alongside an online community of participatory viewers.

This layered listening connects the online Coke Studio cover to older forms of media: in particular, YouTube directs new listeners from one video to older versions of the same song, including digitised and uploaded copies salvaged from audio and video cassettes. The VCR had already allowed audiences to record and curate their favourite shows and songs; a generation later, many of these tapes are appearing online and becoming embedded in audiences' responses to new music. Often, the audiences and commentators on these videos, who make connections between original versions and their Coke Studio covers, are from a new generation who do not have direct or unmediated memories of the songs as they were performed in earlier decades.

This has a bearing on the nature of memory stirred up by the evocative music video, what Alison Landsberg (2003) has defined as 'prosthetic memory', that is, when mass media generates empathy and produces and disseminates memory. The prosthetic memory is not natural, as it has been produced by a mediated engagement with a technologically

generated representation. As a produced memory, it is a commodity, and thus interchangeable and exchangeable. However, it is nonetheless personal and affectively engaging: 'like an artificial limb, these memories are worn on the body.' Yet, since the memory does not belong to a single individual, it conjures up a shared, public past. Since the memory does not belong to a single group either, such as the nation, prosthetic memories 'open up the possibility for collective horizons of experience and pave the way for unexpected alliances.' (2003, p. 149) Similarly, regarding the social formation of memory in media worlds, Andreas Huyssen has suggested that the digital arena challenges the assumption that memories should be tied to authentic and territorialized experience (Grainge, 2003, pp. 6-7). While the cultural industry produces these memories, consumer audiences are not passive in their reception: 'commodities, and commodified images, are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow whole, but rather the grounds upon which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed.' (Landsberg, 2003, p. 149). Prosthetic memories therefore have the potential to generate collective identification and 'potentially counterhegemonic public spheres.' (Landsberg, 2003, p. 150)

This form of recollection and collective identification can be considered in terms of Cultural Memory, which Astrid Erll understands as the totality of the contexts for history, individual memory, collective memory, and so on (Erll, 2011). Najia Mukhtar has argued that Coke Studio's identity 'is a reworked pastiche of local cultural forms (poetry, musical instruments, folk artists) through which CS's producers mean to appropriate their roots and create alternative interpretations of being Muslim and Pakistani that still cater to their own westernised-liberal *Burger* [i.e. the so-called Anglophone *Mummy Daddy Burger crowd*] sensibilities.' (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 109) As we will suggest below, 'pastiche' is perhaps not the best term here, since Coke Studio covers are more than imitative reproductions of older songs, and more like a 'tradaptation' (Bastin, 2009), in which the sound of the source song is perceivable yet highly altered. Coke Studio's videos evoke echoes from the nation's past and cultivate prosthetic memories that in turn create spaces for public negotiations over Pakistani heritage.

Sound of the Nation

Coke Studio's musical editorial—reimagining older styles for contemporary tastes and social questions—can be viewed against a longer history of debates about music in Pakistan.

Yousuf Saeed (2008) has stressed how, in the decade following Partition, state owned radio became the key platform for classical musicians, who had to tailor their repertoires to meet the demands of government officials. Classical genres like *dhrupad, dhamar,* and *ṭhumrī* were considered offensively Hindu (despite the long pre-Independence history of Muslim singers and lyricists of these genres), while priority was given to *khayāl*, *tarānā*, *qawwālī*, and *ghazal*, which were considered more Islamic. Musical terms were renamed, replacing Sanskrit etymologies for Persian (Shiv Kalyan becoming Shab Kalyan), and artists like Akhtar Shirazi composed neo-classical lyrics in Urdu and with overtly Islamicate imagery (Saeed, 2008-9, p. 241). Likewise, while certain dance forms were canonized as sacred and classical on the Indian side of the border, Pakistani artists trained in Kathak and Bharatanatyam had to navigate accusations of being 'unIslamic', partly by orienting their lyrics and points of reference towards the memory of Central Asian or Indus Valley pasts (Pande, 2004).

This was not simply a question of nationalist politics and state funding, since leading litterateurs and theorists were divided on the nature of Tradition and the need to erase the traces of a musical history shared with Hindus. Faiz Ahmad Faiz was critical of this approach and was especially concerned by ideologies he termed 'anti-culture, anti-art', especially those that framed music and dance as lewd remainders from a corrupt Mughal age (Majeed, 2005, pp. 41-6, 93-4). He argued that classical music had historically been cultivated primarily by Muslim artists, and encouraged forms of preservation that would not stifle creativity and ongoing development (Majeed, 2005, pp. 27-8, 115-6, 120-1, 186-7). These ideas became foundational to his work over the 1970s, when, under Bhutto's investment in state cultural initiatives, he was assigned the task of developing a new cultural policy. On the other hand, Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919-1978) cautioned against a Modernity that neglected Tradition, which he defined as stemming from Revelation and the pristine practice of religion. The arts were a means to a higher end and were intended to cultivate gnosis (*ma'rifat*).[1] In terms of classical music, Askari reimagined the pasts of two premier classical genres, *dhrupad* and *khayāl*. He took *khayāl*, and his Sufi reading of the genre, as his focus in the essay '*Waqt kī Rāginī*' ('Tune of the Times', 1977) (Askari, 1979, pp. 152-196). According to Askari, Hindu *dhrupad* was mundane and lower (literally emanating from

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[1] See Mehr Afshan Farooqi's discussion (2012, pp. 176-7) of Askari's 1962 essay, '*Rivayat kya hai?*' ('What is Tradition?').

the singer's stomach—*peṭ kā gānā*—and keeping to the floor) than Islamic *khayāl*, which had the power to elevate (literally arising from the singer's chest and heart, and soaring upwards) the individual towards knowledge of *khayāl-e-haq*, the concept of the absolute.[2] Following this scheme, Askari associated 'Pop Music' very much with the West, especially the USA. He noted that while its proponents considered Pop Music to possess spirituality (*rūḥānīyat*), he saw this music as pure 'stomach singing' and an indictment of the modern age (Askari, 1979, p. 194).

Following 1971, musicians from Punjabi migrant families became more seriously invested in popular and folk music, such as Zulfiqar Ali and his brothers who sang Sindhi folk songs in a classical style (Saeed, 2008-9, p. 242). Over the 1970s-80s, urban audiences took a fresh interest in local language culture, including Sindhi, Balochi, and Saraiki. Institutions such as Lok Virsa (est. 1974) documented and promoted regional and popular arts, and 'folk' performers began to appear more regularly on PTV, most notably the Rajasthani gypsy dancer, Reshma (1947-2013) (Saeed, 2008-9, p. 244). At the same time, lovers of classical music lamented the rise of 'pop music, heavily loaded with strong influences of Western music and orchestration, in our films, radio and TV these days. Ghazal singing and folk songs trail behind, whereas classical music has been relegated to the background despite the fact that all other varieties (except folk) draw heavily on its treasure house for some of their effects and impact.' (Malik, 1983, p. 30)

This history of screening the 'folk' has influenced Coke Studio, which presents itself as foregrounding the work of regional artists and styles. Zahra Sabri, who translated the lyrics for nine seasons, has observed how Coke Studio went to great lengths to accurately transcribe Saraiki, Pashto, Brahui or Punjabi words in the online subtitles, 'because in the end we contributed to increasing the literacy of these languages.' (Sabri, 2018) This sensitivity to linguistic and regional diversity might be seen as a response to a longer history of contestations between different communities in the making of Pakistan's cultural identity. Following Partition, the cultural integration of Urdu-speaking 'Muhajir' Muslims from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar into the newly forged nation came at the cost of other, more expansive and continuous visions of the past. While the Punjabi population already

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[2] Other writers more familiar with these genres critiqued Askari's interpretations. See Farooqi, 2012, pp. 199-200.

dominated political institutions, their cultural closeness to the newly immigrated population from UP created a cultural hegemony. The fear of this hegemony led to a cultural consciousness among the other tribal and non-tribal ethnicities which fuelled a nationalism that drew from Kashmiri, Sindhi, Baluchi and other regional historical narratives (Devji, 2013; Khan, 2005). Coke Studio's varied catalogue gestures to a more open-handed, multifaceted understanding of the nation.

Branding Coke Studio as the 'Sound of the Nation' gestures back to a precedent set by Radio Pakistan, which played a crucial role in reproducing and replaying a musical narrative of the nation. Following 1947, Radio Pakistan, an off-shoot of All India Radio, was assigned the task of manufacturing a national music by making necessary additions and amendments to the existing traditional music repertoire: in essence, an improvised and amended version of a folk repertoire that resonated with Islamicate themes (Ahmad, 2005). Radio Pakistan's potential for propaganda came to the fore during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. Although TV became available as a broadcast medium in Pakistan in 1964, it did not have the same coverage or ease of access as Radio Pakistan. The state's radio apparatus played an active role during the war, broadcasting news bulletins around the clock, alongside patriotic songs, plays, and poems (Parvez, 2018). Patriotic songs appeared on radio and in cinemas, such as Shaukat Ali's '*Jāg uṭhā hai sārā vaṭan*' ('The whole country has arisen'), first released in 1965 in the film *Mujāhid* (Lodhi, 2016).[3]

The patriotic prehistory of Coke Studio was especially pronounced in Season 8, when the producers chose to inaugurate the show on Pakistan's Independence Day, August 14, bringing together the season's featured artists in a cover of the popular nationalist song, '*Sohnī Dhartī*' ('Shining Land'). The Studio has covered other patriotic Radio Pakistan classics, including Naseem Begum's 1965 wartime hit, '*Āe Rahe Haq Ke Shahīdon*' ('Oh, the martyrs of the righteous path'). In a commemorative book to mark a decade of production, Coke Studio described how the artists in this song 'came together to remember the heroes who defend our borders…The effect is close to Naseem Begum's original: hearts race, eyes soak, and heads bow down in honour of the tremendous sacrifices made to protect Pakistan.' (Haq, 2017, p. 20) Likewise, Coke Studio opened their 2017 season with an operatic version of Pakistan's national anthem. Strings, the producers of the season,

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[3] On the role of radio in wartime propaganda, see Bhat, 2013.

received extensive criticism on social media and Pakistani news websites for turning Coke Studio into an 'echo chamber' and 'spoiling' Pakistan's national anthem (Raj, 2017). Critiques included the 'varying pitch levels' and the alleged 'lack of zeal' in the expressions and gestures of the singers in the video (Images Staff, 2017). These examples might suggest that Coke Studio has firmly attached itself to a state agenda of glorifying the armed forces, or has become entangled with Imran Khan's dream of a *nāya* Pakistan (New Pakistan). However, the show's catalogue demands further qualification, beyond the overtly political, especially in its central emphasis on ethnic and linguistic diversity, cultural memory, and Sufism.

Najia Mukhtar has examined the importance of Sufi music to Coke Studio's sound and ideology. By Season 5, she calculated, some 40% of 117 songs had contained lyrics from Sufi sources (Mukhtar, 2016, pp. 47-8). Rohail Hyatt himself has discussed how he has been influenced by the ideas of Bulleh Shah (d.1757) and Inayat Khan (d.1927) (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 133). Mukhtar underlines how the Sufism of Coke Studio is associated with peace, harmony, love, and an emphasis on personal rather than corporate religion: 'This shifts away from the use of a secular interpretation of Islam as a singular national ideology by Pakistan's founders and accommodates individual expressions of difference by de-emphasising public markers of religious community.' (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 73) Pakistani musicians had worked along these lines before, including the band Junoon (Obsession), which became popular over the 1990s, in which band-leader Salman Ahmad focused on Sufi poetry to the image of a peaceful Islam, especially in the wake of 9/11 (Mukhtar, 2016, p. 50; Pirzadeh, 2019, pp. 199-202).

The larger context, of course, is the efflorescence of 'Sufi Music' over the last decades, especially following the unprecedented success of the Pakistani *qawwāli* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d.1997), and artists like Abida Parveen and the Sabri Brothers (Huda, 2007; Sakkata, 1994). In the Indian context, Peter Manuel has argued that there are several ways to interpret the popularity of Sufi Music and urban 'Sūfiānā fashion', including as the 'local efflorescence of a global Sufi music fad', or as an anti-communalist investment in traditions of pluralism and tolerance, or as a 'bourgeois appropriation of a subaltern idiom' (2008, p. 378). New 'Sufi' music genres vary enormously 'and indeed have no unifying features except an explicit Sufi orientation, conveyed variously in lyric content, accompanying iconography, or publicity blurbs.' (2008, p. 384; c.f. Sundar, 2017). Sufi music's popularization and the loss of a distinctively Sufi aesthetic (or even spirituality), was

explored in Farjad Nabi's film, *Nusrat has left the building… but when?* (1997) At once a celebration of Nusrat's life and a critique of his career trajectory, his early *qawwālī* songs are arranged jarringly opposed to the spectacle, showbiz, and synths of his later experiments in Sufi pop. Coke Studio productions draw on these influential precedents, and by arranging covers of older material they ask their audiences not only to compare versions, but also recollect earlier phases of reworking Pakistani and Sufi music.

Coke Studio's visual format for the music videos is especially striking. The videos have been designed for small screens on personal devices, so we find close-ups and intimate framings with simple textures and colours, rather than sweeping vistas and expansive cinematic shots. From exposed wiring to discarded production props, the stripped back look appeals to the global trending of Hipster décor. The lack of dramatic staging, costuming, or dance is an explicit departure from the spectacle of Bollywood or Lollywood, suggesting the producers' investment in 'authentic' sound rather than visual spectacle: of course, the heavily stylized simplicity is itself a form of spectacle. Set up as an alternative to filmi aesthetics, the videos show singers with headphones, microphones, and, perhaps superfluously, branded stands for their lyrics and notes. This 'raw', pseudo-documentary styling again stresses how Coke Studio is an alternative to the culture of the invisible playback singer: the show prioritises singers before actors. In contrast to Manuel's notes on *filmi* and other 'new' Sufi genres, Coke Studio videos do not foreground explicitly Islamicate visual cues; instead, traces of religion come through the personal effects of the artists, as marks of their personal piety: the religious, regional, and traditional diversity curated by Coke Studio is embodied in the performers themselves, rather than through staging, props, and graphics. The politics of the production team is also reflected in the egalitarianism with which artists are presented, a specific statement of a collaborative and contemporary Pakistan, where a hijra or a bard can shine alongside a US-educated guitarist, united under the reassuring glow of the Coca-Cola bottle. This was most overtly pronounced in the video for '*Hum Dekhenge*' (below), released in 2018, in which a range of urban, folk, rock, and Sufi artists collectively re-interpreted the song, each musician—however famous or marginalized—being assigned a single line of the lyrics each. Alternatively, detractors might argue that this apparent egalitarianism only serves to obviate the highly unequal conditions in which these artists perform, and therefore neutralises the inherent politics of the music itself. Likewise, Coke Studio's framing of Sufism—uprooted from the shrine and

transplanted into the corporate studio—distances the music from its regionally specific and meaningful contexts, dampening the political resonance of genres from the provinces.

Lyrical Interventions

Faiz often suggested that when a singer performed one of his ghazals, they made it their own, and it ceased to be 'his' poem (Aydelott, 1998, p. 306; Hussein, 2013, p. 126). A hallmark of Coke Studio is how Sufi, regional, and popular classics are reworked and reimagined; beyond an imitative pastiche or a reconstruction, Coke Studio songs are new pieces inspired by the echoes of earlier musical works. The evocation of the echo and the reworking of the familiar has implications for how audiences respond to Coke Studio and reflect on cultural memory.

A key site of Coke Studio's musical editorial can be seen in the—often controversial—re-arrangement and interpolation of lyrics. These interventions are often gendered: Mukhtar (2016) noted that certain Coke Studio producers, especially Rohail Hyatt, have specific conceptions of character and aesthetic being masculine and feminine and, therefore, complementary. In 2013, Coke Studio re-worked '*Āmāý Bhāsāili Re*', a Bengali lyric by the East Pakistani poet Jasimuddin (1903-76) that had originally been popularised by the singer Abbas Uddin Ahmed. The song was given new life by the East Bengali pop star Alamgir Haq, who made his career in Karachi over the 1970s. Alamgir's success in music was cultivated through his work at PTV, where he sang over 400 songs in different languages (Rumi, 2018, pp. 250-1). Coke Studio invited Alamgir to perform '*Āmāý Bhāsāili Re*', though now the characteristic electronic synths were replaced with a tender arrangement for keyboard, harp, and orchestral strings section. The subtitles roll over four registers: Bengali script, Urdu *nasta'līq*, Roman transliteration, and English translation. An additional line in Hindustani (*chaahe aandhi aaye re / chaahe megha chhaaye re / hamen tu us paar leke jaana maajhi re* [Whether a storm rages / Whether rainclouds rumble / Take us across to the other end, boatman]) was interposed into Alamgir's Bengali lines, at which point the Bengali register was removed from the captioning. Then, a third of the way into the song, a new love lyric in Braj[4] is embedded in the body of the song, performed by Fariha Pervez. Then Fariha concludes this section, and Alamgir sings his lines again. Similar choices

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[4] The composition has Sanskritic lexicon and Braj grammatical features.

in arranging and interpolation can be seen across other Coke Studio songs, such as the 2016 cover of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's '*Afreen Afreen*', performed by Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Momina Mustehsan, in which Mustehsan sings new lyrics as a form of beloved's response to the original words. Arguably, these additional lines transformed the tone of the song, distancing it from a Sufi's allegorical exposition on the love of God, and making it more of a conversation between human lovers.

The addition of Hindustani and Braj to Jasimuddin's Bengali lyric had aesthetic and political implications. In the comments section under the YouTube video, audiences from across the subcontinent responded with transnational identifications; one user wrote, 'I love Pakistan, India & Bangladesh. we used to be the same land for thousands of years. Politicians created borders not long ago & divided us for their benefits......from a proud Bangladeshi'. Listeners responded to the shifts in the music video, even when they did not know the languages involved; 'Sweet Lemon' wrote, 'Loving Bangal [sic] music even i dont understand lyrics… love from Nepal.' The song also stirred up specific memories. One user commented he was 'In love with this song… Reminds me of my Bangla bloodline… I live in West Bengal but my ancestors are from Chattogram… So yeah.' The YouTube comments section created a way to respond to the song, but also to reflect on the partitions and migrations of the past century, and engage with other listeners across national borders (c.f. Stokes, 2016, pp. 48-50). Some listeners provided notes on the background of the singer, especially for younger viewers who would not remember Alamgir Haq (e.g. 'Alamgir is a Bangladeshi born Pakistani singer'). For some, he was 'a founder of the pop music in Pakistan', but for others a 'Great son of Bangladesh [emoticon of Bangladeshi national flag].' While many viewers echoed the tone of the video in their comments, seeing Bengalis and Pakistanis as sharing a common culture that transcends national politics, other commenters were very conscious of the borders: 'We really miss u Alomgir sir....   why did u become attached with pakistan only.....? you need to work also for Bangladesh....because here is your root ... why did u forget us ......' For one West Bengali viewer, the multilingualism of the song stirred several layers of personal and national memory: '[In Bengali:] I learned this song in school as a child, in Kolkata, we have no need to *explain* [English] anything to Pakistanis, I will not bring up the conflict between Urdu and Bengali today. Jay Hind Jay Bangla. Long Live 1971.'

Read together, these comments gesture to different kinds of recollection. At the most immediate level, when the song is streamed or downloaded onto a personal device and played repeatedly, a trace of each time the song is listened to becomes embedded in the mind of the listener. Since the song is a cover, these traces become entangled with memories of the embedded contexts of hearing Alamgir's original version. Besides these immediate, musical memories, the song has the potential to stir up different historical imaginaries: the early-twentieth century ideal of a rural Bengal, eulogized in Jasimuddin's poetry; the Pakistan of the 1970s, when Alamgir Haq first became so successful; and the partitions of 1947 and 1971 that disrupted the unity suggested by the multilingual, multigenerational song. For many of Coke Studio's target audience—young viewers, born long after these events—these are collective and cultural memories, but also prosthetic, in the sense that they are produced by the media technology, the comments section as much as the music video itself.

Tājdār-e-Ḥaram

A similar situation arises with 'Tājdār-e-Ḥaram'. Following the conventions of qawwālī, the Sabri Brothers' version was a bricolage of different lyrics in a range of languages, including Urdu, Hindavi, Persian, and Arabic. As the Coke Studio video of Atif Aslam's cover begins, a caption pronounces 'Originally Sung & Composed by Sabri Brothers. Lyrics by Hakim Mirza Madni'. This attribution to Madni was presumably based on the sleeve notes of the Sabri Brothers' album, Balaghal Ula Be Kamālehī, released by EMI in 1975. The album's cover also identifies Madni only, whereas EMI's annual catalogue for that year lists Amber Ali Shah Warsi, Sehrai Sanbhri, Hakim Mirza Madni, and Amir Khusrau as the lyricists. These other names were lost in the process of making Aslam's cover. Reducing lyrical authorship to one name reflects a larger negotiation between musical cultures: while Sufi musicians conventionally compile a work by tying together multiple poets and Saints, the music studio follows the logic of production credits, and implied that the song (singular, fixed in form) had a single lyricist. Many viewers accepted Coke Studio's attribution, which was cemented online when someone added the 'fact' of his composing 'Tājdār-e-Ḥaram' to Hakim Mirza Madni's (1553-1585) Wikipedia page (2019). As the younger brother of the emperor Akbar, attributing the lyrics to him evoked the memory of the Great Mughals, and suggested the song had a centuries-old provenance.

However, this attribution was misleadingly simplistic, and other listeners turned to online forums, such as Quora, to ask 'Who was the original writer/singer of the song "Tajdar e Haram" which is recently sung by Atif Aslam?' (Quora 2019) In 2016, one user, Quaseem Siddiqi, who described himself as an Assistant Consultant, gave a highly detailed response, providing the lyrics and translations for the version performed by the Sabri Brothers. According to Siddiqi, the *naat* composition alternates between lyrics by several different authors. The core text was by Purnam Allahabadi (1940-2009), a popular Urdu poet and song-writer based in Pakistan. The Sabri Brothers then knotted these verses to lines by Muzaffar Warsi (1933-2011), the Persian poem 'Marhaba Sayyidi Makki Madani', then Persian lines by Maulana Jami (1414-1492), Arabic verses attributed to Zain al-Abideen (659-713), verses from Amir Khusrau's (1253-1325) 'Zihaal-e-Miskeen' (in Persian and Hindavi), and then from a Purbi poem that Siddiqi suggests may have been by Bhai Mardana (1459-1534), the companion of Guru Nanak. Notably, these attributions do not wholly correspond to the list prepared by EMI in 1975 either. If Coke Studio had to assign the work a single author, Purnam Allahabadi would have made the most sense: instead, the Pakistani Urdu poet has been mistakenly erased by a Mughal nobleman, from a period before Urdu poetry.

Comparing Siddiqi's transcript of the Sabri Brothers' version to Atif Aslam's cover, it is immediately apparent that many verses have been edited out and others have been rearranged, creating a very different piece. In the Sabri Brothers' version of '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*', a couplet from the poem 'Marhaba Sayyidi Makki Madani'[5] has a prominent position, early in the piece ('Open the eye of mercy, and cast a glance towards me, O Qurayshi, you who are titled Hashemite and Muttalibite!' (Quora, 2019)). In their PTV Global performance, Ghulam Farid Sabri becomes extremely introspective and almost silent as he breathes the invocations to God, then loudly and dramatically bursts out in this very couplet. In Atif Aslam's version there is an echo of this technique, when he also becomes muted and almost silent to represent his own internalization. However, these particular words were cut from Aslam's arrangement. Several sections in Arabic and Persian were also cut, along with verses by Amir Khusrau and Muzaffar Warsi. The remaining text is therefore

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[5] This poem is generally attributed to Muhammad Jan Qudsi Mashhadi (d.1646), although it does not appear in the *diwān* of his compositions (Sunil Sharma, personal communication). See Qudsi, 1996. This song should not be confused with the Urdu text, 'Makki Madani', as made famous by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and performed by Rahat Fateh Ali Khan in The Derek Trucks Band's album, *Songlines* (2006).

proportionally *more* Purnam Allahabadi's composition than the arrangement performed by the Sabri Brothers, which makes the attribution especially problematic.

Several factors might account for this editorial: Coke Studio's aforementioned custom of reworking lyrics; the musicians' own creative practice; time constraints (reducing a *qawwālī* performance for the constraints of a popular music video); but also linguistic aptitude. Zahra Sabri has specifically commented on problems with language education in connection to this song (Sabri 2018):

> Atif Aslam has done a great job is singing the poetry, turning it into a powerful and heartfelt prayer. However, perhaps because he picked up a faulty copy of the lyrics written in Roman Urdu from the internet, he ended up making an utter muck of quite a few of the Persian verses and even a couple of Urdu ones as well… It's not just that certain nuances are getting lost in what these artists are singing. They are actually singing some completely meaningless lines

Zahra Sabri's remarks call attention to a paradox within Coke Studio's initiative. She suggests that covers of older songs are a response to the dearth of new high-quality lyrics, since English-medium education has weakened the younger generation's facility in Urdu and Persian composition. Coke Studio therefore steps in to assist in the curation and transmission of Pakistan's musical and literary heritage. However, when the lyrics are sourced online, in Roman script, not understood, and then mispronounced, the preservation and transmission is flawed. Sabri describes hearing other artists' covers of Atif Aslam's own cover that perpetuate these errors in pronunciation and meaninglessness.

We do not focus on these misattributions and errors to pass judgement, but rather to underline two points: the significance of digital media in producing resources—flawed, comparative, corrective—for engaging with Pakistan's past and contemporary music; and the role of Coke Studio's audience in generating conversations and ideas about the past. While Quaseem Siddiqi provided an extensive break-down of the lyrics, other Quora users either pronounced the 'original' composer was Madni (following Coke Studio or Wikipedia's misdirection) or even Hafiz Shirazi. In isolation, these instances might be interpreted as cases of mistaken identity or arbitrary and ahistorical opinions in the age of online misinformation. Read against the larger context of social and participatory media, however, we might view these conversations, and the tracing and forgetting of poets and lyrics, as processes of prosthetic memory making.

The song '*Tājdār-e-Ḥaram*' took on new meanings, and activated different memories, after Amjad Sabri, the son of Ghulam Farid Sabri, was killed in a Taliban gun attack in June 2016. His own version of the *naat* was re-posted and recirculated, and became iconic not only of his own music but also of a Sufi-oriented, non-violent Islam (The Nation, 2019; Rauf, 2016). A year earlier, Amjad Sabri had commented on Atif Aslam's Coke Studio cover, and defended the song against its critics: 'I really like how the music was arranged. Atif didn't do badly. I wish he could have worked on his diction a little more.' (Raj, 2015).

The expanding menu

On 22nd July 2018, days before Pakistan's elections, Coke Studio released a promotional video for the new season, a multi-artist and collaborative rendition of Faiz's '*Hum Dekhenge*' ('We shall see…'). This was a poignant choice: the poem had been made famous by the celebrated ghazal singer, Iqbal Bano, when she performed it in 1985—a year after the poet's passing away—at Lahore's Alhamra Arts Council. Her rousing, ardent performance was celebrated as the voicing of dissent in defiance of Zia-ul-Haq (Faiz, 2006, p. 230):

> And the idols in the House of God
> Will be thrown out;
> We, the rejects of the earth,
> Will be raised to a place of honour.
> All crowns'll be tossed in the air,
> All thrones'll be smashed[…]

Following this verse, her performance was momentarily interrupted and she was ordered to leave the stage; the audience rallied around her, some crying out '*Inqilāb Zindābād*' ('Viva the Revolution!'), and she continued (Pirzadeh, 2019, p. 197).

Coke Studio's revisiting this song at the height of election tensions is emblematic of the broader range of relationships forged between music, nation, and cultural memory through their music videos. The evocative choice of song led many commentators to revisit Iqbal Bano's original performance, providing links to a recording from 1985 that had been uploaded to YouTube, and then draw out a larger commentary on both the era of Zia-ul-Haq and contemporary politics by putting the two versions in dialogue (e.g. Warrier, 2018). Comparisons were not always complementary: in particular, the Coke Studio version

removed the above verse from the lyrics, which some audiences interpreted as a form of self-censorship, neutralizing the radical potential of Faiz's words and Bano's performance (e.g. Kaur 2018). At the same time, other commentators focused on Coke Studio's explicit celebration of diversity, and applauded their providing a platform to two transgender singers in the video, Naghma and Lucky. These blogs and commentaries, often by self-declared 'millennial' authors evoked affective yet prosthetic memories, acquired through digital media and uploaded archives rather than first-hand, lived experience. Layered with hyperlinks and embedded videos, online responses and commentaries create a textured engagement with the music video: while Coke Studio's productions might be critiqued for flattening the difference between styles and genres by interpreting them all through a relatively uniform, fusion-oriented aesthetic, examining how these songs are received and compared to their originals indicates a varied engagement with the growing online repository of recordings.

Coke Studio's success has inspired alternative platforms and approaches to screening music. The most corporate of these is the *Pepsi Battle of the Bands*, which first aired for one season in 2002 but was revived in 2017. Smaller enterprises have moved in different directions from Coke Studio, in the sense of aesthetics and curatorial practice, such as Lahooti Live Sessions, which began as a YouTube channel in June 2013. This is a self-funded project initiated by Saif Samejo, the frontman of The Sketches, a band based in Jamshoro in Sindh, who also works as the marketing director of the Sindhi-language newspaper, Kaawish. Lahooti Live Sessions deploys documentary, music video, remixing, and animated film, with a particular emphasis on exploring Sindhi musical culture while interrogating the narratives of the Pakistani nation. In 2016, MTV India aired selected Lahooti Live Sessions videos as part of the Pepsi MTV Indies project. Other YouTube channels have kept away from fusion and remixing altogether, and present an archive of musical performances that follow the accepted conventions of style and genre. These include The Dream Journey, which launched on YouTube in 2015, which provides a platform for classical and Sufi musicians: the videos are simply produced and edited, mostly filmed in domestic spaces rather than glossy studios.

As Coke Studio continues and these new alternative platforms and distributors proliferate, conversations over the fashioning of Pakistani music and culture will also continue to unfold online. We have suggested that these discussions between audiences—

the prosumers of the music videos—engender forms of cultural memory and debates over how to imagine the nation. These memory practices are removed from more elite forms of historical consciousness, yet are nonetheless entangled in longer debates over how Pakistan and its musical heritage should be defined. While Coke Studio is an explicitly corporate and elite enterprise, the forms of media consumption around its products—from YouTube commentary to shared responses over lyrics—materialise across transnational audiences and communities of listeners, activating digital archives and prosthetic memories that provide an architecture for reflections on personal and shared pasts through music.

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