

Filming Pakistan in Zero Budget

*Dr. Ahmad Bilal**

ABSTRACT: *In 2009-10, I have decided to do the doctorate in the art of filmmaking. Those were the years of extreme decline for Pakistan's film industry. Pakistani film was almost over and there was no evidence of the resurrection of this destroyed industry. Indeed, the future of film industry was doubtful, and the same could be the case for a film researcher. Most of the friends, after knowing my field of research, often asked me that why would I chose to do PhD in the subject of film. As, according to them, this is one of the obnoxious and intolerable field, as it is ruining the society by offering and promoting sinful and immoral acts. So a PhD in such a field might not be fruitful in this world, as well as hereafter. I started thinking about one of the very basic questions that how this perception about the art of making film was built. The study of traditional Pakistani cinema, 'established cinema', has disclosed that the medium of film was facing a control from the very beginning. Indeed, the policy of censorship was rooted in the times of imperialism. The censorship policy of the British rule was executed only to restrain socialist political ideology and nationalistic themes (Pendakur 1996; Shoemith 2009). The main emphasis of the policy focus of mass media systems during colonial regimes was on furthering administrative efficiency" (McMillin 71). The government of Pakistan had inherited the policies of their colonial masters; hence, they executed similar censorship policies even after Independence. Indeed, 1947 onwards, a control has always been exercised on the cinema of Pakistan through strong censorship policies (Bilal 2015).*

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* Email: ahmadbilal13@yahoo.com

In 1949, the Minister of Industry stated: “In principle Muslims should not get involved in film-making. Being the work of lust and lure, it should be left to infidels” (Gazdar 24). From the very beginning, film has been conceived as a “work of lust and lure” and religion has been exploited as a conflicting force against cinematography. This also shows a policy of disowning the film industry, and how the art has become known as ‘a dirty business’. A few of the extremist groups declare film-making as being opposite to religion, and the establishment has funded that specific version of religion to maintain the power structures. Certainly, according to these groups, cinema, with its elements of acting, music and dance, is prohibited in religion, which has restricted the cinema from deepening its roots in Pakistan. Cinema had never been fully facilitated or funded in its true sense, and the medium had never been able to explore its full potential. It was also disclosed that the medium of film has been portrayed as ‘boys night out’ kind of activity by the policy makers, and the subject of film has never been taught in any institute in the first fifty years (Bilal, “New Developments in Pakistani Cinema”; Bilal, “Recent Quest For Distinctive Identity in Pakistani Cinema”).

Apart from all the negativity attached to the profession of filmmaking, established cinema and its *masala* genre showed a considerable growth in the first thirty years of its history. Some of the individuals, through their own efforts, had developed studios, technological facilities, and opportunities for talent to grow. Established cinema of Pakistan has touched its peak in 1970s, as it was producing almost 100 films per year. However, the film industry has failed to make successful teams for a long period of time. The lack of investment from the governments and corporate sector has left the job only for the independent moviemakers. The established cinema practitioners are concerned about the social shaping of technology, as they consider government support as a crucial factor for development. The government has named it ‘the film industry’; however, it has never been treated as an industry. Therefore, no legislation to protect intellectual property or to facilitate production, no possibility of loans and no guarantees of investment are possible. Hence, established cinema was never transformed into a sustainable business.

My research also reveals that, on the one side, Policy makers had considered cinema a dirty business, while, on the other side, filmmakers has only portrayed cinema as a business opportunity. This means cinema has never been described, understood or realized as an “art form” that

can represent the collective face of a nation, particularly, in the new globalized world. Indeed, film, in the modern global village, is considered to be one of the biggest intellectual activities. Absence of films, in 2009-10 and particularly in 2012 where Pakistani cinema had not made even a single national film, means the society is facing intellectual curtailment. Various restrictions throughout the history of cinema caused various limitations and, as a result, the medium of film was unable to be exploited as a tool to portray Pakistan at the global stage. However, this realization is linked with the new media revolution in Pakistan.

A shift in the mode of production from analogue to digital can be observed in Pakistan with the turn of the century, which has lessened the control on the medium of film. The impact of new media technology on the art of filmmaking has, at least, three significant dimensions. Firstly, the transformation to digital has equipped the new generation of moviemakers to explore the field of film making. The Media Liberation Act of 2002 has broken the state's monopoly on electronic media. Television networks have been increasing, from two state-run channels in 2000 to over 50 private television networks, in the recent years (Mezger and Sial). The Act also showed a shift in the policy as far as the content of the films is concerned. Therefore, contemporary subjects, like War on Terror (WoT), Indo-Pak relations, political and religious racism, have been showing on Pakistani cinema screens (Bilal, "Recent Quest For Distinctive Identity in Pakistani Cinema"). Indeed, another kind of cinema has been initiated with the contemporary era of media convergence, and I name it "emergent cinema" of Pakistan (Bilal, "New Developments in Pakistani Cinema"; Bilal, "Recent Quest For Distinctive Identity in Pakistani Cinema").

Secondly, the technology is giving the access to the world of special effects and animation, and films like *Waar* (2013) and *3 Bahadur* (2015) were produced in Pakistan. Thirdly, new media has empowered common man by giving them access to the mode of production, and to distribution, to some extent. Whereas, old media has only allowed a centralized system of production and distribution. Divya C. McMillin (2007) believes that censorship and the broadcasting system are centralised in the postcolonial societies to maintain hegemonic dominance and to spread the ideology of the ruling elite. However, new media is mobilising and connecting people outside of their regular boundaries and traditional limitations, and groups such as Earth-Water, Culture SOS, Bloggers Association of Pakistan, People's Resistance, and

Digital Activists of Pakistan have been operating in Pakistan (culture 360.org).

In the last decade, filmmaking, its distribution and viewing, have been transforming. The inexpensive technology has been facilitating independent filmmaking and mobile phone films is an emerging genre, which is mostly about daily life imaging, as these do not involve any cost. The medium can also be used to make a fiction film. Mobile phones and the Web have been operating as circulation sources and film as an entertainment material, instead of cinema and television screens, is mostly watched on mobile devices, which has transformed the viewing habits of the consumers and has expanded the audience for motion pictures (Kozlowski). Another platform to share movies is social media, and Warner Bros. has initiated the renting of movies through Facebook (Kozlowski).

In Pakistan, like the rest of the world, the access to the internet, mobile and smart phones is also growing and social media platforms is becoming the only opportunity for the common man to participate in the national issues (Yusuf and Schoemaker). Entertainment, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have converged in the mobile phone; hence, it has been influencing everyday life through a specific cultural processes. The convergence with the handheld devices has played a role in the political discourse (Talib; Eijaz). Features that plays major part in selecting and purchasing smart phones are large screen sizes and built in cameras, which also indicates their basic usage: viewing of films and entertainment programs, making memorable photos and their sharing on social media platforms (Soomro and Ghumro).

It is believed that the new media tools have been instrumental in the process of the democratisation of information and have started empowering users to be the producers as well as the consumers of content. The mobile phone is becoming the main source of information and entertainment, and it can also be useful for making films and their distribution to a specific audience, particularly in the context of Pakistan. However, a systematic experimentation with the new media tools, particularly smart phone, to explore their workability and relevance is still needed. Thus, I decided to make a film by using smart phone as a tool of production and distribution, with almost zero budget.

The film *Sohni Dharti: An Untrue Story* was planned to shoot in Pakistan with a smart phone. The target was to explore the medium for simple story telling with almost zero budget. The process also explores

the scenario of using smart phone as transmitter to distribute the content on social media sites. It also reveals that a smart phone can be used as a tool to teach the art of simple story telling, and can be helpful in initiating independent movie projects.

Film: *Sohni Dharti: An Untrue Story*

Duration: 2:20 minutes

Screenplay: Ahmad Bilal

Language: Urdu

Subtitles: English (Shahnawaz Zaidi)

1. Setting the Brief; Smart Phone as Mode of Production

Christian Metz (1982) has defined the term “cinema” as a combination of all departments of filmmaking: production, distribution, screening and viewing. *Sohni Dharti*, explores the possibility of using smart phone as a new kind of production, distribution and viewing device. The making of the film investigates that a smart phone can provide these services to the new generation of moviemakers, in Pakistan. The process also finds that it can be used to facilitate the youngsters to learn the art of filmmaking, and can reduce the cost of the production to almost zero. Lastly, it discovers the option of telling a story of the suburban population of the society.

Marilyn Agrelo, a US filmmaker, during the 60-Second International Film Festival 2014 Pakistan, states that mega budget film productions are about governments and establishments; however, the small films are about common people (Usman). This idea is correct only up to an extent, as the small films with mobile cameras can be about common people, only if these are not sponsored by any authority, otherwise a small budget film can also be used for propaganda or to stimulate any hidden agenda. In other words, the commonness of a film can be judged by the funding involved in a specific project, and also by analysing its content. Thus, a film made with zero budget can open the path of common man films. *Sohni Dharti*, is an effort to make the film as a collaborative task, so that the team may contribute to diminish the cost, which definitely can liberate the art of moviemaking from regulatory and financial pressures. In the words of May and Hearn (2005), “When the experience economy meets the digital economy, penetrating more and more intimate domains of personal life, it is reasonable to expect big things to happen”.

Another aspect of this practice is to examine possibility of learning the simple technique of storytelling with the smart phone cameras. These cameras have simplified the technique, at least in this practice, where emphasis is only on the art of simple storytelling with the available technology without involving the complex technicalities and gadgets. The steps involved in the making of *Sohani Dharti* with mobile phone camera are almost similar to any film; however, preproduction is with a stress on money saving. The film was started with a script, storyboarding and list of shots. The basic principles, such as the rule of 180, or the continuity, remain the same; hence, the simplified tool can be extremely handy in learning the art of moviemaking.

2. Planning

In *Sohani Dharti: An Untrue Story* the most critical part was to gather and convince a team to work voluntarily; however, the group, once convinced, had been glued to the project as they were committed to the storyline, distribution and final outcome. The agreement of the team was crucial in this project, as everyone was participating voluntarily; hence, the involvement of every individual in all the decision-making and at almost every step had helped to finalise the production in a given timeframe, with almost no funds at all. In countries like India and Pakistan the social networks, due to their history, customs and beliefs, are more important than the institutional networks (Taeube and Lorenzen). Indeed, in this project social networks are extremely helpful in reducing of the cost, as well as finalizing the location, makeup and props required for the film.

During its production new media technology has been used in various ways. Social media was used in developing a network inside Pakistan, and the team of volunteers was formed through networking on Facebook, almost three months before the final shoot. It consisted of nine people, a blend of recently graduated practitioners, students from art institutes and early career editors, so that the practice remains relevant to the film students and future directors of Pakistan. The basic concept of all of the scripts was discussed with the individuals and their ideas had also been welcomed. A short script is tougher to write than a full length film, as the story needs to be condensed to deliver a direct message (BBC). These guidelines have set the requirements for the script of the project. A simple plot of a film must have a beginning, middle, and end; however, the writing of the script and its complexities are out of the scope of this practice. Thus, some of the existing texts are selected, which are slightly altered and also squeezed into a small duration to fit

into this exercise. Most of the team members were agreed to *Sohni Dharti* as the theme is directly tackling one of the major issues of the society: the mysterious targeted killings of Pakistanis by the Pakistanis. It is purely a reaction of a voluntary group of Pakistani people to the illogical and unclear situation.

Preparatory meetings were arranged at the office of one of the group members, almost three weeks before the final shoot. The storyboard was shared with the group and the basic plan was made in these meetings. The members decided their duties, according to their experience and preferences. Two of them preferred acting, as both have some experience of theatre and television. A boy and a girl had chosen camera, one member had picked the clapboard and sound, and another member preferred to be on props and costumes. The other two were familiar with editing. The group finalised the schedule of rehearsals, and made a list of required props, costumes and makeup. One of the group members offered the backyard of his house for the rehearsals, and other members took the responsibility to provide the support material. One of the volunteers suggested some locations for the final shoot; hence, location scouting was also planned with that member. Finally, the group discussed the available equipment, and the list comprised of 4 smart phones, 2 DSLRs, 1 Go-Pro, 2 tripods, 1 mic, 1 sound recorder, and 1 clapboard. The team agreed that the date of the shoot has to be decided after finalizing the rehearsals.

New media technology also helped to improve the acting and final look of the film, as rehearsals was recorded on DSLR, and on a smart phone, and shared with the actors to improve their performance. The costumes, props and makeup was finalised by the group members. The sound equipment was not functioning, so a mobile phone was tried to capture the sound. Again in postcolonial societies, like Pakistan, long permission procedures and huge sums of money are required to book a location. In contrast, the social network helps to finalise the shooting location, as one of the team members acquired a place near his residence. The support from the community relieved the job as they assisted the project by providing human resources, changing rooms and free of cost tea breaks, during the production. As a result, the filmmaker had enjoyed extreme freedom in experimenting with his ideas. The process helped to achieve a bottom-up method of producing a film.

3. Shooting

Ultimately, two days were reserved for the final shoots; however, most of the scenes were shot on day one, as it was a sunny afternoon, and the scene was planned against the sun. Two mobile phones, and a DSLR have been used for the final shoot. It is hard to handle a mobile phone; however, the slight shake of the hand was part of the shoot just to add extra tension. The camera persons, as well as actors, had improvised according to the situation and had displayed their talent and involvement. The actors performed the scene many times to achieve their own desired performance. The mic was not working properly, so the dialogues were also recorded on mobile phones placed in the pockets of both actors to avoid any inaccuracies in sound recording. The shoot continued until sunset and, apart from some of the inserts and point of view shots, almost all the required shots have been recorded. The shoot has taken a little long as the pace of work was slow, the retouching of makeup had also consumed time and the sound of different *Azans* (Islamic call to prayer), a feature of the socio-cultural environment, had also caused a few breaks. The next whole week was full of mist; hence, day two of the shoot was used only to capture some insertions. Most of these clips have not been used in the final film, as the light did not match.

The process of shooting *Sohni Dharti: An Untrue Story* reveals that with the availability of contemporary new and convergent technologies a comprehensive experience of the film production and its distribution, is possible within the minimum budget, which is vital within the context of Pakistan. The final footage was edited by two of the volunteers on Adobe Premier, by using their own computers, and was uploaded on Vimeo, from Pakistan. The total cost of all the shooting and editing was around 1000 rupees (US \$ 10/GB £ 7). It indicates that the model of *Sohni Dharti*, a film with a mobile phone, can liberate the art of moviemaking from regulatory and monetary pressures. It also verifies that digital technology can bring filmmaking to the level of pencil and paper, and it can also provide an option to the beginners to experiment and learn the art of filmmaking.

4. Distribution

Sohni Dharti was finalized with subtitles, and uploaded onto social media. However, content on social media cannot be restricted to the indigenous market alone. Although social identity is built with the involvement of local and regional places; however, new media technology is redefining the cultural boundaries and promoting a so-

called new regionalism which is beyond the state, market and civil society (Adria). Indeed, internet, with the availability of mobile phones has all the capacity to dodge the national controls. Mobile phones can also challenge the control of official establishments. A mobile phone user can interrupt or adapt the set roles of any organisation; for example, students or workers can send MMS from any controlled setting (Geser). Social media differs from any of the old media tools. Firstly, the growth rate of social media is expanding at a rapid pace, secondly, it gives access to the mode of production, and thirdly, it is instant and interactive.

Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC).

(Kaplan and Haenlein)

It is also believed that the speech or content on social media cannot be controlled or censored.

User generated content on social media networks is free of that limitation; web2 and social media technologies are instant, provide interaction and are nearly impossible to censor and control (Kohle 10).

However, Kohle's stance on the censorship of social media content, to some extent, can be challenged, particularly in the context of postcolonial societies such as Pakistan, as distribution or uploading can be a tricky matter. For example YouTube had been banned in Pakistan in 2012 (Maqbool). More than 15,000 websites have been blocked by the PTA, due to the directness of the discussions on social media, since July 2012 (Yusuf and Schoemaker). A video on Vimeo by the music group *Beygairat Brigade* was blocked in the days of the 2013 election (ASIE). Facebook have blocked the page of *Laal*, a music band, which has more than 400,000 likes, at the request of the Pakistani government (AFP).

The launching of a blog, or a channel on YouTube or Vimeo, or a social media page, is normally without any cost (Kohle). *Sohni Dharti* proves that there is no financial risk in uploading a film. Social media also has an impact on the observation behaviours of digital natives, who are quickly familiarised with the alterations, transformations and progressions in the interactive and social media.

Digital natives are not merely adapting to social media, they are developing into a generation of social media

literate users and content creators capable of challenging the status quo of the existing system (Kohle).

5. Learning:

Sohni Dharti: An Untrue Story discloses the various possibilities and limitations of new and convergent media. By using the data gathered during this practice a course of video production is initiated by the researcher at the College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab. Moreover, a workshop of filmmaking was organized at Superior University, a three day seminar was held at Lahore College for Women University, and most recently, in December 2017, a seminar was organized at the Gulberg College for Women, by the researcher, where students have made various short films with their mobile phones. Indeed, the new generation of filmmakers has an access to the mode of production, and they can share their narrative with minimum resources. This means that learning the different technicalities of production is possible.

Nick Knight declares that the mobile phone has become his camera of choice. He relates the freedom of the mobile phone camera as being equivalent to the 1960s' action of the prominent photographer, David Bailey, who discarded the tripod and started using a handheld camera (Jeffries). The mobile phone camera has simplified the technique of the camera and is only 6 to 9 years behind DSLR (Holland). In Pakistan, moviemaking with the mobile phone can be connected to the phase in the late 1980s and 1990s when the Video Home System (VHS) Camera was the only inexpensive possibility to learn the basic art of filmmaking. However, the picture quality was blurry, the editing was mostly analogue and the limitations were higher with VHS technology. Indeed, editing and other facilities are much easier to learn with digital technology; however, learning is only possible by investing time with these tools. A film students should spend as much time as possible with their cameras; whether it is a still or a movie camera, so that the camera should become their second nature (Figgis). The mobile phone camera has made it possible to spend most of the time with the tool to make film. According to Professor Fujihata, head of the School of Film and New Media at Tokyo University, the mobile phone should be used as an exclusive handheld camera (Hart).

Sohni Dharti: An Untrue Story proves that, with regular exposure to the technique one can learn basic art of storytelling and also create one's own audience. It also reveals the limitations that accompany the new

technologies of production and distribution, including the appearance of amateurism and a narrow sense of the national and international context in which filmmakers often work. Thus, a regular interaction with the art of filmmaking, with a response from the professionals, critics and audience, can help the individuals to build their own style of cinema.

6. Conclusion:

Sohni Dharti also demonstrates a shift in the control, from mode of production to mode of distribution. This means that any content can be produced without any major hurdles within the minimum budget; however, it also can be banned even years after its release. Postcolonial societies have a tradition of a centralised and controlled production and broadcast system which has been followed in the case of the internet and new media in Pakistan; hence, different websites, YouTube, content on Vimeo and Facebook pages, have been blocked by the authorities. However, support from the policymakers for making films on a mobile phone in order to learn the skills and sharing these on social media for creative purposes can be productive in terms of intellectual grooming and strengthening the creative economy.

The youth of Pakistan have a liking for digital technology. This point is also endorsed by the popularity of the laptop scheme¹ by the Punjab Government under the Chief Minister e-Youth Initiative (Government of the Punjab). The new and convergent media can benefit the film industry; however, technology alone cannot revive the tradition of filmmaking in Pakistan. The government needs to motivate the youth, as well as the professionals and academicians for the strengthening of the creative industry. For instance, small funding can be issued to specific groups to develop content. Individuals can be motivated by providing opportunities for earning money, such as by launching a channel on YouTube. Moreover, various workshops, competitions and film festivals can be organised on a regular basis at national level, and academicians, film practitioners and writers can be helpful in building the new talent.

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Note

1. The scheme is launched to offer free of cost laptops to 100 thousand bright students at public sector colleges and universities.

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