

4 THE ZINDA BHAAG

ASSEMBLAGE

Reflexivity and Form

FIVE DECADES AFTER THE LONG SIXTIES, CINEMA IN THE 2010S reveals a profound rupture of memory in contemporary consciousness of forms that were popular prior to 1980. The film *Zinda Bhaag* (Run for life, 2013, dir. Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi) was an ambitious attempt to address this cultural and societal amnesia. The long sixties was largely characterized by top-down modernization processes, the promotion of cultural homogeneity, and bourgeois liberal values. It ended with widespread instability and popular mobilization in opposition to Ayub Khan's rule (r. 1958–69). The economic and cultural policies that Pakistan had followed since 1947 had accumulated grievances and a sense of broad political and social disenfranchisement, especially in East Pakistan, which had comprised more than 50 percent of the Pakistani population. This eventually led to the breakup of the country, with Bangladesh becoming an independent nation in December 1971 after a bloody struggle and in the aftermath of war between India and Pakistan, in which the latter was decisively defeated. By 1971, the breakdown of the consensus that had developed during the Ayub years was followed by a greater populist participation in all arenas of life, after the coming to rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (r. 1971–77). More attention was devoted during the seventies to vernacular, local, and provincial cultural forms. For example, with the founding in 1974 of the organization Lok Virsa, which promoted and documented folk cultural forms, the elite consensus around the singular excellence of Urdu literary forms began to be challenged.¹ In cinema, after 1971, Punjabi-language productions exceeded Urdu productions for the first time (see figure I.1). Pashto-language cinema also saw a rise in the number of films made each year during the 1980s and the 1990s.²

Pakistan's economic policies had long been aligned with the American sphere of influence from the 1950s onward. As global developments began to embrace globalization and neoliberalism from the 1980s, these were also

adopted by the state in Pakistan without much hindrance. The Afghan War (1978–92) precipitated multiple structural changes in Pakistan, with the inflow of weapons and money, a staggering increase in the domestic consumption of and the export of narcotics and heroin, and the rise of shadowy players wielding power over a growing informalized and urbanized society. Also, from the midseventies onward, expatriate labor left the country for extended temporary stints or permanently, and this included both blue-collar labor and white-collar professionals, with large numbers moving to the Middle East and the Western world. These currents included legalized migration, extended guest-worker movements, and the risky and fraught nonlegal passage—the *dunky* in Lahori slang—whose pursuit is the central subject of the main characters in the film *Zinda Bhaag*.

The Pakistan of the second decade of the twenty-first century is therefore very different from what it was during the long sixties. Nevertheless, the question of memory and cultural lineages of prior popular forms remains an important one for the present. Pakistan lacks a physical and institutional cinema archive, but more importantly, it lacks a presence in the consciousness of the generations of people who came of age after the seventies, whose memory of Pakistani cinema before the eighties is fragmentary and tenuous. With the recent rise of the so-called “New Cinema,” the decades-long decline in the quality and number of Urdu films after 1980 finally began to be reversed. Yet critical questions remain pressing regarding the relationship—in formal, thematic, narrative terms—between New Cinema and cinema’s golden age from the long sixties and seventies in Lahore, Karachi, and Dhaka.

Zinda Bhaag is an ambitious attempt to engage with the legacies of twentieth-century South Asian cinema for the present. In this respect, it is analogous to the project of *Jago Hua Savera* (A new day dawns, 1959, dir. A. J. Kardar), which also sought to activate thematic and experiential connections across national borders. *Zinda Bhaag*’s broadly leftist orientation in examining issues of disenfranchisement and class via the commercial cinema realm can also be situated with the earlier films of Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid. In particular, both *Susraal* (The in-laws’ home, 1962, dir. Riaz Shahid) and *Zinda Bhaag* attend to the lives of subaltern male characters and the dilemmas of male bonding among friends living in Lahore’s nonelite neighborhoods. Nevertheless, a temporal and social distance of over fifty years separates the two films. Significantly, unlike all the other films analyzed in this study, *Zinda Bhaag* is primarily a Punjabi-language film. But unlike most Punjabi films made earlier, which are set in rural

contexts, *Zinda Bhaag* is fully engaged with urban subaltern life in a contemporary global megacity. The use of mostly Punjabi in this setting is in keeping with the neorealist conception of using the local dialect, which neither *Jago Hua Savera* nor *Susraal* fully followed. The shift in emphasis here to a Punjabi-language production acknowledges the profound transformations that have transpired in the social and cultural life of Lahore since the sixties; it also raises questions of cultural amnesia, as well as the need for reactivating cultural legacies from across South Asia in order to better address the fraught present. The film is also exemplary for the continued salience of the Lahore effect into the present.³

NEOLIBERALISM AND CINEMA

The feature-length Punjabi-language film *Zinda Bhaag* (2013), directed by Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi and produced by Matteela Films, narrates the story of three young men, Khaldi, Taambi, and Chitta, who desperately attempt to push against the economic and social limitations within which their class background confines them.⁴ The various prevalent types of gambling activities, all of which are illegal, are analogues for taking fatal chances with one's own life in order to leave a society that presents little possibility for forward movement. Puhlwan (wrestler), played by noted Indian actor Naseeruddin Shah, is the local don who manages and profits from the gambling, provides a sort of rough-and-ready local governance in the absence of the state, and fondly narrates absorbing moralistic fables as the occasion demands (figure 4.1).

All the young men in the film, as well as Khaldi's love interest, Rubina, are caught in a horizon of aspirations fueled by neoliberal consumerist fantasies. But while Rubina focuses on the steady and persistent entrepreneurial manufacture and guerrilla marketing of soap in the informal locale of nonelite Lahore, the young men perceive themselves to be trapped in a socioeconomic nightmare for which migration to Europe beckons as remedy and fulfillment.⁵

Apart from Naseeruddin Shah, a leading actor in Indian commercial and parallel cinema, *Zinda Bhaag* uses mostly nonprofessional actors and was shot on location in a nondescript lower-middle-class locality in Lahore, which recalls neorealist principles.⁶ In its shooting and postproduction, the film also deployed Indian expertise—its production team was mostly Punjabi-speaking, from both sides of the border. That the film deployed a cross-national team and that Matteela Films is now based in Karachi



FIG. 4.1. The Puhlwan mesmerizing his admirers with his fables. *Zinda Bhaag* (2013).

contribute to the possibilities and dilemmas of how media whose reach is increasingly transnational can effectively relate to the specificities of a location that is itself thoroughly permeated by vectors of migration. Despite the grim and serious subject, the film deftly negotiates a narrative arc that traverses realism and fable. It evokes a perceptual space in which the weight and grind of everyday realism are continually traversed by openings that offer glimpses toward possibilities in which the burdened daily existence of the protagonists can be redeemed by levity and success—possibilities that seem to be latent in every moment yet, despite the best efforts of the protagonists, remain unrealizable.

The brief opening sequence establishes the dichotomy between a nostalgic conception of Lahore as a city with a storied history and its famed Punjabi ethos of being a city inhabited by the *zinda dilān* (possessing *joie de vivre*),⁷ on the one hand, and the grim reality faced by its underemployed male youth on the other. It opens with an establishing shot from an elevated perspective of the rooftops and minarets of the old city, accompanied by ambient street noise. Next, close-up shots depict Mughal architecture, street food, colorful fabric, girls laughing together and making henna patterns on their hands, and children bathing in a canal. These joyful touristic shots of everyday life in the city are followed by a shot of neatly arranged piles of cash and a top-down fast-motion shot of narrow lanes, along with frenzied traffic, accompanied with a voiceover by the genial and magisterial Puhlwan. It narrates that all of God's bounties are already available in the city of Lahore; why do fools seek to leave all this behind to venture abroad? The next sequence shows a wide road and medium close-up of the three male friends behind the windshield of a vehicle (figure 4.2). The opening shots



FIG. 4.2. Khaldi, Chitta, and Taambi in the opening scenes. *Zinda Bhaag* (2013).

immediately dangle the allure of the picturesque and touristic Lahore, which is no longer habitable for the three young men.

Zinda Bhaag is an important film whose cinematic, geographical, and moral universe raises a number of critical and analytical questions for independent filmmaking in contemporary Pakistan. These include the considerable history of older Pakistani cinema, its present crisis, and the degraded condition of the older studios and cinema halls; the history of a cinematic form and of its relationship with prior and superseded forms of Pakistani cinema; the tension between vernacular linguistic and cultural forms and international norms; the overwhelming presence of Indian cinema and the difficult task for Pakistani filmmakers to situate themselves both in conflict and in cooperation with this juggernaut; the role of a contemporary imagination that is thoroughly shaped by media and neoliberal consumerist fantasies; the strangely constricted and hallucinatory universe of the protagonists, which is shot throughout with avenues of escape to a thrilling but unfathomable future elsewhere; and the virtual impossibility today of cinematically representing class conflict.

Zinda Bhaag is highly intermedial and reflexive, as it refers to older cinematic tropes and local television soap operas. In terms of form, the film deploys intertextuality with earlier cinematic and theatrical tropes, and it relays between high cinema and commercial mainstream. It utilizes techniques whose lineage goes back to neorealism and Indian parallel cinema: location shooting, nonprofessional actors, local language and dialect. Its fabling also presses on elements of “traditional” imaginative modes—literature, poetry, and theater—to transform them into new, fantastic modes of aspiration promised by entrepreneurial effort, participation in shadowy

economic schemes, or physical migration. The film is part of a new wave of cinema emerging from Pakistan, termed New Cinema.⁸ But *Zinda Bhaag* completely sidesteps the issue of terrorism and violence, which dominates much of the New Cinema from Pakistan. Nor does it focus on the social and romantic dramas of the elite or the oppression of women, topics that are often revisited by directors and encouraged by the global film festival circuit. Rather, it explores urban subaltern lifeworlds that are not especially concerned with the question of being Muslim and are consequently quite invisible to mainstream reception.

New Cinema has relied on a specific kind of realism that emerges from television serials: the need to grapple with religious “fundamentalism” and offer instead a more moderate and tolerant version of Muslim life for Pakistanis. New Cinema is also under pressure from spectacular commercial mainstream Bollywood, whose influence molds Pakistani New Cinema in its image—in form, narrative, and address. While these provide some cultural resources for Pakistani filmmakers seeking to address their own locale, they are clearly lacking in other ways: the realism of the TV serial follows conventional narrative structures and cinematic styles, the dominant focus on the theme of fundamentalism obscures other contemporary issues, and mainstream Bollywood is compelled to work under market-driven conditions, with many productions simply being variations of formulaic narrative and cinematic tropes. What remains markedly absent in the history of Pakistan’s cinema and television is a rich legacy of avant-garde and experimental moving image, critical pedagogy, and viewing practices that foster an environment for experimental and critical approaches to flourish.

In the absence of a tradition of experimental cinema and parallel cinema in Pakistan, New Cinema is tasked with finding new ways forward with narrative and form in order to expand the local vocabulary and range of resources. Its engagement with a much more diverse ensemble of medias is critical if the New Cinema is not to arise in a space filled only by a stereotypical constellation of available tropes and techniques. What is needed is a critical reckoning with the history of the medium in Pakistan and South Asia, and with other disparate mediums and narrative forms that are local, but not in a dogmatic or exclusivist register.

Zinda Bhaag is a cinematic work of considerable ambition in conceiving of itself as an agent that intervenes in numerous cinematic and imaginative domains and traverses both realism and fable. Of primary interest here are its formal and reflexive elements, rather than its charged, socially conscious narrative of the problem of illegal migration. That its form is an

assemblage is a more significant intervention in New Cinema than an ostensible adherence to a unified narrative. The following analysis understands *Zinda Bhaag* as an experimental assemblage that marshals a wide ensemble of narrative tropes and visual styles—premodern oral tales and Sufi allegories of the unattainable beloved, Marxist poetry, the influential Pakistani television serials, the golden age of Bombay and Urdu cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, and Pakistani-vernacular action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. As a montaged ensemble of realism and fable, it flexes the Lahore effect in new ways.⁹ The film draws upon multiple resources and subjects them to critical and reflexive translation. It does so not only to narratively address issues of class and masculinity in a crisis-ridden neoliberal present but also to experiment with cinematic form in order to expand the constellation of references for emerging cinema in Pakistan.

The concept of assemblage is helpful for this analysis. “In the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *assemblage* (*agencement*) carries connotations of connection, event, transformation, and becoming,” notes media theorist N. Katherine Hayles, adding that it is “the notion of an arrangement not so tightly bound that it cannot lose or add parts, yet not so loosely connected that relations between parts cease to matter.”¹⁰ Assemblage thus encompasses the ethos of unfolding newness through the dynamic articulation of disparate elements in a specific configuration. Since *Zinda Bhaag* draws tactically and selectively from the media and cultural forms of the premodern and modern eras, it can indeed be usefully seen as the marshaling together of an assemblage. Assemblage also distinguishes *Zinda Bhaag* from earlier art or parallel cinema of South Asia in which a more unified narrative arc subsumes other tropes, and this is the case also for the earlier social film and its melodramatic universe. And if we hold that cinematic form does have an articulation with the social world—keeping in mind that this linkage is not mechanical or simply causal, but overdetermined and marked by fracture and uneven temporality—we can nevertheless posit that while the earlier cinema of relative narrative coherence flourished in expectations of a top-down developmentalist modernity or its failure, *Zinda Bhaag*’s form addresses our neoliberal era and its informalized ethos through its frenetic pace, fractured narrative and editing, permeation of neorealism with fable, and open-ended, nonredemptive ending.

But does Pakistan today face conditions that are dominantly neoliberal, and do the consequences of this “mode of production” characterize its economic, social, and cultural life? This is obviously a proposition that can be bestowed with a kind of magical explanatory power—every consequential

transformation since the late 1980s can be easily laid at the feet of an omnipotent neoliberalism. This temptation is especially compelling in the case of Pakistan, which lacks effective and prominent examples in which individuals, communities, or regions have followed other trajectories that could serve as identifiable counters to the alleged hegemony of neoliberalism. Keeping in mind these reservations, and remaining vigilant about totalizing explanations, we can nevertheless note that large areas of governance, economy, and society in Pakistan can indeed be characterized as neoliberal. For our purposes, this means a retrenchment of the state from the kinds of heroic developmental projects from the 1950s to the 1970s that were especially intense during the long sixties; the continued crisis of the national education system at all levels; the privatization of state enterprises and services largely for the benefit of crony capitalism; the unplanned and rapid growth of informal urban housing and employment; a tremendous expansion of the realm of consumer commodities and credit; deepening divides between social groups and classes that have bodily, architectural, and symbolic dimensions, such as gated city enclaves and leisure spaces, including suburban housing, malls, restaurants, and clubs; the stoking of libidinal and material desire in a massive and pervasive capitalist media ecology; and the availability of upmarket accessories and consumer commodities, prominently showcased on glossy billboards and in seductive media advertisements. On the other hand, the hold of the older business elite and the landed aristocratic classes has come under increasing threat from upstarts, in a social economy that is more diversified and far more volatile than during the modernist developmentalist era, and one in which diaspora is no longer a realm cut off from home. In psychic terms, poor education, absence of secure employment opportunities, and immersion in consumer and media images fuel intensified desire for material success and stature via “entrepreneurship,” and all this in a society in which breadwinning still remains closely associated with masculinity. This potent realm of crisis and possibility is precisely *Zinda Bhaag*’s contextual mise-en-scène.

THE 2013 JUNCTURE

Cinema in Pakistan experienced major transformations from the late 1970s onward. The arrival of the VCR brought Bombay cinema into the private spaces of middle-class households and, increasingly, lower-class households and communities. Cinema halls showing similar but lesser-quality social

and melodramatic Urdu films became less frequented, leading to a vicious cycle of further decline in their number and quality from the eighties into the twenty-first century. The conservative and censorious media policies of the regime of military dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88) also created impediments for filmmakers addressing social issues (which television serials arguably addressed more intensively and seriously during the eighties).

The decline in the number of Urdu films was partially made up by the rise of Punjabi and Pashto films that catered to rural and urban working-class constituencies. Ali Nobil Ahmad has cautioned against falling into the prevalent decline-and-fall narrative that romanticizes the golden age of the Urdu social film addressing the middle class, blinding critics to the importance of vernacular cinemas of the eighties and nineties, whose rustic action genres catered to subaltern audiences.¹¹ Undoubtedly, however, the overall decline in the infrastructure of production and distribution has been dramatic since the late seventies. Ahmad in 2016 noted that “the national industry’s hundred-plus features per year in 1980s were regularly projected onto twelve hundred screens nationwide—figures that have dwindled to barely two dozen films and a mere hundred and fifty screens respectively, of which an unknown number are non-functional.”¹² This extended crisis has resulted in an infrastructural and thematic discontinuity in Pakistani cinema for three decades, but recent years have witnessed a revival of cinema (aka New Cinema) forged in the crucible of neoliberalism and catering to globally aspirant middle-class tastes.¹³

Several observers have notated 2013 as a landmark year in which several key films were launched. While this number is not large, many of these films were genre-formative and the firsts of their kind for Pakistan. These 2013 developments did not arise in a vacuum, however. After a steep decline in the number and quality of films in Urdu, momentum had been building toward a revival since around 2006. This development was not led by the older filmmakers and studios, whose conditions had deteriorated very badly, as had the conditions of the remaining film theaters.¹⁴ Rather, this revival was spearheaded via new technologies (digital filmmaking), new personnel, new patronage (many supported by the big private news and media networks), and new distribution circuits in newly established multiplex theaters and network television. This meant that this revival of cinema also emerged without an awareness of the not-inconsiderable history of cinema in Pakistan from the 1950s to the late 1970s, a period that saw the release of thousands of commercial feature films.

A milestone in this new turn is the film *Khuda Kay Liye* (In the name of God), a technically well-made 2007 feature film directed by Shoaib Mansoor that elicited considerable publicity domestically and also circulated abroad. Mehreen Jabbar's *Ramchand Pakistani* (2008) is another important film, and one in which the noted Indian actress Nandita Das played a lead role. Its lyrical sensitivity toward the desert landscape and its consciously loose narrative were a welcome departure from the mechanical cause-and-effect scenarios seen in many television serials. Omar Khan's zombie film *Zibahkhana* (Slaughterhouse, 2007), made with fewer resources, has been the subject of a number of scholarly essays.¹⁵ Here, I summarize two of the film's characteristics that are relevant for my study. *Zibahkhana* is salient for its intermediality, as it references *Zinda Laash* (The living corpse, 1967, dir. Khwaja Sarfraz), an Urdu horror film from Lahore, as well as international horror tropes. And it addresses issues of class (although, its take on class is from the vantage of the elite kids and is one in which subalterns are largely monstrous, unlike *Zinda Bhaag*, in which the subaltern urban characters are central). As a horror film, *Zibahkhana*'s reception is evoked via its visceral effects, rather than in the social film, where emotive affect is dominant, and which constitutes the focus of this book. But *Zibahkhana* is partly an exception that proves the rule that most contemporary Pakistani films largely do not address class nor are they engaged with the rich legacy of theatrical, performative, and cinematic fabling that characterized the Lahore effect.

The arrival of the multiplex fueled the desire of middle-class viewers to return to the cinema hall. This was greatly aided by the Pakistani government's decision to legalize the screening of Bollywood films, which enabled the infrastructural development of new cinema theaters that the emerging Pakistani cinema could also utilize.¹⁶ Other recent films that have enjoyed notable publicity include *Bol* (Speak, 2011), directed by Shoaib Mansoor; *Waar* (Strike, 2013), directed by Bilal Lashari; and *Na Maloom Afraad* (Unidentified people, 2014), directed by Nabeel Qureshi. However, gauging New Cinema's commercial success is not easy—neither production budgets nor audiences, nor screening figures, nor returns are fully transparent, given that many films are sponsored in-house by media conglomerates and that some films are aided gratis in their production by the considerable resources of the military. One may note that all these films are in Urdu, and apart from *Ramchand Pakistani*, they all largely follow conventions of mainstream commercial cinema drawn from Hollywood and Bollywood, or realist aspects of earlier parallel cinema in South Asia.¹⁷

HEGEMONY OF TELEVISION SERIALS

Television serials have been dominant for several decades in the Pakistani mediascape, tackling issues such as the fraught position of women, feudal and gender hierarchies, and other social concerns. Fuller analysis of these serials—including their formal characteristics—is extremely important for understanding their pervasive social influence, a task that is beyond the scope of this study and awaits extended scholarship.¹⁸ For our purposes, it is important to note that the serials are largely made according to specific conventions—linear and steady narrative unfolding; foregrounded but ultimately circumscribed affective and emotional registers; rehearsed dialogue between characters; high-key lighting in staged interiors; little camera movement, with tableau placement of characters facing the camera; and shot–reverse shot and other conventional techniques. Editing is seldom experimental, nor are the placement and movement of the camera or the characters. In this sense, if we posit the quality of being *cinematic* in terms of techniques such as fluid camerawork; montage editing; the deployment of unexpected camera positions; the dilation, compression, and interruption of narrative flow; outdoor mise-en-scène; locations whose ambiance cannot be fully stage-managed; and other aspects of cinematic style, the television serials are *not cinematic*. Even though the television serials might espouse upper-middle-class liberal feminist and anti-authoritarian topics in their overall narrative, the problem with this mode is the reproduction of conventional and commonsense morality, normative temporality, and normalized space, in which events and encounters unfold with a steady regularity in a stable social fabric. And in terms of narrative resolution of issues of gender and class, it largely conforms to mainstream liberal norms. The television serials nevertheless provide an important set of references to New Cinema—the more so as many directors of New Cinema developed their careers in the dozens of television channels that have emerged since the liberalization of media in 2002.¹⁹

Due to its dominant influence in the Pakistani mediascape, the genre of television serials nevertheless influences many new films, especially those addressing social issues. Notwithstanding their formal and narrative limitations, the serials' undeniable importance for Pakistani society means that *Zinda Bhaag* engages with them, albeit critically and reflexively. The film recognizes the wide viewership of the serials—both Khaldi's mother and Puhlwan are addicted to the fictional television drama serial *Auqat* (Social status), participating in the fashioning of a larger Pakistani

“imagined community” that popular media has arguably done more to constitute than uneven official policies have.²⁰ On the other hand, even from the few clips of the serial that one glimpses in the film, *Auqat* is a parody that lampoons television serials’ conservative formal conventions and staged melodramatic bourgeois morality. A wide establishing shot of the rooftops in dim twilight and then ground-level views of the street below connect with a sound bridge to the interior of Khaldi’s home, where the theme song of *Auqat* is playing; the sense here is that street life is empty when the popular serial is on. As one watches snippets of *Auqat* throughout the film, it becomes clear that it lampoons the gentility of the television serial with cruel and sadistic dialogue, suggesting that the reality of urban subaltern life is far beyond the ambit of the genteel universe of the television serial.

I believe that the *formal* properties of a genre are more primary and more significant than narrative or thematic content and that the lack of experimentation in Pakistan’s moving image production therefore limits development of new approaches in the moving image format. The task of serious artists and filmmakers is then to also reflect on this amnesia and absence. Not only are *Zinda Bhaag*’s rapid editing and quick-paced sequences opposed to the television serials’ stodgy temporality but the film also includes an explicit critique of the latter, as when *Auqat* lulls Khaldi’s mother into a kind of stupor of inhabiting a parallel universe. This media addiction to what has been commonly understood as a more realist register (as compared with the commercial film) is ironically what is shown here as being unable to keep pace with the quickened, multifarious, intersecting, and clashing challenges of the crisis-ridden present.

Zinda Bhaag also incorporates numerous references to prior cinematic forms. Khaldi’s mother recalls but departs from the self-abnegating character of the mother in innumerable commercial Indian and Pakistani films. The mother figure in *Zinda Bhaag* is nevertheless critically bound up in an intertextuality of filmic significations.²¹ If the earlier stock mother figure bore enormous personal sacrifices to preserve family honor, such as in *Clerk* (1960), by contrast Khaldi’s mother constantly hounds him to become a better breadwinner. Rubina, Khaldi’s romantic interest, also refuses the role of the ever-faithful female lover of classic Bombay and Pakistani cinema, walking out of the relationship as Khaldi’s desperation grows. This inversion of the conventional codes of femininity nevertheless becomes legible via an interfilmic subtext. These are but two examples of critical reworkings of the cinematic tropes of the past.

This referential strategy was a result of a deliberate set of choices on the part of the filmmakers. According to Meenu Gaur, *Zinda Bhaag* utilizes techniques that were prevalent in 1970s cinema but have now fallen out of fashion, such as flashbacks, voices in the characters' heads, and saturated color that has faded along specific chromatic registers, the way color celluloid unevenly ages.²² *Zinda Bhaag* integrates and incorporates songs in advancing the narrative, allowing the songs to express emotions or feelings that are difficult to express otherwise. In this sense, it references the golden age of melodramatic films, rather than action genres and more recent Bollywood films, in which songs such as "item numbers" might serve as interruptions that do not necessarily advance the plot.²³ Unlike the violent, nihilistic, and amoral villains in many contemporary films, Puhlwan never deploys brute or muscle power, despite his nickname as a "wrestler." Even this signifier is a chiasma, as his prior career is depicted in flashback not as that of a powerful wrestler or heroic masculine figure but as a "lowly" sanitation worker employed to clean the audience stands at a horse racetrack after the race. And in an incident in which drug addicts have to be removed from a space owned by Puhlwan, he advises using a water hose, sagely observing, "A druggie is already half-dead. Humanity doesn't preach killing of the dead." In his persona as an absorbing, soft-spoken raconteur, Puhlwan takes after an ensemble of villain characters in past films. According to Gaur, one reference is the celebrated Indian actor Pran (1920–2013), who appeared in numerous Bollywood films as a gentleman villain.²⁴ Pran's character played at the edges of an otherwise functioning society and within a semblance of moral order, rather than transgressing rules completely.²⁵ A similar character in Pakistani cinema was developed by the actor Aslam Parvez (1932–84).²⁶ Another inspiration for Puhlwan is the quiet, soft-spoken, and principled Noori Natt character in the hyperviolent, celebrated, and genre-formative Pakistani Punjabi film *Maula Jatt* (1979, dir. Younis Malik).²⁷

MISSING LINEAGES OF PARALLEL CINEMA

Barring a few honorable experiments, such as *Jago Hua Savera* (1959), Pakistan does not possess a rich lineage of experimental or avant-garde cinema—certainly nothing of the scope and scale that arose in India from the 1950s onward, associated with directors such as Shyam Benegal, Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Kaul, Satyajit Ray, Aparna Sen, Mrinal Sen, and others.²⁸ Historically, Italian neorealism was formative in the emergence of parallel

cinema in India, where enlightened state funding provided crucial support. Veteran actors such as Naseeruddin Shah (who plays Puhlwan in *Zinda Bhaag*) have been closely associated with Indian parallel cinema for decades—in Shah's role as a young feudal scion in *Nishant* (Night's end, 1975, dir. Shyam Benegal), for example. Avant-garde experiments in India also found another avenue in short films made under the aegis of the Films Division, in which artists such as Akbar Padamsee and Nalini Malani made important formalist experimental work.²⁹ In Pakistan, the realist feature-length experiment of *Jago Hua Savera* was not repeated in any influential manner until Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* (Silent waters, 2003). Even in India, parallel cinema was not *formally* experimental in a cinematic sense, and this is the also case for Sumar's film, which deploys conventional camera and editing and follows a temporally steady realist narrative arc. And while one can analyze commercial and mainstream Pakistani films for occasional experimental and discrepant elements, there is no doubt regarding the larger absence of a legible trajectory of parallel cinema in the country, in theme as well as form.³⁰ The few experiments that one can recount did not prove to have a lasting impact. Jamil Dehlavi's surrealist political allegory *The Blood of Hussain* (1980) was banned in Pakistan and has not circulated widely.³¹ Hasan Zaidi's *Raat Chali Hai Jhoom Ke* (The intoxicated night, 2002), Pakistan's first digitally filmed feature, which Zaidi developed in collaboration with the novelist and critic Mohammad Hanif, was shown only twice on television and has not been released on DVD or the Internet.³²

Zinda Bhaag reconstructs this missing lineage, by having Naseeruddin Shah play a leading role and by inviting Mohammad Hanif to contribute the lyrics of a key song, which takes after a celebrated poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Faiz was associated with the neorealist experiment *Jago Hua Savera*, was a close friend of Khurshid Anwar's, and contributed lyrics to the films of Riaz Shahid and Khalil Qaiser. Aspects of *Zinda Bhaag* also follow neo-realist principles. These include reliance on nonprofessional actors, location shooting in an unremarkable lower-middle-class neighborhood in Lahore, and the challenging task of recording sound on location to render ambience with a heightened character.

PATRONAGE OF THE NEW CINEMA

The dilemmas faced by contemporary filmmakers in Pakistan in situating their films in a series of overlapping and disrupted traditions have formal

implications, beyond the concerns of marketing and distribution. If the missing lineage of parallel and experimental film cannot now be re-created, what is available today, of course, is a much broader palette of options, but they have to be translated into the specific matrix of conditions in which emerging Pakistani cinema is being forged. These resources include mainstream Hollywood and Bollywood genres, such as action, romance, buddy, horror, political thriller, et cetera. And equally significantly, they include the development in Indian cinema of what has been termed the new hybrid, which includes the so-called *hatke* (quirky) films.³³ In his study of “the new indies” in India, Ashvin Devasundaram notes that these films “narrate micro-narratives—the minority and alternative stories of nation excluded from Bollywood film representations . . . the discursive contexts and subjective voices in contemporary India, largely elided in academic literature’s preoccupation with the majority narrative of Bollywood.”³⁴ These films challenge what Devasundaram has termed Bollywood’s “meta-hegemony,” which encompasses “monopoly over the Indian film industry’s modes of production, distribution, exhibition and capital generation,” its “ideological propagation of a post-globalization master narrative,” and its investment in “patriarchal, postcolonial, national narrative through gendered and stereotypical representations of women.”³⁵

Nevertheless, these independent Indian films inhabit a paradoxical landscape. Unlike older parallel cinema that enjoyed state support, these new feature films remain very dependent on precisely the infrastructures of production and distribution that commercial mainstream media and cinema have established.³⁶ Devasundaram further observes, “This hegemonic configuration often standardizes Bollywood’s presence as a seemingly indispensable intermediary for Indies to gain funding or a wider audience . . . [and] often deems it necessary for independent film directors to solicit the influence and patronage of Bollywood personalities or producers. The aim is to augment their films’ visibility amongst civil society by attaching the associative commercial gravitas of Bollywood to an Indie project. This is part of an idiosyncratic ‘godfather’ syndrome in the Indian filmmaking firmament.”³⁷

Independent filmmakers in Pakistan must rely on various “godfathers” as well, even beyond the film industry, given the deteriorated infrastructure of commercial Pakistani cinema. In terms of infrastructure and funding, these include sponsorship by network television media houses, corporate sponsorship and its demands for product placement or attempts to improve its public image by supporting feel-good or conventional themes,

and the rise of the multiplex cinema showing Bollywood and mainstream Hollywood films. These neoliberal conditions, and the fact that many new filmmakers have cut their teeth on advertising work, mean that many productions of the New Cinema uncritically embody these aesthetic values.

Zinda Bhaag assumes a reflexive stance toward this infrastructural reality. It focuses centrally on class divisions and antagonisms, a theme that was important in the commercial South Asian cinema of the 1940s to 1970s but is no longer in vogue. And the film has a critical take on product placement and the amplification of desire through capitalist consumerism. For example, the seductive red dress that Rubina admires in the Exist designer store at the Mall of Lahore has a steep sticker price of 4,985 rupees. This dress is also prominently advertised on street billboards, further fueling Khaldi's desire to steal it as a gift for Rubina. Consumerist consumption and branding as lifestyle are thus impossible without the original sin of theft. And Rubina's soap brand, Facelook, would not be dissimilar to what in contemporary art is termed "tactical media" practice.³⁸ The soap's packaging is branded with a typeface and color lifted from the Facebook logo, exemplary of a highly dominant product placement being waylaid via informal parasitic procedures.

One of the most important patrons of the New Cinema is the powerful and extremely well-resourced Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), which has provided technical and logistical assistance for some of the most expensive recent feature productions.³⁹ Since the ISPR is the public face of the Pakistani deep state establishment, this patronage is ideologically fraught for filmmakers who wish to address serious social issues that venture beyond formulaic and mythical resolutions. *Waar* (Strike), a slick action film directed by Bilal Lashari also released in 2013, was made with the extensive support of the ISPR, for example. And Bollywood productions, which have done very well in the new multiplexes in Pakistan, remain a highly influential template for Pakistani aspirants, despite the fact that the budgets and range of professional expertise available to Indian filmmakers are orders of magnitude greater than even the best-financed Pakistani film.⁴⁰ Despite calls by critics to develop a less formulaic cinema that is responsive to its local site and to its social and infrastructural conditions, many Pakistani filmmakers remain in thrall to the spectacular big-budget Bollywood extravaganza.⁴¹ Indian commercial cinema thus serves as yet another demanding "godfather" and occasional patron in many ways—for example, Pakistani New Cinema has relied on major Bollywood actors as leads in numerous films, such as *Khamosh Pani*, *Khuda Kay Liye*, *Ramchand*

Pakistani, and *Zinda Bhaag*.⁴² *Zinda Bhaag* reflexively foregrounds the structural dependency on these “godfathers.” The Puhlwan character, for example, is the very personification of the don who is feared but to whom one also turns to in order to fix one’s financial and social difficulties. Puhlwan provides serviceable governance and patronage in a context where the state is absent.⁴³

FABLING AND RECOVERY OF PRECINEMATIC TROPES

One of the most important dimensions of *Zinda Bhaag* is its investment in creating linkages with oral and performance genres from the Punjab and beyond. There are no fewer than four extended flashbacks in the film, each at least eight minutes long, in which Puhlwan recounts stories allegedly from his past in order to provide edifying moral lessons—“*gall vichon gall nikaldi ai*” (one story emerges from another), a phrase he fondly repeats at each flashback. There is, of course, no way of knowing whether these stories are true. In terms of narrative, this nesting structure recalls pre-modern and early modern genres such as *qisṣa* and the *var*, including the story of *Hir-Ranjha*, which incorporated subnarratives that departed from the dominant narrative and offered both entertainment and edification.⁴⁴ Significantly, early cinema in South Asia until the fifties has engaged with the *dāstān*, the Oriental tale and stories of impossible love, such as the Laila-Majnun tale, as film scholar Rosie Thomas has shown.⁴⁵ Codirector Meenu Gaur has observed that many epic oral folktales in Punjabi, Sindhi, and other regional languages are accounts of “death foretold,” in which the quest for union with the beloved is all-consuming but impossible, leading toward certain death. These epics depart radically from the narrative arc of modern Western genres, such as the short story or the bildungsroman, for example. This is evident in the closing song of the film, as Gaur notes:

The lyrics at the end of the film try to communicate that sense of victory in the face of foretold death: *jo haar gayo so paar gayon / sab andhron baharon vaar gayon / sirr dhar tali talwar gayon / haq ticket kata darbar gayon* [you lost and won the passage to eternity / your being was your offering / with your head perched on the tip of a sword / and in your hand clutching the ticket to truth]. . . . These lyrics Farjad and I penned to capture the sense of heroism in failure . . . that to lose is the biggest victory . . . because now there is no place for failure . . . which wasn’t the

case when we were growing up . . . where the so-called failures amongst us could be renegades and extremely attractive figures.⁴⁶

In *Zinda Bhaag*, the fantasy of the full realization of one's desire is located in the successful *dunky*, the fraught journey to Europe. Despite the bitter experience of Taambi being imprisoned when abroad and then deported, Europe's mythical lure remains undimmed for Chitta, Khaldi, and many other characters as they seek fixes with middlemen who forge passports or who peddle admission in dubious college programs in the United Kingdom as a way to secure visas. Here the realm of *jouissance* is Europe, allegorized as the unattainable, forever-desirable beloved of the *qiṣṣa*, the obsessive quest for whom demands the sacrifice of one's life during the *dunky*. Other references in the film to the performative cultures of the Punjab include skits and comedy acts from popular urban Punjabi theater and "Pānī dā bulbulā" (Bubble of water), a popular song sung by Yaqub Atif "Bulbula" from 1962 onward.⁴⁷

AVANT-GARDISM AND MELODRAMA

Given its dense references to prior cinematic forms as well as to precinematic performative tropes, and the stated intention of the directors to refer to these, we must envision *Zinda Bhaag* as a fable as much as a realist film. In its assemblage, codes of realism are shot throughout with disparate elements of fantasy, which include the nested stories as well as the songs. *Zinda Bhaag's* innovative and genre-defying assemblage form can be understood in terms of cinematic avant-gardism that intersects with the conventions of the social film. This is evidenced clearly in the song sequences, three of which are briefly analyzed here.

The fantasy sequence choreographed around the song "Kuṛī yes ai" (This girl is yes!) picturizes the inebriated dream of Khaldi as he rides on his motorcycle with Rubina. On a rooftop gathering of young men, who are barbecuing and drinking together, Khaldi on a charpoy (rope bed) slips into an alcohol-fueled fantasy of riding a motorcycle with Rubina, in which the background is completely replaced with computer-generated imagery (figure 4.3).

The lyrics of the song refer to migration, such as "No red signal can stop us from going to the UK" and "I'll take you to London, UK, via Turkey." Decorated heart and dagger motifs in the ornamental background with the words *Matric* and *BA* suggest not only the qualifications one may need to



FIG. 4.3. Computer graphics based on truck art, folk art, and anime constitute the background in the “Kuṛī yes ai” (This girl is yes!) song. *Zinda Bhaag* (2013).

secure a job abroad but also the duplicity involved in enrolling for fake European university programs just to secure a visa, which Khaldi pursues later in the film. (This also recalls the manager of the Rahnuma Marriage Office in *Susraal* from chapter 3, who bragged about grossly inflating the stature of men desiring a good match by bestowing them with imaginary educational qualifications.) The sequence is shot with the couple cavorting on the motorcycle and dancing against a green chroma background that has been replaced with gigantic psychedelic animated graphics based on truck art, folk art, and anime. According to the screenplay, a reference for this song is the celebrated “Ei poth jodi na sesh hoye” (What if this road never ends) from the Bengali film *Saptapadi* (1961), which picturizes a romantic couple riding a motorcycle on a country road in an idyllic landscape.⁴⁸ “The Bengali song was a general reference to how we wanted to invert the typical ‘romantic’ journey of older films, which is usually an urban couple traveling or discovering a semi-rural landscape. But in ours, it’s the other way around—moving away and away and eventually out of the country,” notes Gaur.⁴⁹ And unlike the lyrical but realist black-and-white landscape of the earlier song, *Zinda Bhaag* replaces the background with a hallucinatory dreamworld of eye-popping color. Nevertheless, “every step that Khaldi and Rubina perform is from a famous film song from a Pakistani or Bollywood film.”⁵⁰ The dance moves are entirely composed of an assemblage of dance moves from numerous films from the past, further underscoring the reflexivity and intermediality of *Zinda Bhaag*.

The intrusion of fantasy song sequences in South Asian cinema is a convention, and this song sequence expresses Khaldi’s desire but places it in a

realm that is not of this world. The sequence also brings anime graphics into an ostensibly realist film focusing on the serious issue of illegal migration. What is noteworthy about *Zinda Bhaag*'s version is the complete artifice of this fantasy space, which brings together truck art with advanced digital renderings.⁵¹ Gaur observes, "This song is an inversion of commercial film tropes while doing something typically from that world. What constitutes a film song? Rural landscape backdrop, modern couple, and dance. But what's left now of rural beauty and landscape? Instead, we show *one* green leaf and later that too is replaced by a motorway and high buildings, this at a time when Lahore is chopping off its trees to build motorways. Even in older cinema, the rural landscape is a mere (romantic) gesture, but now our hero has no such fantasy about the rural."⁵²

The song "Dekhenge" (To witness) was written by Mohammad Hanif. This is the novelist's first film song, and it draws from a famous poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz whose refrain is "*Ham dekhenge*" (We shall witness). The song sequence in *Zinda Bhaag* is performed by the waiters of the Imperial Punjab Club, who have been humiliated moments before by false accusations of the theft of a mobile phone belonging to an upper-crust anglicized man. Meanwhile, in another corner of the club's hall, an elegant, westernized young woman gushes in admiration as she requests that her male companion play Iqbal Bano's rendition of Faiz's original lyrics. Faiz's poem reflexively borrows powerful Qur'anic apocalyptic and eschatological imagery to foretell a future in which sovereignty will finally belong to the people.⁵³ Faiz's poem has become very popular in the version performed by the accomplished *ghazal* singer Iqbal Bano.⁵⁴ The affective message in Faiz's poem for the call toward dramatic and revolutionary transformation risks being overlooked in the neoliberal era, however, and indeed it plays as soft, ambient music in the Imperial Punjab Club where the elite are socializing. Gaur has noted that this incident is based on observations of a similar scenario from real life. For *Zinda Bhaag*, simply utilizing Faiz's original poetry in the film would no longer be sufficient, as the poem has been tastefully incorporated into upper-class society.⁵⁵ Rather, the film's avant-gardist orientation requires a subsumption of the prior form into a new constellation of signification. It rescues Faiz's poetry from its absorption into bourgeois culture as pleasant aesthetic background and extends its call for social transformation into the present era by critically mimicking Faiz's own poetic diction.

Hanif's song's lyrics and declamatory force make for a stirring call for justice that needs be seized by the underprivileged from the elite, who expect



FIG. 4.4. “Dekhenge” (To witness) song with young male waiters who dance and waltz in pairs. A *jhūmar* (ornamental forehead pendant) made of grapes and leaves briefly adorns Taambi’s forehead. *Zinda Bhaag* (2013).

servility from their underlings. The song throughout is a montage of short sequences edited to create a disjunctive effect. Toward the end, the succession becomes increasingly staccato, with rapid shots that assault the screen in bursts and show close-ups of the lips of the elite laughing and consuming food and tobacco and vertical shots of a platter that shows a succession of hors d’oeuvres, as well as jewelry, and blood pressure medical gear to take care of those who consumed too much. The speed of editing and the frenetic pace is much more rapid than the *qawwali* in the film *Clerk* (1960), in which exploited office workers also dance and sing together about the difficulties they face financially. And the homosocial bonds in *Zinda Bhaag*’s song “Dekhenge” are more overt, as the young male waiters waltz in pairs and a *jhūmar* (ornamental forehead pendant) made of grapes and leaves adorns Taambi’s forehead briefly, held up by one of his friends (figure 4.4).

Finally, let us consider the remarkable Punjabi *qawwali* written by the New York-based poet Hasan Mujtaba. The poem, originally several pages long, was edited by the directors and rendered by Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, who is affiliated with the *gharana* (household/atelier) of the celebrated Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948–97). Even though Rahat Fateh Ali Khan is regarded as an accomplished *qawwal* who has created numerous playback songs for Bombay films, this is among his first original renditions.⁵⁶ Set at the fictitious shrine of a Shah Muqem that is nevertheless reminiscent of Lahore’s many Sufi shrines, the *qawwali* juxtaposes traditional tropes of the unattainability of the beloved with new imagistic symbols: the mulberry, the silkworm’s labor, the sensuality of silk fabric on skin, and the fetishization of kohl-lined eyes. One can designate this an experimental,

avant-gardist *qawwali*, at least on the level of its symbolism, which fuses the traditional imagery of the traditional lyrics with startling and unexpected tropes. Its refrain includes the lyrics “The waves in love’s ocean surge and crash,” but “It’s not easy to find a path to the Beloved.” As the *qawwali* builds in intensity toward a state of *hāl* (spiritual immersion), the sequence cuts to a grim-faced government official traveling by car, who arrives at the shrine and informs Chitta’s father that his son perished while attempting the *dunki*, as the *qawwali* reaches a crescendo. The beloved remains an elusive ideal, in whose quest many young men have sacrificed themselves in succession during the course of the film.

REVISITING THE LAHORE EFFECT

Contemporary Pakistani cinema continues to suffer from multiple crises: not simply those of infrastructure, patronage, and distribution, which may be resolved as the industry grows in scale, but more fundamental predicaments of form, memory, and critical reception. As Ali Nobil Ahmad has wryly noted, by sidestepping these crucial issues, much of what passes for New Cinema is “unabashed about looking good without burdening audiences with unnecessary brain activity.”⁵⁷ Much of New Cinema ends up relying on, and even quoting verbatim, Bollywood, Hollywood, and advertising stereotypes or at best re-creating the stodgy temporality and upper-middle-class liberalism of the television serial as a feature film.

But what form of critical cinema is adequate for contemporary local *and* global predicaments? Which historical media and cultural forms remain salient for addressing today’s increasingly urbanized subjectivity in Pakistan, shaped unevenly as it is by neoliberal forces but also through lived and remembered familial habitus and from cultural memories inherited and learned from widely disparate media? This is hopefully where filmmakers will venture beyond the hackneyed manner in which they have addressed a rather limited number of themes so far—feudal patriarchy, women’s oppression, fundamentalism and terrorism, and thwarted individualist aspiration—which all repeatedly find mythic resolution in accordance with the pervasive liberal upper-class norms of the New Cinema.

The analysis above delineates only some of the distinctive features of *Zinda Bhaag*, but even this cursory engagement should underscore the considerable critical ambition of the film. It deploys diverse registers of historical and contemporary forms from the long sixties and beyond to marshal a new self-reflexive cinematic assemblage. *Zinda Bhaag* is itself perhaps

engaged in a kind of *dunky*, a consequential and risky journey charting a critical future for Pakistani cinema itself. This is a future in which narrative form is critically rethought, where a fuller range of social, cultural, and media references from across South Asia and beyond are engaged reflexively and in resonance with the lifeworlds of its intended audience, and where aesthetic and social issues are addressed in their emergent complexity.

Made five decades after the other films examined in the previous chapters, *Zinda Bhaag* serves as an important instantiation of the Lahore effect in the present era, in which the narration of realism is inextricable from the foray into the imagination that is enacted by the considerable legacy of South Asian theatrical and mediatized forms. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has suggested that in the Lahore effect, “films quote one other, fold inside each other, or hover over each other. Every film, thus seen, becomes a history of the cinema. Remakes, along with other forms of a haunting cultural survival . . . become crucial here.”⁵⁸ This modality has incorporated reflexivity and recursivity within the commercial feature film itself, rather than seeking these primarily in art, alternative, or avant-garde cinema—which did not have a substantial legacy in Pakistan’s cinema.

If cinema associated with Pakistan is to move forward beyond congealed stereotypes to embrace new technological, infrastructural, social, and aesthetic terrains, one way to do so might be to critically reexamine the present moment with awareness of the extensive formal, narrative, and imaginative resources of earlier media forms from South Asia. The Lahore effect was never confined to the city of Lahore itself but was expressed as a modality across South Asia, especially in Bombay cinema, during the mid-twentieth century. A significant potentiality for future South Asian cinemas from various locations and contributors is one that activates cross-border linkages—in production arrangements, distribution circuits, and formal and narrative audience appeal—and that remains indifferent or at an angle to the blandishments of majoritarian and nation-state ideologies. This is a cinematic mode that imbricates realism and fable and resonates with the affective moral universe of multiple publics. Its extended and episodic unfolding has constituted among the most significant developments in popular culture in the modern era, in South Asia and beyond, and its capacious potential awaits future realizations.