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Bypassing Television: Media Story at the nation's edge

by

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Bypassing Television: Media Story at the nation's edge

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Who objects to music? Only orthodox ones. Maulvis (clerics) will object. Not all Muslims. Those who haven't studied Urdu, the Qur'an, won't object. Music is not heretical to Islam, I say that! Or else! Khawaja Saheb wouldn't have listened Qawwali! Bulle Shah wouldn't have worn bangles and danced. Bulle Shah's Guru had told him.... You can attain God by dancing. So he started dancing and found God! If I sing Bulle Shah's poetry.... who does the poem attack..... The maulvi, the cleric. The one who reads the prayers in the mosques, it will sting him. They are the ones who have banned music, not Allah! If song was banned in the home of Allah, he wouldn't have made singers. (Had-Anhad, 2008)

This paper---more in the nature of meditative reflection born of a personal encounter --- examines the problematic perception of television in Banni --- a rural, remote and Islamic region in Gujarat, India. It contextualizes the intertwining contexts of religion, gender, nation and language that mediate Banni's relationship (or lack of it) with television. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the paper shows how access to forms of modernity through television and viewership are denied to women, as patriarchal hegemony claims to adhere to religious and cultural norms, that apparently apply mostly to women. Given a problematic relationship with television, the Muslim women and men in Banni have forged long-lasting and 'optimal' relationship with the radio and cellphones respectively, and have quietly circumvented media content associated with televisions. If the context of Islam and patriarchy lends a touch of discomfort and silence to the use of media, especially television, hectic and fully acknowledged activity

surrounds the use of media (radio, television and cellphones) for keeping up dialogue with Sindh in the neighbouring territory of Pakistan.

Section I provides a quick socio-cultural background to Banni. Section II surveys the media geography of Banni, with special emphasis on radio, television and cellphone. The three media intersect with each other and also define for the people of Banni media experiences through technologies in urban India. Section III focuses attention on Banni's strange negotiation with television and radio. In particular, I am interested ---- specific issues that emerge in Banni's dealings with media community and 'cultural citizenship' (Toby Miller 2001), and the gendering of media-use. I argue that ambiguous relations between legal citizenship and emotional citizenship in another geography takes place through technology, and the Banni story of media provides a fascinating critique on boundary-making. The metaphor of boundaries is also useful to understand how by keeping technology out of bounds for women, the men of Banni create discrepant and discriminatory experiences of modernity.

I

Unknown and invisible place to most in India, on the extreme western border of the state of Gujarat, where the vast Runn of Kutch separates India from Pakistan lies the region of Banni. Historically a grassland, Banni is now a vast expanse of cracked earth and dry shrubs. Its villages are scattered sparsely over an area of 840 square kilometers, and access to them requires sturdy private transport. Unremitting heat and aridity combined with poor

infrastructure does not make Banni an obvious destination for tourists. Moreover, Banni is patrolled by the Border Security Force, and Non-Indian visitors require a special permission to visit the area. As for people living in India, you do not go to Banni unless there is a special reason to, for the place is remote and does not fall on the way to any destination. It is visited by only by those who specially wish to visit ---- for making documentaries or studying desert conditions or handicrafts, or for defense and military personnel.

My first visit to Banni was also a purposeful one – with a view to meet its first writer, Kaladhar Mutwa. The Mutwas are one of the twenty odd Muslim communities living in Banni. My intersection with Kaladhar was through the Sindhi language which I have in common with the people of Banni. Sindhi is a language with diminishing use in India. Its origins lie in the region of Sindh, Pakistan. Hence to find a new writer in Sindhi who narrates an unknown and rural part of the world had taken the urban literary community by surprise. In 2006 when I first met Kaladhar Mutwa, I was in the final stages of my own work on the Sindhi-speaking Hindus and their displacement from Sindh in the wake of the Partition in 1947(Kothari 2007). I had not met a single Sindhi-speaking Muslim in India, less so from the hinterlands. In the years that followed (2006-2010) I undertook a sociological study of Banni and its people, and this paper focusing upon the media in Banni is an offshoot of a much larger study on the society, culture and political economy of the region.

Meanwhile, the community of Mutwas that Kaladhar belongs to traces, like all other communities in Banni, its origins to the Thar Parker region of Sindh.¹ The different communities in Banni such as the Raysipotas, Halepotas, Mutwas, Nodas etc. have slightly varying versions of when their ancestors came from Sindh to Gujarat, but what remains unchanged is the myth of origins. The people of Banni are cattle-breeders, known locally as maldharis. Historically they would live in Banni grassland from some part of the year and graze their cattle, and go over to their homes in Thar Parker when the season changed. Over the centuries, as the desert of Kutch extended its boundaries into Banni leading to severe ecological changes, the nomads became settler communities. However, the physical movement between Banni and Sindh continued because it was to the minds of the cattle breeders *the same place*. This consciousness continues to persist in Banni, albeit in vestigial forms. In 1965 when the international border between India and Pakistan along with the Rann of Kutch was consolidated and barbed fences erected to disallow any illegal movement, the people of Banni had to make serious adjustments to their idea of the nation. Despite their physical existence in India, their cultural world is formed by the idea of Sindh as their nation. This idea has very little to do with the Islamic state of Pakistan, but the smaller villages in Thar Parker, especially a district called Badhin. Almost all the families in Banni have relatives in and around Badhin. Through collective consciousness, families trace centuries old history in Sindh, and create through their life and memories a little part of Pakistan that has accidentally landed in India. Although all the communities in Banni are highly literate in the oral tradition, Kaladhar is the first person to narrate the region in

¹ For a fine understanding of the Mutwa community through its women and the embroidery work they do, see Michelle Hardy (2002) *Embroidering at the edge : Mutwa women and Change*

written literature, and his novels create, like Thomas Hardy, a nation in narration.² However, as we shall see, this narration itself is not as simple as we (or Homi Bhabha think it is).

During the course of our first meeting, he had recited Sufi verses and also read out to me a story about the earthquake in Kutch. At the centre of the story was a wife who witnessed her husband using inferior material for constructing buildings which then led to the deaths of hundreds during the earthquake. While I was struck by the sensitivity of the story, I was also disturbed by how his narration related the reasons why such calamities take place. The main reason, said his story, was nature's retribution when women do not observe *pardah* and watch 'too much' television. He told me later that his community followed the principles of Ahl-e-Hadith, and followed stringently the original sayings of the Prophet. The Ahl-e-Hadith version of Islam prohibited entertainment in any form----- music, dance and poetry. The only musical instrument that followers of Hadith allow is the tambourine or duff (frame drum without cymbals) When Kaladhar was relating this to me, he had just returned from a conference on Sufism in Delhi and had brought with him volumes of Sindh's famous sufi, Shah Abdul Latif. I did wonder about the contradiction between his penchant for Sufi poetry and music, and adherence to a textuality that would make the former suspect. The problematic consumption of media revealed through the episode I

² Barely ten out of 30,000 in Banni would have studies beyond the 12th grade. My experience of observing educational matters in Banni shows how difficult it is to both run a school as well as attend one when a vast linguistic and cultural chasm lay between institutions and its supposed beneficiaries. Most people in Banni prefer *padvun* (to study the Quran) over *bhanvu* (to study formally). By the first they refer to the madrasa learning they willingly and unmistakably do for the first ten years of their lives. By the second they refer to the formal education they receive from the Gujarat State through government-aided schools. The education imparted in such schools is in Gujarati, a language children of Banni do not understand, and given the distance and isolation of the region, both teachers and students feel equally reluctant to attend the school.

related lay in the subterranean corner of my mind, to re-emerge on another occasion. At the time of the first meeting, I was relieved to have found simply the presence of cell-phone technology that had made it possible for me to find him, and thought little of its social mediation in the lives of the people.

Of about 30, 000 people living in the region, at least twenty five thousand people are Muslims. They follow hybrid socio-religious practices, inherited from the linguistic and geographical legacies of Sindh in Pakistan. Long-standing regional practices co-exist with, and are sometimes in conflict, with Islamic reform that Banni got exposed to through indoctrination from the Deoband School of Islam. The men are cattle breeders, and own some of the best cattle in the state of Gujarat. The women help the men in looking after the cattle, and drawing milk, in addition to cooking and cleaning the homes, and raising children. In a day full of arduous activities, they also sometimes make time to embroider, creating some of the finest embroidery in the world. While Muslims constitute 90% of Banni's population, and provide in many ways the social template for others to follow, the rest 10% are formed by the Dalit community of Meghwals and a small smattering of a community called 'waadas,' whose religious practices remains unclear (See Kothari, 2010). What remains common to all the communities living in Banni is the Sindhi language, and the fact that they share the same cultural references to idioms, riddles, folk-songs and sufi poetry. This sets them apart from 'Gujarati,' the official language of Gujarat, as well as languages such as Hindi and English. This linguistic insularity plays a very crucial role in the way Banni responds, by and large, only to media in Sindhi. The fact that Banni is a cohesive and insular region, operating only in and through the Sindhi

language, also makes Sindh its source of linguistic and cultural sustenance. It is also important to keep in the mind the fact that Banni's media response and experience is out of its context as an extremely patriarchal region, and one moving from fluid Sufi practices to austere forms of Islam.

Of the many visits I had made to Banni and continue to make, the one that has played a crucial role in this paper was in the winter of 2008. I had taken with me six students specializing in media and marketing from the Murdra Institute of Communications for a study tour. As our jeeps turned into Banni after a 60 kilometer drive from the nearest railway station, I heard someone from the students' group remark, "This looks like a media dark area." I realized how conspicuous was the absence of posters, images, and film songs in Banni. And yet a music CD with Sindhi songs from Pakistan is copied and sold in quantities of eight to nine thousand in Banni and also other parts of Kutch. A new song in Sindhi language written and composed in Pakistan reaches Banni the same day and becomes a part of people's consciousness in no time. Every child and adult in Banni knows verbatim the Sufi verses of Sindh, adding a layer of literary and cultural register to every conversation, trivial or sublime, in Banni. How would a media-dark region be so sentient to the transmission and distribution of oral material, patterns in embroidery, and music CDs that travel despite surveillance from the state? Banni was clearly not responding to what my students had understood as media, and yet it had its own negotiation with media which had yet to be discovered and understood. The ubiquitous nature of oral tradition in Banni formed by the cultural memory of Sufi songs and stories shapes in very concrete ways the production and consumption of media there. However, this vibrant and thriving media

transmission and dissemination is not taught in the curricula of media schools, and seldom figures as “media” in institutional discourses. The students were also responding to the fact you do not hear a single film song in the entire region. The most obvious but inadequate explanation would be Banni’s isolation from urban centres, so that the nearest cinema hall is at least 70 kms away. The people of Banni would have to take a private vehicle and go to the town of Bhuj to watch a film. Alternatively they would have to go up to the village of Bhirindiyara, which serves as a convenient point for taking a bus or hitching a ride to Bhuj. This effort is an enormous one; for some of the villages are in the interiors, fairly distant from Bhirindiyara. The physical distance provides only a logistical explanation to the absence of the films in any form in Banni. It is only through an intimate entry into the lives of Banni, does one realize that films carry a baggage of tremendous social disapproval. The men of Banni, in their various travels to the urban centres, which they make for selling milk and miscellaneous purposes, may watch an occasional film or two. However such instances are few and far between and do not form a part of their conversations with the larger community. The silence around such activities was unearthed after I had made several visits to the region, and could be trusted with the knowledge that some of the men I was interacting with were familiar with contemporary film stars. Tucked away in homes that remain invisible to human race, the women spend their entire lives within their boongas. When I explained this to the students, they surmised that people would then be watching television at home. The students from an elite media and communications school I had taken with me would not settle for a situation where “consumers” had no ‘need’ for entertainment. If such is the case with films, what is Banni’s

response to other forms of mass media? The sections below are built out of an attempt to answer that question.

II

Radio:

The most enduring form of media in Banni is the radio. Mazharuddin Mutwa, member of a prestigious family in Banni remembers how the radio came to his house first in 1961. “There must only two or three radios in the entire region of Kutch then. But because my grandfather was a man of the world, chief of the community, he used to meet a lot of urban people. When he used to play the radio at home, everyone around us would gather at our house, and wonder how a human voice spoke from within a box. It had seemed like magic.” Mazharuddin’s grandfather Dada Gulbeg is Banni’s most well-known person. He was the sarpanch of the Mutwa community and respected like a local king in the region. His house even today is the hub for international visitors. Therefore the presence of technology in Mazharuddin’s house needs to be understood in the context of privilege and legacy that Gulbeg’s descendants come with. However, radio became the most democratic and socially acceptable form of media in a large number of homes in Banni. In 1984-85, the Gujarat Government gave a radio set to every panchayat, just as it gave a computer to each panchayat in the 90s. Over 40 panchayats in Banni have computers, but unlike the radio, the computers continue to be used by and associated only with state offices.

The radio is affordable, socially acceptable and helps people keep in touch with what they wish to know. Barely seven households in the entire region of Banni get newspapers (in the Gujarati language). In a region where oral literacy is high, but almost completely absent in the written tradition, print medium remains most irrelevant and inaccessible. On the other hand, the people of Banni listen to stations from Karachi, Hyderabad, Khairpur in Pakistan. As Salam Node remarked, “ We are abreast with every piece of news in Sindh. We may not know what goes on in Bhuj, but we have international news from radio.” The indifference to Bhuj, the nearest urban centre is symptomatic of Banni’s cultural distance from Gujarat, in general and the community’s cultural citizenship with Sindh. As Salam Node further added, “*Gujarat se hamaari mulaqaat hee kam hoti hai,*” meaning, “We seldom meet Gujarat”—a simple way of pointing to psychological inhabitation in another nation. The radio helps people of Banni continue to maintain their everyday links with Sindh, a nation of their origins, and also with the Sindhi language which they improve upon and acquire literary registers by listening to programmes aired from Karachi. If Mazhar taught himself Sindhi songs by listening avidly to the radio, Abdulallah listened to the cricket news in Urdu and can mimic the intonation of a seasoned cricket commentator. What is yet spectacular is the way, another resident of Banni imitate commentary in impeccable English with absolutely no formal or informal exposure to the language. It is possible to find many individuals in Banni who have listened to the radio for over forty years. For instance, Hoorbai Mutwa, a 50 year old woman living in Dordo, mentions listening to Sindhi qafis, poetry and programmes in Sindhi focusing on “good breeding” of women. “ I have been listening to the radio since I was fifteen years old. How many years went by, programmes changed, names changed but I continued to listen they are all vivid

in my mind.” Meanwhile, Hoorbai is Banni’s most respected embroidery artist, a recipient of national awards for embroidery. The only time she stepped out of Banni was to receive the President’s award in Delhi. She grew up and married into the same *waand*³, and remained thus within the limits of the same geographic and social circle. Her connection with the outside world, especially the one across the border, where people are linguistically and culturally like her survives on the Pakistani radio stations she accesses from home. She and many other women in Banni have also learnt the recitation of the Quran through radio. When I asked her whether she watched television, she replied, “*asaankhe sutho na lagando aahe*” The Sindhi words translate into “We do not find it good” in an active voice, but also “It doesn’t behoove us” in a passive construction. (I shall return to the medium of television later in the essay).

Given the presence of the radio as media used by both men and women, I had explored in another visit the role and success of community radio in Banni. Known by the name of Ujjaas radio, the community radio in Kutch was initiated by the organizations Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan. Aimed at drawing women as media producers, KMVS had made several attempts to draw the women of Banni into generating content for the radio. In an interview with Parth Mehta who works with the organization, I was told that the KMVS’s experiments to launch a community radio had largely failed. The Muslims of the region wished to protect their Islamic and linguistic culture, and would not allow the women to participate in volunteering for the radio. The Dalits of the region, although small in number were far more responsive, although they felt apologetic about being liberal. According to

³ An extended family living in the same geographical space or quarter

Preeti Soni, one of the founders of KMVS, Kutch accounted for 66% regular listeners for Ujjaas radio, and 98% constituted partial listeners, although its quite possible not only in Banni but in large parts of Kutch, people prefer listening to Pakistan radio, which is understandable because Sindhi is closer to Kutchi, than Kutchi to Gujarati. Apart from the proximity to language, radio stations from Pakistan also provide the content that makes sense to listeners in Banni. The programmes on Islam, plays, sufi songs provide both linguistically and culturally a world that Banni itself is. Despite Ujjaas radio's efforts to create programmes in "Kutchi" (a language very close to Sindhi), the joy of accessing Sindh in Banni is much higher than listening to programmes on health, hygiene and cattle breeding in one's local language.

On the whole, the radio serves in Banni as the only media with social acceptance for both men and women. While the younger men in Banni have outgrown the uses of the radio; older men and women continue to use it on a continuous basis. The absence of visual images in the radio help maintain distance or purdah between men and women. As Mufti Junaid pointed out, the narrator's voice in a radio does not come with a physical presence. Women can listen to the radio, at least some programmes. But ideally they should not speak in the radio." Despite a long-standing comfort with the radio, the men of Banni prefer to see women as consumers of this media, and not its producers and hence the failure of the community radio efforts mentioned earlier. It is important to remember that the women of Banni listen to discussions on religion, household duties and some plays in Sindh -- all of which is broadcast from Hyderabad and Karachi in Pakistan. They listen to programs in a

language they understand, but they also continue to operate only in the same language, reinforcing their insularity from the rest of Gujarat, if not the country.

Television : The television story of Banni is complex, rife with silences and taboos . The people of Banni describe themselves as ‘parhezi’ (those who abstain) and stay away from television. The Muslim women in Banni communicate the kind of response we heard from Hoorbai Mutwa, which is to say, it is not good for us, or at times, “our mazhab prefers we don’t watch television.” The non-Muslim women also avoid admitting any relation with television. My students Suhasini, Susan and I had visited the Dalit quarters to see if the responses were any different. Sonabai, our chief respondent, was introducing us to other women in the women’s quarters and assuring them that I would not be taking pictures or videos. In the course of my conversation with women about the infrastructural difficulties of Banni, lack of resources, especially water which made every thing appear such indulgence, Sonabai let it slip that their men beat them up if they are found watching T.V. “My father in law is a parhezi. He wouldn’t let us.” She whispered into the ear of every woman she introduced to that we were not to be told about their surreptitious habit of watching T.V. If the women of Banni do not watch television (as is the case with Muslim women) or do not admit even if they occasionally (as was the case with some Dalit women), the men do not have an easy relationship with this medium either. By and large, very few Muslim homes in Banni possess televisions. The ones that do, such as Mehmood Mutwa in the village of Dordo, admit to watching only “select” programmes such as the news, National Geography and some coverage of sufi shrines or Islamic countries. “It becomes difficult to watch anything what with all kinds of advertisements popping up. Its bad for

us, and for our families. So we prefer to watch it only once in a while. We find KTN most attractive because its in our language.”

Television sets are placed in a boonga designated as a baithak, which only men use. Women and children are not allowed in the baithak. It is quite understandable,” remarked a priest based in Ahmedabad.” You have no control over advertisements on television screen, anything can appear on the screen and make an appeal to the devil inside you.” However as a resident of urban India, he mentioned, it was not possible for him to prevent the use of television in his home. According to him the Muslims of Banni have been staunch followers of Islam, and protected their culture not only out of religious reasons, but also to conserve their distinctness as a Sindhi community.

Cultural citizenship – into and of the Sindhi ‘nation’ or culture’ therefore modulates into a gendered context: Why would the anxiety over preserving the religion or Sindhi cultural identity rest only with women? Why are women the custodians of this tradition? I couldn’t help asking this question to Isabhai Mutwa, a senior and respected leader in Banni. “They are innocent and naïve, so they are not in a position to know what is good and what is bad for them,” he mentioned. This view remains unchanged across generations. Mazhar Mutwa, one of the most traveled and knowledgeable of the young men of Banni, and one who critiques by and large the austerity imposed upon Banni Islamic reformist movements also subscribes to a similar view. When I asked him whether little boys and girls are allowed to watch television? “ Yes, they do, so when the girls are very little, they can watch, they get older you are thrown out. My father used to do that, and emulating him I used to do that to my sisters. We would shoo them away, and think of it as great behaviour.

I know its not right, but this is too integral to our community. We need to safeguard our women's *izzat* (honour).”

Thus in the name of *izzat*, women in Banni are kept away from technology. If the location of Banni and social constraints circumscribe their lives in one way, the absence of new technology enhances their insularity. The last technology they used was the radio, which made its arrival in Banni in the -1960s. In the subsequent two decades, Banni witnessed the arrival of computers, landlines, television and cellphones. Computers and landlines almost bypassed Banni, the former required literacy and was therefore not relevant, whereas the difference between the landline and cellphone in terms of a time period was much too little for landlines to take place. Before people could have the infrastructure and wherewithal to book landlines, parts of rural India were exposed to the cell-phone technology.

Cellphones: Like television, cell-phone is also a male media. Women are allowed to use it occasionally under male supervision. While this is not surprising, given the extremities of gender differences in Banni; the social effects of cell-phones in men's lives constitute a fascinating story. It is through the pervasive presence of cell-phones that Banni reflects a changing and changed India. The mobile telephony revolution in India that brought after the 1990s most remote parts of India into the telecommunications network finds one of its most concrete example in this border region. It is possible to come across houses in Banni, as would be the case in other parts of rural India also, where cellphones are more accessible than electricity. The two phone towers in Banni stand incongruously in a landscape filled

with acacia and untrodden patches of desert. This is not to say all the parts of Banni receive active waves uniformly. However, it is increasingly difficult to find any male in the region without a cellphone. While this may have parallels in other parts of the country, what is most striking is the way the young men of Banni use multi-media phones and make use of the Bluetooth, games and internet facilities. In fact the men of Banni make very sophisticated use of the assembled Chinese models they buy (Athlekar and Krishnamurthy 2008). They download movie clips and watch films, and compensate for their inability (both logistical and cultural) to watch cinema on the television or in the cinema halls in cities. The men quietly access websites, and sometimes create them through each other's help, download software, conduct the business of milk and handicraft and make the cell-phone their road to mainstream India. They circumvent the hurdles of written literacy by making use of visual symbols in the cell-phone and in truly entrepreneurial ways, have turned the cell-phone into a one-stop-shop entertainment gadget cum phone. The profound economic and social effects this may have trigger are difficult to enumerate now, it is easy to see how the young men of Banni have set themselves apart not only from their forefathers but their wives and daughters who live with them, but not necessarily in the same time zone. The distance between men and women is amplified by cellphones, and forms of modernity that men have managed for themselves are simply not available to women.

III

What emerges out of the complex and localized story of media in Banni is that the visual medium remains the least legitimate and acceptable one. Names from popular culture such as Amitabh Bachan and Shah Rukh Khan may perhaps be familiar to women, but upon asking if they had seen any posters or photographs, they claim not to have. Cinema halls are far away, and require a physical movement out of Banni for men. As far as women are concerned, they remain completely out of bounds of even imagination. Hence films do not even constitute any possibility of existence or discussion within the Banni household. On the other hand, Television is accessible to many families in Banni, hence T.V sets have been bought although placed discreetly. Images of television such as popularly circulated advertisements, soaps, reality shows that would appear pan-Indian from middle class's point of view find no viewership in Banni. While the men have access to technology from both India and Pakistan, and to that extent, a participation in bi-national media spheres, the women are allowed 'select' Sindhi programmes on the radio. The absence of "pan-Indian" programmes through any technology reinforces in the lives of women a continuity with Sindh.

At its most fundamental level, the perception of television as a source of disruption stems from the fear of the seductive power of the audio-visual medium. The social disapproval about television in this region must be contextualized as discomfort with a specific understanding of entertainment ---- an onrush of alluring images and sounds that spectators have no control over, but are believed to carry within them a threat to the cultural and

religious health of the spectator. It is also to do with a peculiar reading of the medium : as a source mainly of entertainment rather than say, information or education. Technological ‘modernity’ here is conflated with the regime of the visual as frivolous entertainment.

The absence and/or unacknowledged presence of television in the Muslim households in Banni begs for a simultaneous examination of both gender and religion. The men of Banni cite their affiliation to an austere strand of Islam – Ah-Le-Hadith – based upon the original sayings of the Prophet and explain away the taboo on art and entertainment. Since the last two decades or more, most communities in Banni have moved from hybrid practices (formed through regional conventions, Hinduism, Sufism, Islam) to textualised pan-Islamic reforms. Their visits to pirs and shrines have decreased, and they are indoctrinated in the pursuit of proper Islam by Muslim clergy visiting them especially from Madrasas in the Uttar Pradesh. As a result, women who traditionally sang at weddings now play only the tape-recorders and are not allowed to sing. The men have stopped organizing among themselves or participating in mehfiles where traditionally verses from Sindh’s sufi poetry would be recited and sung. This austerity and its consequences upon women singers and performers especially in Egypt has received scholarly attention (See Nieurkerk, 1995). Scholars mention how visual iconography of women in particular becomes the locus of unease in Islam. In his examination of women dancers in Cairo, Van Neurkerk mentions that “ women are thus generally perceived as more enticing than men and excitement aroused by looking is considered more powerful than excitement aroused by listening.” (Nieurkerk 1995 : ?, also see Abu Lughod, 2007) This makes television more threatening than the radio, compelling Isabhai Mutwa to say, “ Hum T.V. nahin dekhte hain, who

hamaare andar ka shaitan jagata hai.” Isabhai’s acknowledgement of the seductive power of the television is conveyed in a more euphemistic manner by Mutfi Junaid, “ Television *ki Islam mein sakht mana hai. Iss se aurat mard ka purdah toot jaata hai.*” According to him, television encourages a violation of purdah by exposing “us” (read, men) to gair (unrelated) women. “Once T.V. is on, we have no control over this. They put advertisement even in a Haj programme. *Bepurdah auratein kissi bhi cheez ki numaish kar ke chali jaati hain.*” The unease about female sexuality betrayed in Mufti Junaid’s words may explain why austere male viewers may not wish to watch television. It does not justify the parhez or abstinence that women viewers must observe. According to Isabhai Mutwa, “ Women do not have discretion. They are naïve and innocent. They will not know what to watch and what not to watch. Its our responsibility to take care of their culture.” The collapsing of Islamic culture and Sindhi culture of Banni remains unnoticed in such statements. What also gets obfuscated is the fear that Banni women may watch other kinds of women and may acquire some wrong ideas of living. What is clear and acknowledged is the fact that whatever the culture of Banni might be, women are its chief custodians. They are assumed to carry the responsibility of maintaining purity of traditions, although they are not perceived to be adult enough to know how traditions need to be sustained. The woman here, stereotypically, is the ‘boundary marker’ (McClintock 1995), the repository of traditional values and beliefs. The threat to men is by female sexuality, the unstated threat to women is female freedom that men in Banni must not expose their women to. That women might want to watch other women --- and therefore acquire a different role as the ‘female spectator’ ----- is even more unacceptable, one would think, to see Banni’s patriarchy in operation.

Patriarchy collaborates with religion and prohibits women from watching television. The men watch select programmes and keep the television sets in the *otak*.⁴ They prefer not to be watched while watching and in general, maintain silence on the subject. If television watching is a taboo, it is also a public act, the men run the danger of being watched. In a strange twisting of the very idea of the public, men watchers are under surveillance in the very space that is identified, by the patriarchal set up, as ‘public.’ Cellphones on the other hand allow a private view outside the home. The film clips and songs that men cannot watch on televisions without feeling a sense of awkwardness, they download on to their cellphones. Thus the rural men of Banni bypass both television and computer screens and settle for a tinier but safer cellphone screen on multi-media Chinese phones smuggled or assembled in Indian markets. Televisions are not only public, but exclusively objects of entertainment. Cellphones are personal necessities, needed especially in a small region for connecting with the outside world. What you watch on a cellphone may also be construed or explained as a by-product of a tool whose primary function is utility, not entertainment.

So far we have discussed Banni’s negotiation with different media in the context of religion and gender. However Banni is also on the border of one nation and tantalizingly close to another. It is a part of Kutch, a princely state in colonial India but consolidated as a district in the linguistic state of Gujarat in 1960. Historically Kutch had more in common with Sindh than with central Gujarat, and to that extent, one layer of Banni’s insularity is formed

⁴ An Otak, also known as *baithak* in some Indian languages is a meeting place where men of the house meet male visitors. Women do not enter in to this part of the house, built at times, slightly away from women’s room.

by Kutch as a region culturally distant from Gujarat, but no means marginal in international trade and immigration(See Rushbrook, 1999). Kutch continues to have a subterranean layer of Sindhi in its language, in its fascination for ajrakh, poetry and folk tales that have their origins across the border. Not just Banni, but entire Kutch is mediated through people, textiles, poetry, radio and cellphones that travel between India and Pakistan. Some links are explicit, some are not, as responses to bounded states that wants its citizens to have no relations with “enemy” cultures (See Ibrahim, 2008). Every house and every individual in Banni is in some way or the other connected with Pakistan. Language, history and cultural memory take Banni beyond the state’s official borders and appear as a threatening relationship to the state. It is not unusual for the BSF to beef up its surveillance on phone calls and block services in Banni every now and then. The discourse of security built around such connectivity elides over the fact that in terms of culture and language, Banni is really an extension of Thar Parker. Torn asunder by the arbitrariness of border-making, the people of Banni and their cattle had to suddenly reconcile with a stationary life on “this” side of the border. However, as things stand, an environment of exclusive identities of both nations and religions makes the transborder dimension to Banni’s media appears as a “problem,” and not the triumph of technology over political borders.

In fact the media story of Banni provides a critique of the State and its undifferentiated understanding of highly specific, local and rural communities. As mentioned in the earlier section of this essay Banni’s alienation from mainstream and popular media flows, among other things, from its position as a region of linguistic minority. While Sindhi has been given the official recognition as one of the minor languages in the state of Gujarat, school

education in Banni is entirely in Gujarati. Similarly all mainstream media is either in Gujarati for regional programmes, and Hindi or English for the so called pan Indian programmes. Thus neither the market nor the State are taking account of the language that the people of Banni understand or relate with. Government campaigns for issues of health, hygiene and education in Banni also tend to be in Gujarati. As a consequence of this alienation, when the people of Banni relate with Sindhi programmes across the border their media habits are misjudged as being anti national. If Banni is a critique of the State seeking homogenous definitions, it is also a critique of other institutions working with and without the State. For instance, the response of students from a media and communications school that had not taught them subtle and invisible reading of media habits. Similarly, one of the volunteers associated with community radio stated that “Banni has no need for media,” betraying a surface understanding of the local context that makes Banni not respond to same media, but intensively to some other.

It may be worth asking why an atypical and local story such as the one of media in Banni needs to be told. As mentioned earlier Banni’s negotiation with media is one of the many expressions through which I have attempted to study a region remote and away from all academic discourses. The atypicality of the region does not allow me to make large generalizations about television or cellphones in South Asia. However the local and specific enactment may help us to make more tentative generalizations not only about media, but people who live on psychological and physical borders of the State and middle class consciousness. The Banni community, on the other hand, retains a geographical contiguity across international borders, and manages a cultural citizenship with Pakistan

and the Sindh region rather than India. If we were to think of the community-communication alignment here, we are faced with this curious ‘connection’ of a community spread across multiply fragmented, even hostile, territory but united through cultural citizenship, achieved, among other things, through technology.

Banni also happens to be at the cusp of sameness and change. It maintains and perpetuates its regional, religious and linguistic uniqueness. At the same time its insularity is likely to be seriously challenged by compelling forces of development and globalization within the State of Gujarat. The current Chief Minister, Narendra Modi’s drive to promote Kutch as a fertile region for tourism and industry has begun to show some ramifications for Banni also. The annual festival of the desert called *Rann-mahotsav* is held in Dordo, the last village on the international border in Banni. It brings officers, tourists and marketers from all the corners of the State . The ripples caused by thus attention will have implications for Banni, and in that they may help modify or change its political economy and social moves. The media story may well get modified in the times to come and before homogenizing forces lay a claim to it, it is crucial to understand the heterogeneous contexts of the region.

In sum, multiple contexts ---- nations, language, religion and gender --- form a complex and thick context of Banni’s negotiation with media. It also helps provide legitimacy to certain media, and not to some others, so that different media such as the radio, television, computer and cellphones do not operate in the lives of people as neutral representations of technology. For the male users of television and cell phones in Banni technology is a male

prerogative and means of control. Its access needs to be earned for its constitutes both cultural and political capital. The opportunity to access is not even made available to women. While the denial of modernity through technology is not peculiar only to Banni, the combination of other factors such as language, nation and religion does create an extremely intricate and unusual story. What needs to be underscored in all instances is that the television, cell phones, radios etc are objects invested with social meanings, and units in an interconnected design, negating and reinforcing each other's presence

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