



## Devotional Video CDs in the Islamic shrine market

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This presentation looks at a few samples of devotional videos available in the shrine markets of north India, normally purchased by pilgrims and local devotees to watch at their homes, shops or even inside buses and trucks. This selection features a cross section of locations, ideologies and popular visual idioms prevalent among the north Indian Muslims, ranging from the *bulava* (beckoning) songs of Sufi shrines, and saint's biographies to orthodox sermons and even light-hearted copying of film music. This presentation tries to map the flow of concepts, cultural icons and pilgrimage sites via these videos by plotting them on an interactive map where one can see the



- (1) Location of the shrines or sites promoted by the video
- (2) Location of the production company
- (3) Location/sites of the shooting (real outdoor site as well as a staged set)
- (4) Location where these videos are finally available for sale
- (5) What 'foreign' or non-native concepts, media techniques and fragments the videos use to make them attractive and effective for storytelling.

The video shops stock the titles of several brands such as SONIC, CHISHTI, CHINAR and SHREE, to name a few. They showcase a mix of different music genres and videos such as those of Islamic devotional, the orthodox school, the renowned scholar Dr. Zakir Naik, the Quranic verses and Hindi films as well, to name a few! However, the company-owned outlets like SONIC stock only the self-produced Muslim devotional products (shrine-related and those belonging to the orthodox school, like naats, religious discourses and Quranic verses). The shops outside the Nizamuddin shrine are also frequented by the followers of Tableeghi and Wahhabi movements, who buy videos of the orthodox school. Many temporary shops set up on pavements at night after the main market closes in the old city, stock titles of many brands of both Muslim and Hindu devotional videos and Hindi films as well.

Amongst the varied offerings, the videos on the Ajmer Sharif shrine are well-liked by a majority of people. Other popular videos include the shrines of Sabir Kaliyari, Bakhtiyar Kaki and Hazrat Nizamuddin. It is not very common in Delhi to see productions from southern parts of India. One shopkeeper explained the rationale for this – firstly due to a language barrier, and secondly, the difference in tastes. The orthodox school videos such as those by Dr. Zakir Naik and the Quranic verses have gained immense popularity among the majority of people. This can be attributed to the growing influence of the Tableeghi and Wahhabi schools on the urban and rural Muslim population. These schools reject Sufism and focus purely on a puritanic version of Islam. There is one more category of videos worth mentioning - the videos from Pakistan, such as naats by Owais Qadri and Sufi devotional qawwalis

like “Mast Qalandar”, which have been doing good rounds. The film videos are popular, however mostly in the main market and the roadside shops.

#### What do the videos promote?

Product promotion is dependent on various factors: the point of sale, the commission that the shopkeeper would get from selling a particular product or brand, the available stock, fast moving videos (based on popular demand) and whether or not the outlet is company owned/operated.

Shops outside the shrine stock a bigger percentage of videos related to the shrine and religious discourses such as the ones given by Dr. Zakir Naik and various Quranic verses. Visitors to these places comprise of pilgrims, tourists or Tableeghis. They display an assortment of VCDs/DVDs and also run the videos on TV screens in the shop to attract prospective buyers. The videos played usually are the fast moving ones, new arrivals or relevant to the specific time of the year. For instance, during Urs, one would find videos associated with the rituals and those elevating the saint being played regularly. However, the company-owned and operated outlets like SONIC only play their own products based on their observation of popular demand.

The videos are also promoted through advertisements on local channels on cable TV posters at the outlet and the word of mouth. Videos are also distributed strategically to shops in various areas and regions based on demand. A few production houses such as SONIC (Delhi) and Shree (Ajmer) conduct market surveys to evaluate popular demand and take the feedback of customers and shop keepers.

The videos combine the use of popular music and technology to create a ‘make believe’ atmosphere. The videos are usually in praise of the buried saint and feature his miracles, his association with God and the Prophet. The songs are often sung with repetitive lines like “I am crazy for Khwaja” and that “One should visit the shrine if one wants to get rid of problems in life”. Such themes create curiosity amongst the listeners to know more about the shrine and to visit as well.

The videos use popular religious images of the Ka’ba at Mecca and other icons. They also show current (and sometimes new) practices at the shrine. Coupled with these is the use of visual effects such as dancing stars or myriads of colours in a montage to cater to consumer taste. This captivates the viewers and makes them curious about the saint, the shrine and the miracles that were performed. These videos create a feel-good vibe; inspire a hope for a better life and a resolution of their problems. These tactics boost the demand for such videos. Screening of these videos is a social event in communities, and is quite popular amongst women, especially housewives. One interviewee said, “I watch a VCD when I am alone or feeling lonely. Watching the VCD I find peace. I watch the VCD whenever I face a problem in life. I hope that the Sufi will listen to us and pray to Allah (God) as his prayers will get answered first and ours later”.

The videos usually contain a mix of indoor and outdoor shooting, which illustrate present rituals and practices at the shrines and enhance their popularity and acceptance. However, at times the videos showcase practices thus far unknown. For

example, a video on the Ajmer shrine released in 2009 showed pilgrims kiss one of the walls of the sanctum sanctorum like it is done at the Ka'ba in Mecca.

### Who produces them?

The videos are produced by companies such as CHINAR, SHREE, SONIC, CHISHTI etc. with low production cost mostly through illegal recordings (to evade tax and liscencing etc.) done in studios in old Delhi and in outskirt areas like Jagat Puri, Laxmi Nagar, Seelampur, where there is no monitoring. It is ironical that all video covers carry the "Copyright" mark! Usually these videos are mixed with an outdoor shoot of various shrines.

The owners also get shooting/recordings done at studios in other smaller cities. The outdoor shoot is generally completed in a span of two to three days whereas the studio recording is completed in one day. The music composition and recording of songs takes roughly one to two weeks. The production houses have a permanent production team; however the artists, writers and music composers may vary from album to album. (See an interview of a casual actor Shakila from old Delhi who acted in one of the Islamic devotional videos). The artists too, are from a small group that gets repeated in various videos and recordings.

Album covers are designed taking inspiration from popular images of Mecca and Medina, images from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, movie posters, marriage CD covers etc. It is left to the designer to come up with a cover to suit the album title, the theme and the popular taste.

Production quality varies from one company to the next. For instance, SONIC sells more due to better VCD quality, innovative ideas and superior camera work – they take shots of the shrine from unusual angles never seen before!

### What kind of media were the devotees using before the VCDs?

In pre-liberalization India (pre-1990), devotional videos were limited to sequences in Hindi films where a protagonist, often in distress, was depicted visiting a Hindu temple or a Sufi shrine, while some were studio recordings televised on the state-owned television channel Doordarshan.<sup>1</sup>

Muslim devotional songs were based on traditional compositions and usually comprised of studio recordings showing traditionally dressed qawwals or their live performances at Sufi shrines.

These low budget films were a big source of reaching out to a large audience. These films usually had an ensemble of older or not so popular actors and were released in the form of video cassettes as well. One can trace the history of such films to as early as 1946, when the film "Nek Parveen" was released, to the 1980s with releases like "Namaz ki Barkat".

With the opening up of the Indian economy in 1990 – generally referred to as the period of 'liberalisation' - the influence of western culture on the larger audience increased significantly, finding expression in a "Remix culture" in the early 90s. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Doordarshan* (literally meaning Distant Vision) is the public television broadcaster of India.

culture of overseas Indian communities started to influence the indigenous population and in the process “Punjabi Remixes” were born. These remixes modified traditional tunes by incorporating western beats, clothes and dance styles. These remixes were an instant hit among large numbers of consumers. This success probably inspired companies like T-Series<sup>2</sup> to harness this huge market. They first released remixes of old Hindi film songs and soon followed it up with ‘larger than life’ Hindu devotional videos. These videos had devotional songs based on Hindi film music and used outdoor shootings of pilgrims travelling to various Hindu shrines. The astounding success of these videos caught the fancy of Muslim devotional video film makers, who soon jumped on to the band wagon.

The production of Muslim devotional music videos probably started sometime in the mid 80s. This researcher first heard a Muslim devotional song based on the hit music of the Hindi film “*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*” on the song “*Didi Tera Dewar Deewana*” in 1995 during my visit to shrine of Hazrat Qutbuddin R.A. at Mehrauli, Delhi. Out of curiosity, I went to the stall selling these and much to my surprise found several such cassettes available. The seller confirmed to me that this was a recent phenomenon. The music videos were also being produced in Mumbai at that time by companies like Venus.

#### What new techniques and special effects are being used in the media? Where do they come from?

The technology used in these videos has changed with time. It has graduated from being mere studio recordings of Qawwals to the use of software effects like light emanating from the shrine or light falling on it, floating stars, flowers, mixing of natural sceneries with various images and use of Islamic images interspersed with studio and outdoor recordings. Some of the videos are dramatised versions of incidents, miracles performed by the saint and these use technology to create a dreamy effect. The technology used borrows ideas from Hindu devotional videos, marriage videos and technology effects used in Pakistan. In turn Indian ideas flow back to Pakistan and find a place in Pakistani devotional videos.

Some Shiite devotional videos used clips from Hollywood or other mainstream movies, mainly of war scenes and marching armies.

There is a shift from the use of traditional instruments to western musical instruments like the keyboard, guitars, drums, etc. Music is a mix of Punjabi tunes and those from Hindi film music mixed with some new compositions. There are songs where there is no coverage of traditional or original compositions.

They are new compositions based on public demand and draw inspiration from Hindi films & music, the Pakistani music industry and Hindu devotional videos (for example, ‘*Chalo Bulawa Aaya Hai*’ and clapping of hands like one does in ‘Bhajans’). One of the songs ended with a traditional ‘Namaskar’). Sufis doing bhangra dance is a complete transformation from the original Sufi dervish dance (this was observed

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<sup>2</sup> T-Series Company introduced videos were exceedingly imposing, impressive esp. in appearance or forcefulness. The videos showed frenzy and environment, which one would not otherwise not come across in real life.

in Pakistani devotional videos as well. In all probability this style of dance migrated from Pakistan to India).

There is a growing trend of using women dressed up in gaudy outfits with heavy makeup and jewellery as lead artists. The protagonists dance and gesticulate like film heroines.

Any influence or copying from Pakistan or other countries? Any influence from Bombay film industry?

Some of the ideas flow from across the border while some are indigenous - such as Mata darshan (glimpse of the deity) that is done by devotees who travel to the temple of Vaishno Devi above the town of Katra in Jammu & Kashmir. Some also come via marriage videos or simply an artist's creativity. The videos produced are distributed to shops and sellers across the city and across states. The pilgrims purchase the videos and carry them back home, where they distribute them as gifts or show them to family, relatives and friends.

The drivers of taxis, buses and trucks also play these videos while traveling, and in the process make them available far and wide. The drivers purchase and carry these videos on request for people in far away states, creating a flow and exchange of ideas to create newer videos. In addition, the ongoing media trade between India and its neighbouring countries like Pakistan influences the production of videos in terms of style, music and art direction. For instance it is very popular in Pakistan to use Hindi film music. Similarly, there are instances where the Indian producers like Shree use Pakistani videos about shrines after mixing them with studio recordings done in India. In one instance, a Pakistani devotional music video had the influence of Arabian music in it. It is interesting to know that Indian devotional VCDs are marketed in Pakistan by changing the look and feel of the VCD covers.

The images also flow from other Islamic countries like Iraq (use of images of Shrines and Karbala), Iran (images of Shi'a shrines), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (images of the shrines at Mecca and Medina) and Egypt (images of mosques). The videos which get popular in these neighbouring countries find their way into India, while popular Indian videos on shrines travel to Pakistan and Bangladesh. The videos of the orthodox Indian school find their way into the Middle East and Saudi Arabia.

The devotional videos take inspiration from the Mumbai film Industry – using film music, at times even the picturisation of songs (e.g. in *Sabki Khabar Rakhta Hoon*). They also use female lead actresses in videos, since women are also associated with piety and not just as an attraction for men. Some of these videos also target the women viewers.

Hindi film music seems to be the front runner, whether it involves Muslim devotional videos, Hindu devotional videos, naats or Pakistani devotional videos. It forms the basis for most of the videos these days. Traditional music is also used in some of the videos, while music for some of the songs is composed.

A Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is obligatory for all Muslims and it is a highly formalized behaviour. Circumambulation or *tawaf*, a key ritual of the Pilgrimage is

performed by making seven rounds around the Ka'ba, the shrine that houses the Black Stone. The Black Stone is considered holy and it is a popular practice to kiss it on completion of each round of *tawaf*. If they cannot reach it, they raise their hand towards it on each of their seven circuits around the Ka'ba. This practice is marked by frenzy among the pilgrims.

A similar ritual can be witnessed at the Nizamuddin Shrine (dargah), New Delhi, where devotees perform a clockwise circumambulation around the grave (some do it three times, while others do it seven times or more). In the dargahs of the subcontinent, *tawaf* came to be a widespread practice among pilgrims, promoting the view according to which the saint identified metaphorically with the Ka'ba, as a symbolic centre of the universe (cf. Bashir 2000, 290; Rizvi 2000, 334). It is fascinating to note that circumambulation is a common ritual also in Tibetan, Buddhist and Hindu practice and it seems quite deep-rooted in Indian culture (Morinis 1992, 16). The pilgrims kiss the wall of the shrine or try reaching out to the wall with their handkerchiefs if they do not get access to the portion of the wall, especially during the annual ritual of Urs, which involves a huge number of pilgrims.

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