

GRANTA

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MANGHO PIR

*Fatima Bhutto*

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NASSER  
EL SONBATY

چمپین  
ہیٹھ  
کلب

صبح 7 بجے سے 10 بجے تک  
شام 4 بجے سے رات 1 بجے تک



کچرا پھینکا  
منع ہے

پیشاب کرنا منع ہے

چمپین ہیٹھ  
کلب

I was seven years old the first time I visited a Sheedi neighbourhood in Karachi. I had accompanied my grandmother on a campaign tour, visiting homes and receiving applications from men who needed legal aid to fight cases in the perpetually clogged city courts, from others who had lost their jobs and had no way of feeding their families, and from widows seeking stipends from the state. I felt nervous at the sight of crowds, preferred my car rides free of screaming men chanting slogans and wanted desperately to sit at home and talk without the noise of loudspeakers, megaphones and microphones. My grandmother, Joonam – ‘my life’, as I called her in her native Farsi – had been thrust into party politics after the assassination of her husband, my grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and had been jailed, beaten and elected to congress before I lost my first tooth. I adored Joonam and relished time spent with her, even if it meant engaging in campaigning.

Karachi was, in my imagination at least, a bustling metropolis. Palm trees lined the city’s wide avenues, children thronged Clifton Beach, buying roasted corn smeared with lime and chilli from street vendors and sidling up to the men who sold camel rides for a couple of rupees. But there were millions who would never benefit from its occasional munificence, even though there should have been plenty to spare. There were no Sheedi on Clifton Beach, smack in the middle of the affluent old Clifton neighbourhood where my family lived. There were no Sheedi in the new electronics stores, buying CD players or shiny fabric from the city’s up-and-coming designers. And yet, although they lived in the shadows, they refused to go unnoticed. The poverty and political dispossession could not hem them in. That first visit with Joonam was a jolt to my mental shaping of a city that I had, until then, only seen on its best and most welcoming behaviour.

Karachi, like all port cities, is a hub for travellers, traders and settlers. It is a sweltering mix of those who have been brave enough to settle on its shores – Parsis, Jews, Baha’is, Pushtun,

Afghans and so many more. The city has no majority; but even in this outrageous muddle of people and shades and colours, the Sheedi are unusual – an ethnic minority displaced among the swell of Karachi’s various populations. While the most successful of the Sheedi – and there are not many who escape the deprivations of their community – enjoy a reputation that spans the world of arts, politics and athletics, they are best known for the northern Karachi shrine they protect and serve. A shrine built upon centuries of myth and modern-day fables that proclaim living breathing avatars of their lost saint and inspire spiritual searching. But no visit to this holy site of pilgrimage can ignore the impoverished environment of the surroundings. The glorious, the divine, and then the rot.

Mangho Pir, home of the Sheedi shrine, and its environs are covered in white mist. Men walk across haphazardly constructed pedestrian paths in rubber slippers and frayed shalwar kameez, coated in the white talc, dark hair lightened and skin powdered. This is a quarry town – dust escaping from the mines announces that you have arrived at the largest marble market in the region.

The gritty stone comes from across Sindh Province: from Thar, Sehwan, Jamshoro and Dadu, from Balochistan and, for some reason, perhaps owing to the desolate nature of this conveniently forgotten town, ends up in Mangho Pir. The marble slabs are lined neatly in towers with jagged shards that look sharp enough to cut through skin. Onyx is sold here too but marble is what makes a man’s business in Mangho Pir.

The keepers of the shrine are ethnically African Pakistanis whose ancestors settled on the Balochistan coast and the Sindhi shores around 628 CE. One narrative identifies them as the descendants of opulent traders. They arrived, the story goes, through Bharuch, a seaport in Indian Gujarat fabled for its spice and silk trade, a crossroads through which traders from the Levant, Ethiopians seeking westward winds, Greeks, Persians, Carthaginians and Romans all passed. Alternative histories identify them as the progeny of brave warriors, descendants of soldiers who came a hundred years

later (in approximately 712 CE), combatants loyal to Muhammad bin Qasim's conquering army that landed on the banks of the Indus, at Bhambore in Sindh, when bin Qasim was only seventeen years old, bringing Islam to the Hindu and Buddhist subcontinent. Bin Qasim's soldiers were known as *Habshi* (Abyssinian) or *Zinji*, 'Negro' in the warrior's native tongue. Still another story points to a forced migration of Bantu-speaking peoples (largely Swahili, a language still heard in Sheedi poetry and folk songs) of East Africa. They were transported to the still flourishing seaport of Bharuch in the seventeenth century by Portuguese slave traders who thought their human booty suitable gifts, to be offered in exchange for protection, as baksheesh if you will, for the Nawab of Junagadh. Those who were not presented to the local ruler were said to have been sold at the port. There are grounds, perhaps, for all three legends to be true. Linguistic, mercantile and political trajectories can be traced in support of all three narratives – soldier, trader or slave.

**M**aulabux is a Sheedi political activist whose maternal grandfather came to Karachi when the British were transforming the city into a mega seaport at the time of the Bombay Presidency. Although my parents, and indeed my grandmother, knew him from his work as a dedicated political activist, I remember meeting Maulabux at a funeral; I was eleven years old, maybe twelve. A Sheedi man, another grass-roots worker, had been killed by the Karachi police. He had been tortured and held without charge in police custody. He left behind two small children and a shy, young wife. The mourners screamed angry curses at the government that had killed one of their best organizers, the women wept and hurled their tattered plastic slippers at the police vans perennially parked in the area, the men sat huddled together over a table and worked on a statement condemning the murder and drew up plans for a shutdown of local businesses in protest. Maulabux was one of those men. I remember him, calm but shattered, working quietly that day to ease the grief of the man's family and planning the community's response.

Maulabux is from Lyari, one of Karachi's oldest Sheedi settlements. He is a tall man, his hair clipped close to his scalp and his face clean-shaven. Although I have never seen him chew paan, his stained teeth betray its use – his smile a reminder that for all his serious political background (and his background is serious) he is a raconteur. Maulabux isn't sure which line about his people's antecedents he buys, but he tells me stories passed down to him by his father and grandfather. 'They brought us over as slaves,' he says over tea one afternoon in a Karachi garden. 'They put us in ships and forced us to row to our new prisons – like in the movie *Amistad*. Have you seen *Amistad*?' I nod, more perplexed by the fact that Maulabux watches Spielberg films than anything else.

I ask him about bin Qasim's army, and he wagers that there were indeed African troops but that they can't possibly account for the large population of Sheedi in Pakistan today. He doesn't call himself Sheedi, he doesn't use the term the way I do – to refer to an ethnic group. He says *blackion* instead, adding the Urdu suffix *-ion* denoting the plural to black, a Mingleish – Urdu/mixed English – construction. 'There are *blackion* in the Rann of Kutch in India, in Iran, Bahrain, Oman and in the Gulf.' Maulabux acknowledges that the *blackion* didn't face the same sort of discrimination in places like Oman, where they 'practise the European style of accepting different races', so tolerant and accepting are the Omanis of anyone who is willing to come and build their sultanate by the sea. The Sheedi Maulabux knew who had settled there were all 'highly educated, visible in government posts like immigration offices and customs'; they were not shamed into hiding like the *blackion* in our country.

I say, 'There are Sheedis in the Punjab too, aren't there?' We are playing hide-and-seek with geography and migration, and I feel I must have trumped him now. Maulabux smiles, points to his curly hair and thrusts his fingers at me. 'They are not the original *blackion*.' Case closed, he leans back and gingerly sips his tea.

Sakhi Sultan Mangho Pir Rehmat Ullah Alaih, whose birth name was either Hasan or Kamaluddin, was an Arab descendant of Hazrat Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and progenitor of the Shiite line of Islam. It was during his long pilgrimage at the site of Mangho Pir that Hasan or Kamaluddin became elevated to sainthood, proclaimed enlightened by the respected teachers who oversaw his spiritual journey and the devoted followers who believed in the power of the would-be saint's prayers spoken straight to God. The stories of Hasan or Kamaluddin's sainthood are filled with the fantastic. After his death, according to the best legend, the lice living in his long dreadlocks fell to the ground and were reborn as crocodiles.

For as long as the shrine of Mangho Pir has been part of Karachi's Sufi culture, it has been tended to by Sheedis. Today the shrine is teeming with devotees and guardians alike. The majority of the faithful are Sheedi – in fact, I am the only non-Sheedi on the day I visit – men, women, teenagers, children. While pockets of Pakistan fall to Islamists, filling the vacuum created by decades' worth of corrupt government, and the country becomes a state synonymous with fundamentalism, there are millions who would shake their heads and say that there is another Pakistan, that the one spoken of in BBC headlines isn't the Pakistan they know at all, that the one they know is tolerant and diverse and always has been. The shrine of Mangho Pir is proof of that alternate, retiring society.

I am met at the shrine by Haji Ghulam Akbar, who lives in the adjoining Sheedi Goth ('town'). A former campaigner and political activist who successfully stood for local office in the late 1970s, Akbar has a thin moustache dyed mandarin orange with henna and eyes lined with *kajal*. Everyone we encounter seems to defer to him, though he takes little notice as he hurries along. The site is packed with people; women gather in front of an old man selling salt in a steel bowl outside the shrine's doors, a *shifa*, or treatment, that they hope will cure them of all sorts of diseases – depression, rheumatism, kidney stones, skin ailments, all are dashed by either ingesting a good amount of the water from the hot springs here or

bathing in it. The faithful also come to the shrine to seek blessings from the crocodiles, avatars of the saint that have made their home here for centuries. Many families will spend three days, sleeping on the cool marble floors, purchasing salts, incense, gifts for the saint to enhance the effectiveness of their treatments.

The short distance from Mangho Pir to Sheedi Goth is unpaved; the ground beneath not made to withstand traffic. If the shrine is blessed with spirits imbued with the powers of healing and access to the divine, it is an oasis enclosed within a much more earthbound reality. Half the town's inhabitants' homes are illegal. There are plain, unpainted brick houses, shaped like concrete boxes with no windows; there are homes made out of tents that gypsy Sheedi sleep in when the annual *urs* rolls around; filthy swathes of cloth haphazardly sewn together to provide the bare minimum of what would loosely be considered shelter for the local homeless. Everything standing seems to be made of mud, of dust and dirt and stones. There are no pavements, no *chaikhanas* (tea houses), no playgrounds. The children are barefoot. There are a hundred to a hundred and fifty homes here, and a population of five hundred souls.

'You know, in these non-registered homes are some of our best footballers, cyclists and boxers. Though our name hasn't come forward in cricket yet . . .' Akbar says, his head bent and eyes fixed on the ground – the usual pride that accompanies the fact that the Sheedi are among the nation's most gifted athletes seems curiously missing, reserved for giants such as Syed Hussain Shah, who won a bronze in boxing at the 1986 Olympics, Mehar Ali Shah, a boxer who represented Pakistan at the Asian Games, Aziz Baloch who plays football on the national team. 'But we live in an invisible community. There are no options open to us – only sports, and that only because we break through; they cannot stop us. And this *urs*.'

The residents of the goth are the curators of the festival that marks the death of the saint through a celebration of his life – very unlike the usual manner of marking deaths in Pakistan, where songs



and drumming are not encouraged. The *urs* will happen any time between May, June and July, lasting for four or ten days – however many the residents can afford. The crocodiles will be showered with rose petals and offerings, Sheedi Goth’s residents will beat the drums strung up on maypoles across their run-down town and sing and dance in troupes traditionally led by women. The *urs* is held at a different time each year and newspapers, both local and foreign, only publish news of it, along with photographs of the revellers and crocodiles, once it is over and done with. This year, the UK *Daily Mail* ran a photograph of a man and his infant son, brought to be blessed at the shrine and standing precipitously close to the famous reptiles, with the caption ‘Make It Snappy, Dad!’

The government gives the custodians of the shrine 3,000 rupees (£40) a year for the *urs*, a pittance considering how much is extracted in monthly hot-spring rent. It is an amount designed to placate the powerful bloc of Baloch and Sindhi voters across the city. ‘We can’t even buy one goat for that amount,’ Akbar tells me. ‘There are many other groups, religious or community or *jo bhi* [whatever], who get lakhs’ and lakhs’ worth of financial support. We only get pity.’

This is a community set in a wasteland. The nearest school is a town away and does not teach in the languages – Sindhi and Balochi – spoken by the majority of Sheedi. There is no transport to ferry the children to the school, no buses or cars to return them home. Without an education, this generation of Sheedi is stuck. There is a hospital but it has no ambulances. As I walk with Akbar, the locals gather to talk to me and soon it seems we are moving in a procession. Women grab at my sleeve; they speak over each other and interrupt my questions with answers they know by heart. They see me as a messenger who will tell their troubles to someone I happen to be related to; they don’t particularly care so long as the word gets out. They are thinking, I know, of my grandfather Zulfikar. He was killed in 1979, but ghosts live long in Pakistan.

As we walk through the narrow alleyways, we are hurried towards

an empty plot. Farida's house has just burned to the ground; she stands in front of debris that looks like much of the disorder one sees everywhere in Sheedi Goth. 'I was at work,' she says, clutching her dupatta in a closed fist. She is a young woman, but looks worn. Along with much of Sheedi Goth's working population, she works miles away from home, travelling two hours each way, when the traffic cooperates, longer when there are transport strikes or VIPs clogging up the roads. 'My children were alone – there is no one to look after them – and they are very young so they cannot tell us how the fire started.' I ask if it could have been a gas leak. 'I had no gas connection,' Farida replies, stone-faced. She has the clothes on her back, her dupatta, creased from her clenched hands and dirty from days of wear. Farida is living with neighbours who have taken her family in. Mercifully, her small children were unhurt by the blaze. 'Who was there to call? There is no fire department here. No one from the city government to come and help me build a new house. No one.' Farida continues to stand in front of the charred remains of her home, several minutes pass like this in silence.

I had come to talk about the long-ago journey that brought the ancestors of the Sheedi from their home to this place. I wanted to ask about the famous *urs*, where women sing in a language that is part Swahili and part Balochi, and about the *dhammal* and its relation to traditional East African *ngoma* drum music, which is awfully similar, but I can't. My quest for Sheedi lore and legend remains unspoken as the residents gather to tell me a different sort of story, the kind that won't eventually end up on the front of a foreign newspaper with a heart-warming photo and amusing caption to go along with it.

At the shrine, our prayers offered and received, Akbar and I walk down the small hill towards the crocodiles. Along the short distance to the pool there are small, simple, whitewashed graves marking the terrain – the final resting places of Muhammad bin Qasim's followers. We walk silently between the graves and Akbar breaks our awkward solemnity by telling me that there are 'two

hundred crocodiles here, *takreeban*'. Approximately.

The crocodiles are mostly middle-aged, the elders somewhere between forty to sixty years old. 'They live here like a family,' says Akbar. The head of the family – they are Pakistani crocodiles after all – is named 'Mor' and he is the reason people come to offer bags of bloody meat to the creatures. He is the head avatar, the alpha incarnate. 'What happens when Mor dies?' I ask, not sure how far the lifespan of a Sufi crocodile goes. Haji Akbar shrugs. 'When one Mor dies, another takes his place and becomes the new Mor.' I don't dare ask how the process of dynastic crocodile succession is carried out.

The less brave (or less faithful?) can climb some well-placed rocks and peek from a safe distance, but those who mean business walk through a small corrugated-iron gate and into the crocodiles' lair. I count fourteen of them. Mor, his thick scaly neck garlanded with roses, sits in the shade of a gazebo built for his comfort. He barely moves to acknowledge our arrival and Akbar tells me he's a very calm beast, *takreeban* in his fifties although he looks younger.

'There are no facilities for our devotees,' Akbar complains, pointing around him. 'The Sheedi come from across Sindh and Balochistan in the thousands during our *urs*, but there is no help given to us by the government. We arrange everything ourselves, even though during the *urs* we have a *dhammal* and traditions so unique that the world media comes to film and photograph us, we have no assistance. We provide the water, the food, the lodging, everything.' It is hard not to remark on the fact that I am the only non-Sheedi at the shrine that afternoon, difficult not to leap to conclusions as to why the state has no interest in funding and supporting Mangho Pir's shrine.

For eight hundred years, *chashmas* (hot sulphur springs) have run underground filling the pools at Mangho Pir's shrine. This is the one part of the holy site that is frequented by Sheedi and non-Sheedi alike. Men and women line up with old gasoline canisters that will carry the magical waters of the spring back home with them.

But first they fill up with the water and retreat into small stalls to shower privately and pray for whatever cure they seek. The water, Akbar whispers, cures *kharish* – skin diseases ranging from scabies to eczema – purifies your kidneys if you drink it, softens your skin and inspires full body rehabilitation if you are regular in your visits.

The most famous spring, the Mamma baths, is bedecked in light blue porcelain tiles and, save for the large pool of scalding water in the middle of the room, resembles a Middle Eastern hammam. The area is administered by an aged Sheedi woman named Fatima who stands outside the doors of the Baths collecting the fees – eight rupees, or ten pence, for fifteen minutes. Ladies have their time, then filter out so that the men may come in and have theirs, and on it goes. Fatima is a round old lady, pear-shaped, and she moves clumsily, shifting her weight on to each foot as if she must tread carefully to avoid veering off in the wrong direction. I ask where her family came from, if they travelled in the footsteps of the saint. ‘From here,’ she answers, stomping the ground. ‘Before?’ I ask, trying to place Fatima within a migration of warriors or slaves. ‘*Before?*’ She looks at me as if I make no sense whatsoever. ‘Sindh. Always Sindh,’ she says, stomping her foot again emphatically.

The water in the Mamma Baths, swirling around in a porcelain mini-pool, is *takreeban* 100°F. Abdul Malik Rind, whose local expertise and range of influence covers the Mamma Baths, has appeared between the two Fatimas, the baths’ bouncer and I, and beckons me towards the large bath in the middle of the room; I slip out of my sandals and walk towards the water. He takes a plastic flask and fills it with water and asks me to hold out my hands. I do so, and hot water is poured over me. I stifle a yelp but notice that in fact my hands do feel instantly softer and smoother. Feeling braver, I step closer to inspect the pool and slip, almost plunging head first into the frightening hot waters. Fatima catches me by the elbow, pats me on the back and snickers. She’s been on duty here for the last forty years and – desperate to move on from my near gaffe – I ask her what those years have been like. She tells me

that they've never run out of *chashma* water here, nor out of visitors.

Here, Rind jumps in to the conversation and adds that people from all over the world have come to the shrine to be healed and blessed by its spiritual powers. 'What kind of people?' I ask. 'Oh, American women come with boils on their chests,' he answers, puffing out his own chest with pride. 'They come here to be cured and after a few days of visiting the Mamma Baths then they are fully fine. No boils, no marks, nothing.' Rind wipes his hands together, illustrating the impressive healing potential of the springs. 'They are Republicans,' he adds, throwing in a worldly smile.

**I**t is five thirty in the evening and the doors of the Sindh Government Hospital in Sheedi Goth are padlocked. A young man who asks not to be named, wearing a black-and-white keffiyeh around his neck, has accompanied me here. He runs his finger along the lock and it is soon caked in dust. The lock hasn't been opened in a while. There are other gates and windows, all sealed.

Behind the hospital are bungalows built for absent doctors. Khadim, a gatekeeper who has worked here for the last twenty years, tells me as we walk to his quarters behind the neat bungalows that the local doctors and persistently abbreviated bureaucratic medical support staff – EDOs, MLOs, MOs (executive district officers, medical legal officers, medical officers) – all eat the hospital's budget. There's nothing left for the actual facility or its patients. The bungalows were built from funds meant for the upkeep of the hospital, the refurbishment merely an ornamental indication that the facility was an up-and-running operation, and that's it, nothing has been spent on medical equipment, lodging for the ill or medicines. My guide tells me that the police officers next door have a small-time drug-running business here, hence the padlocked doors. They sell *chars* – heroin-laced marijuana – to supplement their meagre salaries.

Khadim, who has eight children, takes me to his home. He has a nine-year-old daughter with one blind eye, her socket pinched shut. His eldest daughter, Naheed, who is my age, has polio and lies

on a mattress on the floor. She tells me she's just recently had an operation. So the hospital does work? No, Naheed corrects me, she went to Jinnah Hospital in central Karachi.

This is the rot. The oppressive poverty that is the story of the Sheedis in Pakistan, more a part of their lore than the exploits of bin Qasim's warriors, clearer than their confused Ethiopian-Tanzanian-Kenyan-Zanzibarian heritage, and just as easily ignored as they are.

I have made arrangements to visit another Sheedi neighbourhood where in a week's time there will be a *mela*, a festival celebrating their distinct culture. This will be strictly a community affair, not open to outsiders. The men, from Akbar to all the young boys I meet at Sheedi Goth, insist I also visit their boxing grounds, where the greatest train for matches held at midnight in hidden porticos around Karachi. I make arrangements to visit them later in the week. As I drive out of Mangho Pir, my car is stopped by a spontaneous riot. Sheedi and the Pathans living in townships near the shrine, in a rare show of solidarity, have set fire to tyres and closed the roads out of the area in protest over the lack of water in the neighbourhood. Traffic is at a standstill. Men on motorcycles, some sitting three to a vehicle, pull their shirts up to cover their noses and mouths. I notice them first, before I see the smoke. I see them bracing themselves for the obligatory burning that comes with any protest riot. There are no TV cameras here, no press vans or state officials in their standard heavy motorcades, there is no one to witness the riot who can do anything about it. This is a demonstration of anger, grief and frustration, pure and simple.

Three days after my trip to Mangho Pir, I meet Maulabux in a garden and he brings three friends. One of them, Habib, is in his early to mid-twenties; he is soft-spoken and polite. A police officer serving in Lyari, where he and his family have always lived, he is at pains to explain the recent violence and police incursions in his neighbourhood – an area known for its radical politics, secular history and multi-ethnic population. Life is always interrupted –

festival dates, school exams, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays – by this sort of warfare. State v. community, Sindhi v. Baloch, Sheedi v. everyone else.

‘There are very few Sheedi in the police force,’ Habib says when I ask if he feels safe in his posting. ‘People don’t like to be confronted by us in positions of authority. Where did they come from? Who are they? They don’t see us as being part of their communities.’ In 2009, Habib was part of a police team that arrested a member of the powerful Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), a quasi-ethno-fascist political party known for its militant tactics, catering to the *muhajir*, Urdu speakers who migrated from India during partition. ‘They gave a press conference against me afterwards,’ Habib says. Only he was mentioned in the MQM’s media attack – not other members of the squad who carried out the arrest. ‘I’m a local, I’m not corrupt, I know the people I serve,’ he says. ‘Maybe that’s what made me threatening.’

Maulabux’s two other friends are Ghulam Hussain, a heavy-set professor, and Sabir, a banker turned sociologist. Professor Hussain is the eldest of the four men; he wears a crisply starched shalwar kameez and carries a set of pens in his breast pocket. ‘One fellow in our community, his son – born in 1986 – had an FIR [police First Information Report] cut against him for dacoit activities when he was three years old. In 1989.’

‘Let me tell you a story,’ Maulabux begins. ‘A friend studying at Karachi University was asked by some classmates how on earth he had made it into the university, coming as he did from Lyari and being a *blackie*. And he replied, “First I got off my slave ship, then I got on a camel, then I came to the big city . . .” and they believed him! It’s like people who stop us on the roads in Lyari and ask how to get to Lyari. “You’re here,” I tell them and they don’t believe me because we’re standing on wide roads, people are out shopping, there are grocers selling fruit on the streets. They expect only horror from us.’

Maulabux is a born storyteller; he laughs and jokes his way through the most disturbing tales, even when he speaks of racism

and a policy of exclusion that confines us to a private garden on a day when we ought to be on the streets enjoying a festival.

‘People see us, black with *ghungaroo baal*, curly corkscrew hair, and they hear we are from places like Lyari or Mangho Pir – out of eighteen districts in this city we are only in four! It’s not like we’ve overrun the place – and they feel like a *zulm*, an injury, has been done to them, like they’re insulted by us.’

One of the Prophet Muhammad’s earliest companions was a freed slave named Bilal, afforded the respectful honorific *Hazrat* on his death. Professor Hussain sees this religious heritage as a duty upon Muslims to ignore caste, creed and race. ‘In front of Allah,’ he intones, ‘we all say the same *kalma*, the same prayers – there’s no difference between dark or light, rich or poor.’

‘There is no room for us to progress,’ Maulabux continues, changing tack. ‘Maybe we get postings here and there, but that’s just for show. Where is the way up? People say, “Oh, these *kalas*, they’re everywhere in sports – in boxing, in football.” Yes, we are! *Lekin, jidd-o-jehad hai*. But it’s a struggle. Pakistan has only ever won one gold medal in anything’ – at this everyone laughs; knowing nothing of our sporting history, I’m impressed we have any medals at all – ‘in boxing. And it was a Sheedi who won it. But people still pretend we don’t exist. Watch people’s eyes when they think you’re an African foreigner in their country. Their eyes widen. You can see the yellows, the pinks and the white corners of their eyes.’

Habib interjects, ‘You know, in Sheedi communities you see the young idolizing Muhammad Ali, the Brazilian football team, the West Indies cricket team. These are our role models.’ ‘Bob Marley too,’ adds Maulabux nodding seriously. ‘Oh, and we were very, very upset when Michael Jackson died.’ Professor Hussain solemnly bows his head as he remembers the king of pop, a reference that is pointedly ignored by the others.

They tell me that the only time there was hope among the Sheedi was in the 1970s. Lyari, the largest of the four Sheedi districts, was spruced up. Hospitals, schools, sports stadiums were built and



scholarships encouraged. ‘All our local heroes made their names then,’ Maulabux says. ‘Abbass, a famous traditional dancer, Asghar Baloch, a sports champ, the poet Noon Meem Danish [whose first name translates simply into the letters N and M], Malang Charlie and Zahoor Azad, two other great dancers. Azad didn’t think he’d ever get out of Karachi and see Mirpur Khas, let alone the rest of the world. He was sent to the United States on cultural tours.’

But all that changed. In 1977, General Zia ul-Haq overthrew the democratically elected government and ruled for the next ten years with an authoritarian Islamist screed, one that didn’t look kindly upon male dancers, or dancers of any sort. Karachi’s Sheedi community was at the forefront of resistance to the dictator and paid for their protests and campaigns with jail sentences and public torture. Hundreds were arrested, Maulabux and his comrades included, for defying martial law regulations and censorship, and speaking and acting against the government, whether by supporting lawyers movements, political rallies or student uprisings. Maulabux tells me how he and several other men put up posters of Nelson Mandela, at the height of South Africa’s apartheid, in Karachi’s central Regal *chowk*, or roundabout. ‘People here were shocked that this man of colour was fighting the whites in South Africa, they had no idea it was possible. Imagine, forgetting so quickly the lessons of partition . . .’

What about Obama? I ask Maulabux. Will his posters be put up on roundabouts? He looks sideways at me, a tug forming at the corner of his lips. ‘That’s politics. He’s American, they’re killing our people. White, black, it makes no difference in the White House.’

Habib, the police officer, isn’t bothered about Obama or Mandela or about the state that consigns the Sheedi to the periphery, simultaneously fighting them through police violence and ignoring them by depriving them of a stake in their country. ‘At the end of the day,’ he says, ‘we Sheedi are a community. If one person is in trouble, he has twenty people around him. That’s what we are, what we do. We take care of each other.’ ■