Performing Endangerment: Sound, Image and the Staging of Heritage in *Indus Blues*

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Abstract:

Pakistani folk music survives in a social landscape where economic strain, shrinking patronage and anxieties around morality make life harder for musicians. These pressures have led to a growing social suspicion of music and have placed many traditional instruments and performers at risk of disappearance. *Indus Blues* by Jawad Sharif is an honest documentation of this pressure not through abstraction but by closely tracing the living performers whose art endures even as the social worlds sustaining it erode. Nevertheless, even though the film has been widely discussed as a documentary of cultural heritage, almost no scholarship addresses *Indus Blues* as a performance text on its own. This study addresses that gap by arguing that *Indus Blues* functions simultaneously as a documentary. Drawing on performance theory, sound studies, and media scholarship, the paper examines how the film produces a mediated sense of liveness and affective urgency. Methodologically, the study combines historiographic analysis with close media-formal analysis, focusing on the film's use of ambient sound, silence, multilingual voice, camera framing, and spatial composition. The scope of the study is limited to the film's representational strategies and does not analyze the real communities beyond what the documentary presents. Still, by reading the film closely, the paper offers new insight into how endangered musical cultures are framed, felt, and performed in contemporary Pakistani cinema.

Keywords:

Indus Blues, cultural heritage, performance of endangerment, spectatorship, mediated liveness, soundscape and silence, cinematography, folk instruments

Introduction

Across cultures, the world is understood as rhythmically organized. The planets rotate in fixed cycles, the seasons arrive in patterns, and even the human body survives through repeated beats of the heart and controlled breathing. Rhythm and vibration, therefore, are not only artistic ideas but also foundational structures of life. A society, having forgotten about its musical rhythms and artistic expressions, also begins to lose a certain sense of balance and continuity. The concept gains relevance when considering *Indus Blues*, a documentary that emphasizes the ways in which traditional musical practices are slowly being eliminated in Pakistan. As represented in the film, these folk sounds are not mere entertainment. Instead, they are associated with the cultural memory, local identity, and emotional pulse of various communities. Through the attention to these musicians and their instruments, *Indus Blues* helps the viewers to remember that neglecting such rhythms, literal and cultural, will cause a greater imbalance within how a nation perceives its own history and sees its own future.

The folk and classical musical instruments of Pakistan, including soulful Sarangi and Boreendo are becoming past. Among 87 traditional instruments that were recorded in Punjab hundred years ago, only 55 are still in use, 13 are dying out and 19 are completely lost as pointed out by Swe. It is not just a loss

of art forms, but also the living cultural memory that art has. In reaction, documentaries such as *Indus Blues* by Jawad Sharif (2018) aim to save and spread this heritage. Jawad describes the film, noted by Ahmed, as "a visual treat" that forces viewers "to look at people and cultures that will vanish unless we protect them" as the film does not merely list musicians and the artisans who make their instruments; it sits down with them as they discuss losing students, audiences, and even their own role in the community. In doing so, it lets one experience the vulnerability of folk music and how urgently the people who carry it want the world to notice.

Research Aim

The aim here is to explore how *Indus Blues* is a performance in its own right.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the film's use of sound and music to create emotional proximity to endangered heritage.
- To examine visual framing techniques that stage the vulnerability of tradition.
- To understand how the film invites its subjects to participate in performing the narrative of endangerment.

Research Questions

- How do sound techniques in Indus Blues create an emotional sense of intimacy or urgency regarding endangered musical heritage?
- In what ways does camera framing perform the loss or disappearance of cultural heritage?
- How are the musicians and craftsmen depicted not just playing music but also performing their own endangerment?

Scope

The scope of this study is focused on Indus Blues as a case study of heritage on film. While Pakistan's broader folk music revival efforts (e.g. Lok Virsa programs mentioned by Tribune) and other documentaries provide context, this study concentrates on specific sequences within Indus Blues that exemplify the film's performative stance. Altogether, the point is that Indus Blues is not a dispassionate mirror, it is a well-delivered performance which tries to touch its viewers, even to sadness, admiration, even activism, with the help of certain creative decisions.

Literature Review

The interaction between performance, heritage and media has received increasing scholarly interest over the last ten years, particularly with numerous cultures grappling with the issues of intangible tradition in contemporary settings. The current review is a survey of recent scholarship (2015–2025) on three interconnected themes, which are intangible cultural heritage and performance, the discourse of endangerment in cultural heritage and the representation of heritage in documentary film. Such studies form a background and depict gaps on which to analyze Indus Blues.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Embodied Knowledge

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which UNESCO defines as oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and craftsmanship, is embodied and

temporary. According to Powell (89), intangible cultural heritage is "fragile but significant" because its real value lies not only in the visible form of a practice but in the skills and knowledge carried from one generation to the next. Suitable to understand this is Diana Taylor's notion of the repertoire, which she defines as the live, embodied ways communities remember, rather than through fixed archival traces (Taylor 20). Recent scholarship keeps stressing that performing heritage is not simply about holding on to something old. It is a way of making meaning in the present that matters. McKerrell and Pfeiffer (24) show this clearly as they believe when a community sustains an ancestral craft, the act itself generates a sense of belonging and symbolic presence. These performances matter because they let people feel the past as something lived, not distant. This keeps cultural continuity alive through repetition, improvisation and shared memory.

Embodied practices do not readily translate into an academic work or film. We tend to give privilege to what can be written or shown visually despite the fact that these mediums fail to reflect the physical, social and improvisational energy that maintains a tradition (McKerrell and Pfeiffer 20). That tension is significant in *Indus Blues*. The film attempts to present musicians in the places where the music still breathes, in roadside workshops, in cramped living rooms or in the open desert but capturing them on camera irrevitably alters the experience.

The Discourse of Endangerment in Cultural Heritage

The endangerment rhetoric is powerful but also complicated. While it can flatten indigenous communities into narratives of inevitable decline (May71), Pine and Turin suggest such framing can mobilize documentation, pedagogy, and revitalization (2). For example, labeling a musical tradition as in danger of disappearing might spark up documentation efforts, concerts, or transmission programs that otherwise would not happen.

In Pakistan, public initiatives such as Lok Virsa's 2018 "Endangered Instruments in Pakistan" discussion on endangered instruments frame musical loss as a national crisis. Tribune explicitly noted the decline of folk instruments as a "matter of grave concern" and urged for free teaching and institutional support to "save" this heritage (Tribune). These examples show that the 'performance of endangerment' i.e. speaking and acting as if something is on the brink of extinction can be a conscious strategy to create urgency. However, little academic work has examined how endangerment is *staged* or performed in the media. This paper addresses that gap by treating *Indus Blues* as a performance that produces the sensation of urgency rather than merely reporting it.

Representation of Heritage in Documentary and Ethnographic Film

Additionally, how heritage and culture are represented in documentary and ethnographic films is important. A key question is whose voice and perspective are presented. Furlan et al. analyze UNESCO "nomination films" and identify a spectrum between "top-down" and "participatory" approaches (17, 26). Moreover, it is argued that films should privilege the emic perspective (which is the insiders' view) of heritage bearers, instead of an external expert narration (Furlan et al. 25). Recent peer-reviewed discussions also reinforce that audiovisual media can either empower heritage communities by sharing authorship, or else reinforce a colonial gaze if misused (Bee 216).

Sound studies complicate this field further. Chattopadhyay (1) notes that sound design such as use of ambient sound, music, silence, plays a crucial role in shaping authenticity in documentaries about culture by stating ambient sounds "sculpt the presence of a site." Sound can situate the viewer within a place and moment and create what Voegelin (11) calls a "sonic life-world" that envelops the audience and creates an atmosphere that images alone might miss. These insights are essential for understanding Indus Blues, which relies heavily on sound to animate heritage.

Research Gap

From this literature review, it is evident that while there is rich discussion on intangible heritage and performance and some work on heritage in film, there is a gap in understanding how documentaries themselves perform or stage heritage as endangered. Existing studies focus on loss or preservation but rarely on how films generate affective experiences of vulnerability. Sound-based analysis remains underdeveloped in heritage film scholarship. This paper integrates performance theory, sound philosophy, and media analysis to examine *Indus Blues* as an active cultural performance.

Theoretical Framework

This study approaches *Indus Blues* through a mix of performance theory, sound analysis, and media scholarship and treats the film as an active and crafted presentation of heritage.

Performance, Cultural Memory, and the Repertoire

As a living repertoire of heritage, *Indus Blues* can be best understood through Diana Taylor's insights on performance and cultural memory. Taylor (19) distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire. While archives are tangible and static, the repertoire is live, ephemeral, and requires presence. Taylor (2) famously stated, "Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity." In other words, playing a folk melody or instrument-making carry communal knowledge and identity across generations (Taylor 32). This concept applies directly to *Indus Blues* as the film captures numerous performances that serve as acts of cultural transfer. However, because these acts are being filmed, the documentary arguably tries to be both i.e. preserving the performances on camera, yet editing and presenting them in a way that creates an embodied experience for the viewer.

Mediated Liveness and Staged Authenticity

Moreover, Von Appen's discussion of liveness and authenticity in staged performance helps analyze *Indus Blues*, especially with Auslander's idea of mediated liveness. Immediacy is produced through camera movement, location choice, and sound design in the documentary. Auslander argues that media do not inherently diminish "live" experience (Von Appen 15) instead, the very concept of liveness relies on media conventions, since we recognize something as "live" only in contrast to the recorded. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in the film. There is no such thing as spontaneous scenes because their power comes from intentional choices in framing, sound, and editing that create a sense of being there. This is mediated liveness i.e. an experience designed to feel immediate even though it's carefully constructed.

Authenticity is usually approached as an emotional truth, a feeling that something is performed out of heart. According to von Appen, the ideal remains influenced by cultural expectations and styles (2). Here it is followed in *Indus Blues* by the decision to shoot musicians where they are really working deserts, small workshops, riverbanks, village courtyards. "Staging", as Von Appen remarks, is not a decoration, but a "creative strategy", which creates the meaning of the performance itself (8, 18).

This tactic is intentional in the film, whereby the viewers are pushed to regard the musicians as belonging to specific landscapes and traditions. This does not make the film inauthentic. Contrarily, it shows that what feels authentic depends on how the film presents and shapes what viewers see as real. He argues that authenticity can still be real even when staged, if it expresses sincerity. So when the film makes us feel the performers' struggles or pride, it is because the staging supports emotional connection. In short, *Indus Blues* builds liveness and authenticity through media, and both theorists show how the film creates intimacy and urgency through its production choices.

Sonic Philosophy and Listening as Embodied Perception

Salomé Voegelin's philosophy of sound brings attention to the auditory dimension of *Indus Blues*. Voegelin argues that listening is a mode of understanding the world that differs fundamentally from the visual. "Sound does not describe but produces the object...practising its own fleeting actuality, augmenting the seen through the heard," Voegelin (10) writes. Applying this to *Indus Blues*, the film's extensive use of music and ambient sound can be seen as a strategy to animate heritage for the viewer. For example, when a craftsman is shown carving their instrument, the motions but also the scraping of the tool and the resonances of wood can be heard i.e. these sounds give a tactile sense of the craft, 'augmenting' the visual with a layer of reality. Also, the intersubjective nature of sound is emphasized i.e. it involves the listener's presence and imagination (Voegelin 11): it "pulls the seen towards me as it grasps me by my ears." Additionally, Voegelin's notion that silence is not an absence but a generative space is pertinent. The film at times drops into near-silence. These moments force the viewer to listen more intently and feel the weight of what has been said or played.

Brandon LaBelle's concept of sound as "public space" also aids the discussion. According to LaBelle, public space is always a bit unstable and inclusive of the other. This framework sheds light on the film's depiction of open performances in public where onlookers (sometimes disapproving) are present i.e. sound crosses boundaries and momentarily creates a shared space of contestation or connection, simultaneously.

Affective Infrastructure and the Politics of Sensory Experience

Finally, Brian Larkin's ideas on infrastructure and aesthetics provide a metaphorical but useful lens for how *Indus Blues* builds an affective structure of endangerment. He suggests that infrastructures i.e. the physical and organizational structures of society, have a poetic and sensory dimension. Larkin (337) notes that infrastructure materials "produce[s] sensorial and political experiences" that shape how people feel modernity and power. In a cultural sense, we can think of the film itself as constructing an 'infrastructure of feeling'. Through repeated motifs and narrative devices, it creates an ambient condition that the audience experiences. Larkin's insight (336) that

infrastructures set the "ambient conditions of everyday life" parallels how *Indus Blues* sets ambient conditions for the viewer's journey. For example, recurring shots of old forts and ancient sites accompanied by somber music provide an aesthetic of ruination and vulnerability. The film aesthetically communicates that these art forms are living in the ruins of past glory or amid societal emptiness.

Moreover, Larkin's emphasis on materiality and sensory experience, e.g. how the hardness of a road can symbolize colonial power, encourages viewers to look at the material in the film. The film pays close attention to the materials used to make instruments like wood, clay, strings etc and also to how they are made. In fact, close up scenes of hands during the crafting process of instruments along with textured sound, create a feeling of fragility and care. *Indus Blues* creates an infrastructure of vulnerability in this way.

Method

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive method because ideas about heritage, representation, and performance cannot be captured through numbers. *Indus Blues* is used as a single case study that helps explain broader cultural processes. Within this framework, two methods guide the analysis: historiographic analysis and media-formal analysis.

Historiographic analysis is suitable because the documentary is not a live performance but a mediated record shaped by the filmmaker's choices. Each scene functions as a trace those points to longer histories of patronage, social restriction, and the shifting value of folk traditions. This method helps the study read the film as a constructed document that retells cultural histories through selective evidence. It makes it possible to examine how the documentary positions musicians within narratives of decline and how it reanimates older cultural memories.

Media-formal analysis complements this by focusing on how visual and sonic techniques create meaning. Camera movement, drone imagery, silence, ambient sound, colour tone, pacing, and the presence or absence of narration all shape the emotional and narrative impression the film conveys. Since *Indus Blues* relies heavily on audiovisual texture rather than didactic explanation, formal choices become part of its argument about fragility and endangerment. This method makes it possible to identify strategies such as affective framing, mediated liveness, and the construction of soundscapes.

This study is limited by the fact that it works only with what *Indus Blues* chooses to show. The musicians' lives extend far beyond the frame, and the film gives us only the moments the director considered meaningful. As a result, the analysis here depends on a curated narrative rather than the messier realities of live performance or everyday musical practice. These limits don't undermine the study, but they do shape how this research understands cultural loss that is through the film's lens rather than through direct ethnographic observation.

Analysis and Discussion

Jawad Sharif uses sound and imagery to show the endangerment of Pakistan's musical heritage in *Indus Blues.*. This section examines how specific scenes and film techniques respond to each research question while using the theoretical ideas discussed earlier.

Sonic Techniques and Affective Atmosphere

Sound in *Indus Blues* is not just something in the background. It is a central force that creates an emotional link to the heritage shown in the film. Through ambient noises, musical performances, and intentional moments of silence, the film's sound design builds a mood that helps the audience feel the fragility and importance of these traditions.

One of the first sounds the audience hears in the opening sequence is the loud cawing of crows over a black screen (Sharif 00:03:49–00:03:56). This auditory cue immediately sets a tone of foreboding and loss. In Pakistani folklore, crows can signify ill omen or death. Their shrill calls here foreshadow the 'death' of musical heritage that the film is about to dramatize. Voegelin's insight that sound can produce an object or atmosphere is exemplified here i.e. before we even see an image, the crow's caw produces a sense of unease and alertness in the listener and it effectively prepares them to perceive the previous scene (the refusal confrontation) as troubling. Indeed, when the film cuts into the refusal scene, the tension is already high. We hear a man pleading, "two minutes please*"*, and an official responding sternly in Urdu that they are not permitted to play here (Sharif 00:03:22–00:03:35). The dialogue is captured with live sound, in the midst of a murmuring crowd. The decision to present this confrontation with raw diegetic audio (instead of a clean post-dub or voice-over) heightens its authenticity i.e. it is noisy, imperfect, and real.

Auslander's notion of mediated liveness is at work here: the shaky camera and chaotic sound make the viewer feel like a witness on site, experiencing the event in real-time (Von Appen 7). The ambient murmur of a gathered crowd around them also conveys that this is a public spectacle. Therefore, sound here does the work of showing social context (people watching, gossiping) that the camera might only partially catch. As LaBelle noted, sound "flows through the environment… lending dramatically to our experiences of being in [a place] with particular people." In this scene, the audio of crowd chatter places us amid a group witnessing the humiliation of the folk artist; it "lends" the experience of social tension and conflict that a silent image could not convey.

After the official declares "this is not even our culture" and the musician is stopped, the film pointedly drops the music (Sharif 00:03:45–00:03:48). This is heavy with meaning and it marks the violation of the musical flow. Voegelin's (11) idea: "Silence still involves listening… it is a generative action of perception" is relevant here. Immediately after, as the title appears, the suspenseful music and crow calls return, almost as a lament. Thus, this ebb and flow of sound performs loss in a visceral way.

Furthermore, the Boreendo boat sequence provides a striking example of how sound creates a meditative, reverent atmosphere around a tradition (Sharif 00:05:55–00:06:35). In this scene, Faqeer Zulfiqar sits on a small boat at golden hour, playing the Boreendo while the Indus drifts past him (see fig 1. below). The camera doesn't say much; it simply lingers. You hear the slight slap of water against the boat and the thin, piercing clarity of the Boreendo. For almost forty seconds there's no narration, no explanation but just the sound making its own case. By letting the music lead, the film asks viewers to listen instead of being directed. This is Voegelin's (11) idea that sound can make an object "tremble with life" and shift attention from a still image to a living sensory experience. The Boreendo's voice seems to animate the river. This

creates a soft but strong emotional effect, presenting the Boreendo not just as an instrument but as part of the Indus itself.

Fig. 1. Boreendo boat scene, from *Indus Blues*, directed by Sharif, 00:05:55–00:06:35

In the aforementioned scene sound does most of the work long before the viewer's realization. For example, the light is slipping into that warm, late-day haze and Zulfiqar's Boreendo is cutting through it with a heartful tone almost to suggest that the atmosphere is calm yet tinged with sadness. The scene also suggests vulnerability since no other musicians or listeners appear other than the rower. It is argued here therefore that *Indus Blues* uses sound design to generate empathy and reflection (Larkin 337) instead of limiting the viewer on what to feel. Whatever emotions come up grow out of the listening itself.

Adding on to this, the instruments are given their own space in the landscapes they appear in across the documentary. The mix keeps their sound up front but still lets the wind, the bells and the background murmurs drift through so the moment doesn't feel sealed off. One scene that shows this well is Sattar Jogi playing the Murli Been with the snake nearby; his fast, bright playing takes over the track (Sharif 00:11:56–00:12:58). Partway in, the melody slips into the film's score so quietly that the shift is easy to miss, blurring the line between what's being played on screen and what the film adds. This shift suggests that the emotional force of the live moment is being carried into the film's larger affective narrative, extending the meaning of the performance beyond its specific time and place. Chion's notion (5) of "added value" likewise stresses how film sound can extend the emotional charge of an event beyond its immediate time and place, binding it into the larger audiovisual flow.

This sequence reflects Auslander's technique, where the live performance is not presented as a raw document but is interwoven with cinematic scoring to heighten its emotional force. Additionally, the scene builds an affective rise, as the viewer is carried by the rhythmic pull of the Murli Been and then brought into the poignancy of Jogi's reflections on why they never kill snakes and how the animals show affection (Sharif 00:13:00–00:13:04). Therefore, the transition from music to speech, while environmental sound remains in place, sustains the emotional continuity of the moment.

A major sound strategy in the film is that it does not use an external narrator, but instead has the musicians narrate over the voice-over themselves. In the entire documentary, the culture-bearers explain their experience, struggle and their opinions regarding the worthiness of music. This removes the distance that a third-person narrator would produce and gives the impression of a direct address with the musicians acting as custodians of their own heritage. This strategy justifies the claim by Furlan et al. (15) that heritage films are to prefigure the emic point of view, the inside point of view. The natural cadence of these speakers with their breaths, pauses, and hesitations is sonically an

indication of their sincerity. The listeners of these voices are not listening to a piece of script but to a piece of lived voice. It is in this way that Larkin has argued how sonic qualities determine perceptions of truth. This also adds to the emotional tone of the film and creates the impression of a shared mourning that the viewer is being allowed to observe.

Visual Framing and the Performance of Loss

Visual framing and cinematography are used to perform its narrative of loss and disappearance in *Indus Blues*. The images are composed to evoke absence, decay, and marginalization and reinforce the impression that a fragile heritage is disappearing.

A key visual technique in the film is the placement of musicians within historical or symbolic settings that highlight the tension between past and present. In the refusal scene, this tension becomes sharp when the encounter takes place at Islamia College of Peshawar (Sharif 00:02:46–00:03:51). Ejaz Sarhadi attempts to play the Sarindha, effectively bringing music back into an old and meaningful space, before he is stopped. When the camera comes back on after being switched off by the authorities, its brief, shaky, handheld movement offers a quick glimpse of the surroundings. The sight of the modern official in a black coat rejecting indigenous music at such a historic institution creates a layered visual message. It suggests that a living connection to the past is being severed by present-day neglect.

Fig. 2. Ejaz at the refusal scene, from *Indus Blues*, directed by Sharif, 00:03:41–00:03:44

Additionally, when someone in the above scene insists (see fig. 2 above), "If we don't document him, it would be injustice to our culture," the film cuts to a shot of Ejaz holding his Sarindha (Sharif 00:03:41–00:03:44). The camera, too, in that moment frames him almost as a figure of history like someone carrying cultural memory forward. This scene also makes it clear that this folk artist is being pushed out of a place that should belong to him as part of his cultural inheritance. The staging expresses in this scene loss on more than a personal level because it signals a wider cultural decline since traditional music is denied visibility at a nationally significant site. Therefore, this tragic irony is conveyed through the image itself and allows viewers to understand it without the need for direct explanation.

Another compelling instance of visual framing occurs in the charpai scene. Sachu Khan is seated on a charpai as he somberly says, "When love and peace die, who cares about music" (Sharif 00:04:47–00:04:50). His statement

links love, peace and music while visually, his isolation on the charpai quietly reinforces the idea that these broader values have already withered in his environment, leaving him and his music abandoned. It becomes a portrait of neglect. What is significant to note in this scene is that he sits centered on the charpai in his modest courtyard, surrounded by sparse, desolate space. The charpai itself is culturally resonant because it is an object associated with home, rest and communal gathering. Yet he occupies it alone. By using the charpai as a visual anchor, the film translates the abstract notion of cultural decline into an everyday image that he is a man with no one left to listen to his music. The feeling of *disappearance* is quietly illustrated that once charpais might have been gathering spots for music and love (see fig. 3 below) as shown later on (Sharif 00:22:38–00:27:17); now this charpai holds a solitary figure speaking of no one caring about music. The composition likely does not show the instrument in full; instead it shows the man's face and posture, emphasizing human emotion over the object.

Fig. 3.Charpai scene as a gathering spot, from *Indus Blues*, directed by Sharif, 00:22:38–00:27:17

Closely related is the use of silhouettes and shadows to visually symbolize fading culture. In one segment, Zohaib Hassan, who is a Sarangi player in Lahore, says that future generations will only find the Sarangi in books (Sharif 00:04:59–00:05:05). The musician is reduced to a dark outline against light in Lahore Fort (see fig. 4 below). This cinematic choice, turning a living person into a silhouette, powerfully suggests that he is becoming a figure of the past. The details of his face are not visible as if he is already fading into memory. The sarangi instrument might be in view but dark as well that signifies its potential disappearance into the shadows of history. This aligns with the content of his statement (Sarangi relegated to books, i.e. archive). The silhouette visual is an artistic performative metaphor: it performs the content of his words by visually enacting his disappearance. The viewers subconsciously register that this man and his art are being 'blacked out' by time or neglect. Such visual dramatization of absence supports Taylor's idea of the ephemeral repertoire i.e. here the repertoire (Sarangi music) is literally shown as ephemeral shadow, not a solid presence. Cheetham and Harvey similarly read Mendieta's Silueta figures as hollow outlines i.e. "burials without bodies" that materialise cultural and bodily erasure (110). Overall, the film invites the viewer to feel a sense of impending loss.
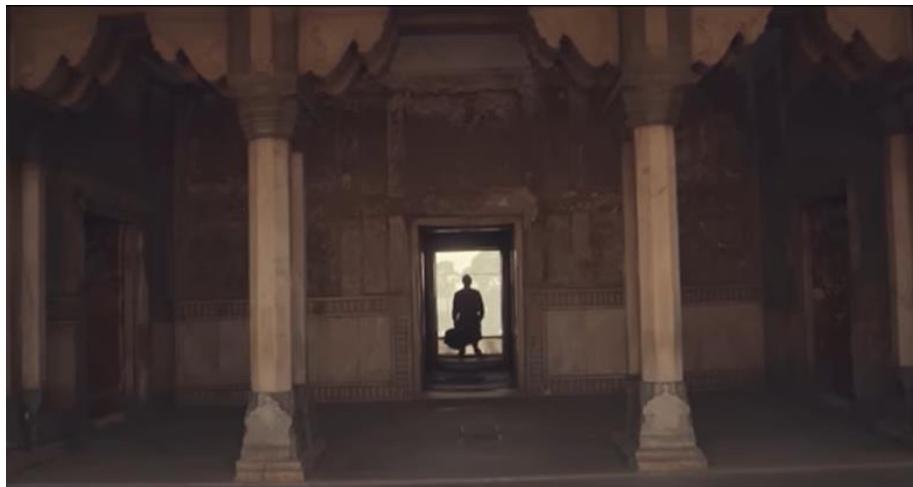
Fig. 4. Silhouette of Zohaib Hassan, from Indus Blues, directed by Sharif, 00:05:07–00:05:09

Another deliberate framing is the use of close-ups on hands and instruments intercut with faces of the craftsmen showing emotion. During a sequence with Shafqat Karim (Chardha maker in Hunza), there are close shots of the hands smoothing wood, the fine details of carving. These are immediately followed by the craftsman's face, in a wistful and contemplative trance as he wonders about the future. "Sometimes I wonder that music is like an ocean. Would I be able to cross it?" he says (Sharif 00:28:53–00:28:58). Visually, this oscillation between the material (instrument) and the personal (face) externalizes the inner concern: the care put into making the instrument versus the uncertainty reflected in the eyes of the maker. It performs the emotional stake too i.e. the craftsman's identity and pride are in that craft, and its potential endangerment is written in the worry lines on his face. The detailed shots of instruments also serve to valorize them as heritage objects (such as when the camera lingers on their textures, showing their beauty and the effort invested). Yet by highlighting them, the film also subtly implies their rarity i.e. only one almost museum-like instrument in focus is seen, not dozens in production. It's as if filming an endangered species.

One cannot overlook the scenes that visually dramatize suppression of music. For example the segment "When faith silenced the folk" where an old man playing an instrument is abruptly stopped by another, with "Stop filming!" shouted (Sharif 00:52:32–00:53:13, 00:54:29–00:55:01). The camera work becomes uncinematic and unstable which indicates the filmmakers intentionally shot this in a raw style to simulate a real incident (alluding to enforcement of the 1980s music ban). Rather than staging a performance, the film documents a genuine, emotionally charged gathering. By including this, the film steps beyond pure observation into the realm of historical dramatization literally performing the moment when music was silenced. Applying Auslander's perspective on liveness and mediatization interprets that the film is creating a hyperreal live moment to convey a truth of lived experience. Visually it serves the narrative by giving the audience something concrete and memorable: an old flute abruptly mute, people stopping him, the handheld camera moment i.e. an image of enforced silence that encapsulates the theme of suppression.

Musicians and Craftsmen Performing Endangerment

An intriguing aspect of *Indus Blues* is how the film's subjects i.e. the musicians and instrument makers themselves become performers of the

narrative of endangerment. The musicians are not presented as passive documentary subjects. The film often positions them to actively express or embody the crisis surrounding their art. This happens through what they say, the emotion in their performances, and even in the ways they are guided to engage with the camera.

Another way this sense of loss is conveyed is through the musicians' testimonials. These anecdotes function simultaneously as laments and calls to action as nearly every performer offers a line that adds to the film's broader message. Krishan Lal Bheel, for example, sings verses that metaphorically express longing. One of the lyrics is "Without my beloved I find no peace…dust flies high from the earth in front of my hut" (Sharif 00:26:57–00:28:13). It is a spiritual sentiment that becomes tied to cultural decay through the film's visual context of dust and emptiness. Later, contemporary artists like Saif Samejo openly speak about the need for revival who mourn this loss while also resisting it. This becomes a necessary performative strategy because the musicians are not only shown playing but they are also shown pleading, warning and protesting. In doing so, they assume the role of cultural witnesses and articulate the stakes of loss from within the lived experience of heritage.

Musicians also perform endangerment through emotionally charged musical performances that are deliberately framed to highlight their plight. When Ustad Ziauddin, who is a Sarangi craftsman, is shown, he does not just talk about making Sarangis. At one point he lights a cigarette and remarks on intolerance: "few people approve of music here…think music is evil" (Sharif 00:04:34–00:04:40). Lighting the cigarette on camera, pausing as smoke drifts, he exudes a mix of defiance and sorrow i.e. a performance of the weary artist under siege (Sharif 00:04:24–00:04:27). As Hu suggests, the presence of the camera often encourages subjects to stylise ordinary gestures into performances that crystallise how they wish to be seen (153) it's cinematic and intentional: rather than a straight interview format, the film captures him in an everyday act, making his commentary feel like an intimate confession to the viewer. This blurs the line between candid and staged. In Bruzzi's terms, the documentary's truth emerges through such self-conscious performances before the camera rather than through any purely unmediated access to reality (2). Likely he was prompted to speak on these issues, but the choice to film him in that mood and action turns it into a small scene.

Additionally, the film involves the musicians in staged metaphoric scenes that go beyond typical documentary recording. A very telling one appears after the musical performance Krishan Laal Bheel which ends at Pattan Minara, followed by an image of children reaching for the camera with children's laughter on the soundtrack. This seems to describe a transition where performers are first shown in their element (open landscape) and then cut to a heritage site, and then to children. The symbolism could be that the living performance is replaced by a static display and the next generation (children) can only grasp at the legacy through the camera lens i.e. reaching for the camera represents the film or modern media. If that interpretation holds, it's a staged allegory within the film. The children's joyful laughter juxtaposed with the previous intense performance yields a bittersweet effect i.e. hope in new generation, or poignancy that these kids might not inherit the full tradition. By choreographing such sequences, the filmmakers are using the musicians and community to enact the narrative visually. It's almost Brechtian, as noted by

Nichols (128) in calling attention to the message: the music left the open land and is now behind glass i.e. the kids see it but can't fully touch it.

One must also consider how the film's structure of segments has the feel of a staged journey or performance. The musicians appear almost in a sequence, each representing a region and instrument and the film travels from one to another. The musicians and their environments are arranged like acts in a play and each act performs a piece of the overall puzzle of heritage. This deliberate structuring means each musician's story builds on the previous so by the time we reach the last segments with the more contemporary voices like Arieb Azhar, the earlier musicians have performed the decline and have set up the later ones to perform either a culmination or a slight resolution. For example, the final musical gathering (see fig. 5 below) suggests unity (Sharif 01:01:58–00:47:15). This sounds like a final act too as people are coming together and literally performing music to resist the darkness as they are huddled around light blocks at night either by being an active listener or the performer. Sachu Khan is also there. This finale seems deliberately staged and suggests hope to counter the earlier gloom. The film has the musicians perform their resilience in doing so. This very act at the end, after all the hardships narrated, becomes a statement: performing keeps folk music alive. Ultimately, this delivers emotional catharsis and a sense of cultural continuity for the viewer.

Fig. 5. Final performance, *Indus Blues*, directed by Sharif, 01:03:04–01:03:08

Language and the Aesthetics of Disappearance

Language has a significant role to play through rich visuals that go beyond spoken words in *Indus Blues*. Nichols (42) argues that even in very speech-heavy films, documentaries "speak about this world…through both sounds and images" and that they do so with all the means at their disposal, especially with sounds and images in relation to each other and not just through spoken words. Marks's (162) "haptic visuality," which is a way of seeing that feels almost touchable, applies here to create an intimate and uncertain viewing experience. *Indus Blues* uses it to make cultural disappearance something the viewers can feel rather than simply hear explained.

Additionally, the overall use of drone shots in the film is another example of this approach. The camera moves slowly over wide-open landscapes while a musician plays below instead of flying over famous monuments to celebrate greatness (see fig 6. below). The wide framing places the performers in a huge space, not to portray them as heroic, but to show them as small traces of a fading heritage. The effect is quiet but meaningful because the musicians look like fragments in a landscape that no longer fully supports them. This highlights cultural thinning and displacement. In Marks' terms, the image does not offer clear meaning but invites the viewer to sense what is close to disappearing.

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Fig. 6. Performance of Krishan Lal Bheel, from *Indus Blues*, directed by Sharif, 00:26:57–00:28:13

In addition, the film's use of unscored silence is just as important. Between interviews and performances, there are many moments when the musicians are not playing or speaking but simply sitting. These are more than pauses. They function as emotional performances of fatigue where the silence feels heavy and full of meaning. This builds an "interstitial" affect i.e. a sensory gap that invites the audience to absorb disappearance as something embodied and not just told (Talijan 2). The viewer becomes a witness not of drama, but of slow dying.

Lastly, the spoken language plays an important role too. *Indus Blues* includes Urdu and many regional languages. The film does not replace these with a single voice-of-God narrator. Instead, it lets the musicians speak in their own tongues while English subtitles help an outside audience. This choice keeps the accent and rhythm of their speech, so the emotional weight of their words stays with their own voices (Nichols 13). The film's verbal language therefore performs intimacy and honesty rather than official distance.

Counter-Perspective: The Question of Instrument Authenticity

Lastly, there is a small contradiction in the final performance (see fig. 5) when Arieb Azhar is playing a modern guitar (Sharif 01:02:03–01:03:32). Selecting it as one of the final scenes when it brings out a Western instrument, is out of place because *Indus Blues's* focus has been on the endangered indigenous instruments.

Nevertheless, this instance does not overturn the argument at all. Guitar is used here on purpose to demonstrate that, in many cases, cultural survival today is the matter of the fusion of the past and the present. This is consistent with ethnomusicological studies that indicate that many folk music do survive today specifically by incorporating modern instruments and local sounds (Sosrowijaya 59). Therefore, a balance between old and new forms must be created so that cultural continuity can increase.

Conclusion

The stylistic choices in *Indus Blues* perform heritage by creating an emotional world for the viewers. By doing so, the film educates its viewers to perceive than to merely observe this vulnerability. A second key insight comes from the method used in this study. Combining historiographic analysis with close attention to the film's formal choices helps show how meaning is built. The historiographic approach places the musicians' struggles within a longer history of neglect and decline while the formal analysis shows that small aesthetic choices also shape interpretation. These details are part of the film's

overall argument, too. Therefore, future research on heritage documentaries should take sound, visual design and editing seriously, not just invest time on cultural policy.

A comparison between *Indus Blues* and other South Asian or world documentaries to determine whether they employ the same approach to the depiction of endangered culture would serve as good research. It will also be interesting to examine the interpretation of the film by various audiences.

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