

THE *BHĀND* MODE IN PAKISTANI PERFORMANCE

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Bhānds are wandering comedians, widely dispersed in Pakistan and North India. While their art constitutes a persistent mode of performed practice in Pakistan, it is not given recognition by dominant culture. The thesis explores the caste, class, ethnic and literary biases that motivate this ostracism, and in turn how *bhānds* play with these status distinctions in performance. This interaction creates a dynamic mode, which is able to expose, negotiate and subvert hegemonic power structures, and, in so doing, continually adapts itself to changing socio-cultural contexts.

Appreciation of these practices and their effects on the social norm has hitherto been lacking, precisely because of the cultural marginalisation which attempts to place the *bhānd* within a fixed definition of identity. In order to redress this imbalance, I explicate the *bhānd*'s aesthetics and socio-cultural mediation through multiple contemporary and historical manifestations. Contemporary reinventions range from stand-up comics in the nuptial rites, to carnivalesque comedians of the popular Punjabi theatre and socio-political commentators on satellite television. By extracting the *bhānd* from the prejudices of historiography, the thesis explores historical lineages between the *bhānd* and Sanskrit jesters and Sufi wise fools, arguing that this Indo-Muslim synchronism perpetuates the *bhānd*'s presence in South Asia.

This re-reading aims conceptually to release the *bhānd* from contemporary and historical constraints as a shape-shifting mode, which may be seen to continue generating innovative forms and practices for theatre and performance in Pakistan today.