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the state shall remain nameless by manan ahmed asif

The State shall remain nameless. For the purpose of this narrative, let us call it not-Dubai.

I

I went to not-Dubai at the age of six. My father had been in not-Dubai since I was three. He had sent me a battery-powered aeroplane the first year he was there. This aeroplane, which took two Double D Eveready Batteries, beeped, had blinking lights, and made a zoosh! whine when it powered across our carpeted floor. I remember the black cat which was the mascot of Eveready Batteries more vividly than the aeroplane, but I know that this aeroplane was the most important object I possessed, and that it was from my father who had left Pakistan in an aeroplane.

Later, I asked my father for his first passport—a document that the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto began issuing under a new programme geared towards employment in the Gulf States in 1972-3. The earlier Pakistani passport was tri-scriptural, and opened right to left: English, Urdu, and Bangla. The one he received in 1973 opened left to right, and Bangla was replaced by Arabic. This was a passport with a particular intent—it was meant to take him to the desert. He came from a small village in Sahiwal. He was the first person of his family to go to school. The first to move to Lahore. The first to go to university. And the first to go to not-Dubai.

My father was an engineer. In scorching desert afternoons in not-Dubai, me and my brother would wait eagerly for him to drive home from work. We had a beaten old Toyota Cressida with a boxy dent in the rear. My mother had instilled in us a routine for my father's afternoon returns—"pin-drop silence" and dark shadows. He worked in the "Workshop," and would often lash out in anger at any little thing that was out of order at home. We melded into the shadows and waited for our normal, loving daddy to return to us around five or six in the evening. Those intermediate hours, the ones where he would nap, we would sneak out and explore the unbuilt urban landscape of the city.

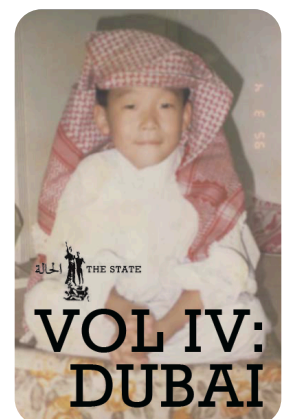
In the mid 70s, there were only unfinished building projects slowly being reclaimed by the desert. Our favourite pastime was to go to the corner shop, (owned by a smelly man who found any excuse to squeeze his young patrons, and often pressed his erection against our shoulders), and buy a chocolate. Next, we would rush to the half-built worker's housing which was our everything—our park, our backyard, our everything. (There were no parks, squares, or playgrounds.) We, in this case, were children of white-collar passport holders of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Egypt, along with two Palestinian twins whose passport status remains undetermined. Our favourite pastimes in those blinding-white afternoons were sneaking into construction sites and warehouses, and then playing hide-and-seek. All of not-Dubai slept between 14:00 and 16:20. We were alone. Eight children of immigrant labourers whose names were registered on their father's passports, and who had no legal rights. In those afternoons, we chased each other (divided into 'American' and 'German' groups based on the then popular—only?—American tv serial *Combat!*), spoke a creole of Tamil, Arabic, Hindi and Punjabi, and pretended that we were all alone.

Our fathers worked in state departments, building infrastructure, laying roads, channeling water and gas into residential areas. My father made a middle class wage, but was the highest paid Pakistani in his department. He was the Chief Engineer for Planning, and responsible for laying the traffic grid across not-Dubai. He later made me a chart of people he reported to, and the vertical list of names ran off the page before he could list his own. We lived in a small street with other company workers, and we went to an under-construction school where wives of other immigrants taught us Arabic so that we could enter a state school. We were not allowed to play football on the only field in the neighbourhood because it was reserved for locals.

In recent years—markedly since the 2008 crisis—a plethora of academic and journalistic work has focused on the lives of immigrant workers in the Gulf States. The economic studies of the 1980s and 1990s, (where the emphasis was on remittances), have now been replaced by theoretically rich discussions of urban migrations, global cities, and diaspora studies. We are now in possession of better numbers to know who, from where and how, built the cities in the desert. We do not have better stories, however. The worker-body is loathe to write its tales down. It has no energy, or desire, to explain and to retell. I have heard some of those stories—three of my uncles were construction workers in the Gulf in the 70s, 80s, and 90s; eight members of my cricket team in Lahore are currently working on cranes and hotels and offices in the Gulf; two of my brothers are employed by the State at this moment. Their stories are stories of disenfranchisement, of betrayals, of small pleasures and deferred dreams. None are written down.

II

In 1980, we went to Lahore for our annual visit and I heard, for the first time, *Dubai Chalo!* It was a catch-phrase. It was everywhere. *Off to Dubai!* The title belonged to a Punjabi movie released in November 1979, which had become a blockbuster hit. Every roadside dhaba had the Madame Nur Jahan solo Munda Meinon Tang Karda blasting from tape recorders. Every kid incessantly went around offering each other pinjeri, (a running joke in the movie), which every



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other kid would then refuse after making gagging motions. I loved pinjeri—my grandmother made it. I was perplexed by all this talk, and of course we were not allowed to go to the theatre to watch a Punjabi movie, so I did not understand any of it.

Slowly, from fad, *Dubai Chalo!* entered political lexicon and became the shorthand for labour migration from Pakistan to the Gulf. “Yeh Dubai Chalo! log hain” my aunts would say, snottily, pointing out some nouveau riche family moving in across the street. It was the moniker for the rural migrant to the city whose migration was enabled via a relative in the Gulf: uncouth, crude, attracted to bling and gild, prone to building large houses with extravagant facades and big, big walls. The *Dubai Chalo!* changed Lahore’s urban fabric, and its social fabric, and its political fabric. And all of it was presaged by writer Riaz Batalvi, and director Haider Chaudhry in *Dubai Chalo!*

Dubai Chalo! is the story of two innocents, Bao (Ali Ejaz) and Cheema (Nanha), who want to go to Dubai. This was the second pairing of Ali Ejaz and Nanha, and they emerged as the premier action-comedy duo for 1980s Lollywood cinema. The movie opens with two set-pieces, both establishing the outsider status of the protagonists. Bao, who is dressed inchoately in a shirt and tie, is shown as a dim-witted subject of village attention (and unkindness). He earns no money and lives at home with an unmarried sister, a younger brother, and elderly parents who dream of better financial times. Cheema, a corpulent man, is similarly the butt of jokes as the husband of a ‘modern’ woman who does not accept him. They both decide to go to Dubai to earn money and fulfill their personal and communal dreams. For Bao, the dream is to marry off his sister, and to make his younger brother into a civil servant. He is also engaged to his first cousin, whose father is in Dubai. For Cheema, it is more simply a matter of claiming his manhood by being employed.

In setting up Dubai as the focus of desire for both these men, *Dubai Chalo!* gives us two basic readings: one is class, and the other is urbanisation. Bao is poor, and his comportment and ways of speech identify him as a villager. He likes pinjeri—a particularly southern Punjabi village food. His village, however, is already changing. His uncle has already been in Dubai, and their house’s interior reflects commodities and tastes akin to those of the middle class of a city. Bao aspires to that urban material wealth, while attempting to stay true to his agricultural life. Similarly Cheema’s wife belongs to the upper class while he comes from a poor family. Throughout the film, she is shown dancing to ‘cabaret style’ music, hanging out with unmarried men and women, and rejecting the role of wife towards which Cheema is trying to pull her.

Dubai is the ticket to upward mobility. It provides the space where dreams can be enacted. In a touching sequence, Bao lists all the things he would accomplish for his village after going to Dubai: promising to buy blenders, tape-recorders, a motor cycle, a big wedding for his sister, and an education for his younger brother. Once Bao and Cheema meet in the bustling city, the theme of urbanisation and its discontents becomes the focus of the film. Their innocence is no match for the deep networks of human traffickers who feast on a steady supply of villagers attempting to reach Dubai.

Promised a visa from his uncle’s travel agent, Bao reaches the city to immediately enter a space of fixers: fast talking city men—flawlessly performing in Urdu, Punjabi, Pashtun, in regional dialects of Sialkot, Rawalpindi, Ferozepur—who con the newly arrived by promising them passports, papers, and visas. Bao and Cheema are taken in by such a pair, and told that they will be taken to Karachi and from there, to Dubai.

The terror of the merciless city is revealed to the audience in the office of the travel agent, who is to sell Bao and Cheema—not sell them a dream, but sell *them*. In his office is a large world map, and a man with a fake English accent. Bao again offers these urbane men his village dish, and is once again rejected. After sending Bao off to Karachi, the travel agent turns to his accomplice and says: “here is the new world of migrant desires, from Afghanistan to Germany to Australia!”

Bao and Cheema, along with a long string of men, are taken via train to Karachi and from there, herded onto a truck which deposits them into the hands of armed men. They have been sold into bonded labour, for the price of 500 Pakistani rupees. They had each paid 10,000 Pakistani rupees to get there. As they are beaten and terrorised in the camp, the travel agent and the fixers enjoy another seductive night at the kotha—Nur Jahan singing Aisi aye yi Jawani. The scenes are brutal and effective, with Bao’s wails at having lost all his dreams juxtaposed against the thrusts of the dancers hips. Bao pleads with his capturers that if he does not get to Dubai, his sister will not get married, his father will not pay off his loans, and his younger brother will not become a judge. He earns a booming laugh in his face, and is told that the rest of his life will be spent breaking stones.

Yet, as their new lords settle in for another dance number—the greatest hit of the movie duroN duroN ankhiaN maray munda Patwari da—the prisoners stage a dramatic escape and flee. Bao and Cheema are rescued by a truck driver. After listening to their tale of woe, he promises to help them, and takes them to a Seth (urban rich man). The Seth offers to help, but only one of them. Cheema sacrifices his happiness for Bao’s greater need, and grateful Bao is finally taken to the airport to board a flight. But his troubles are not over. It is at this marker that the movie melds its critique of class and urbanisation, as things go markedly wrong for our protagonists. Bao is used as a drug mule, and ends up in jail. His sister is raped by the village landowner, and commits suicide. His brother, witness to the atrocity, is struck mute. Though Cheema is able to get Bao released (by turning the Seth over to the police), Bao goes to the village and kills the landowner. The movie ends with Bao heading to prison for murder. Here lies the end of the Dubai dream for the villager. *Dubai Chalo!* then finishes as a stark morality tale where no good can ever emerge from leaving one’s house.



III

Very slowly, like steam clearing up on a bathroom mirror, the anxieties of *Dubai Chalo!* made it to our not-Dubai. My father made a new friend who worked as a car mechanic, (he took over our banged up Cressida), and we began to hear stories about the labourers and their troubles. Instead of Tamil or Urdu, I started to hear Pashtu and Malayalam. I read the newspapers, as the not-Dubai police raided labour shanty towns to crackdown on black magic or gambling or prostitution. I read the accounts of women flinging themselves in front of speeding cars—women who had recently

arrived from Southeast Asia. I left (though my father remained) not-Dubai in the mid 1980s, and it was only then that I really saw the cost of *Dubai Chalo!* writ against the physical and social landscape of Lahore. The development of the new housing colonies circled Lahore; the facades carried the name of God; the crossed triangles and deep maroons festooned the walls; the walls rose higher and higher to save the insiders; the insiders wrapped themselves in gold and black. Not-Dubai came to Lahore in the 1990s, and changed it forever.

Dubai Chalo! evokes a world lost to time. Its anxieties have disappeared. The visa regime is regementised into perfection. The village has disappeared as well. The men who had left are back—bearing gifts. *Lahore Chalo!* is the movie we now need.

My father never talked about his daily existence outside of the house in not-Dubai. After badgering, in the last year of his life he wrote eight pages. Eight pages that he called "memoir." This man, over the course of 30 years, wrote thousands of densely packed letters to his loved ones (to me his eldest son, to his wife, to his brother in Sahiwal, to his friend in Melbourne). Each letter contained a bit of his moral self. Yet at the end, after my endless harangues about racism, about immorality, about worker's rights, he wrote eight pages about his life in not-Dubai. Dubai was a spectral presence, a mere desire, for Bao and Cheema, and it never made an appearance in this movie bearing its name. My father's not-Dubai remains spectral to my understanding of his life. For Bao and Cheema, Dubai was unreachable. For my father, the State was unwritable.

To watch *Dubai Chalo!* in Urdu click [here](#).

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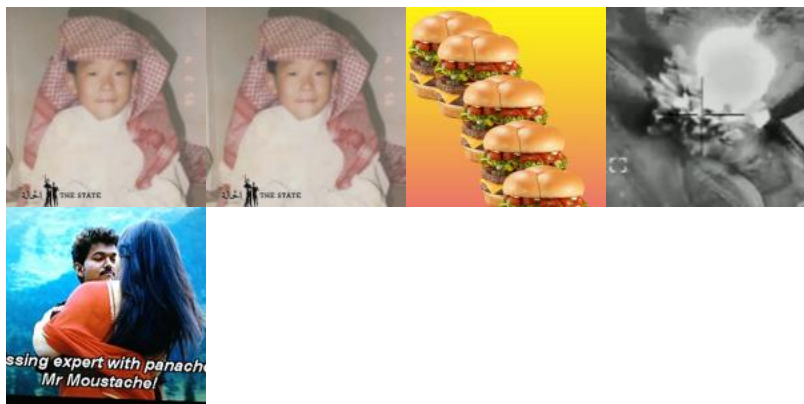
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About Manan Ahmed Asif



Manan Ahmed Asif was born in Lahore. He lives in New York and is an historian. He is currently writing a book about Lahore. [@sepo](#)

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