

ence at Mumbai, Maharashtra, having been interviewed for the post by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He was the editor of K. M. Munshi's *Social Welfare Weekly* (Bombay). Establishing a reputation as a well-informed and engaging teacher, he was attracted to St. Xavier's College, where Dr. Stephen Fuchs SVD and Dr. Hermann SVD started the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. The popularity of that department and the number of students opting for the subject were enhanced by the captivating lectures of Dr. J. V. Ferreira. After serving at that college for several years, he left for higher studies in Vienna, thanks to the good offices of Dr. Stephen Fuchs SVD, renowned anthropologist and the founder of the Institute of Indian Culture, a branch of Anthropos Institute in Mumbai.

John V. Ferreira obtained his doctorate from the University of Vienna on the subject of totemism in India, under the guidance of Dr. Wilhelm Koppers SVD, the scholar companion of Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt SVD – a member of the Vienna school of ethnology, the founder of the journal *Anthropos* (1906) and of the Anthropos Institute (1931).

Professor Ferreira joined the Department of Sociology at the Bombay University and served as its head from 1976 to 1982. He occupied the position of Professor in Cultural Anthropology. He has also served as the Honorary Director of the Western Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and as the chairman of the Coordinating Committee of the East African and Soviet Area Studies Centre of the Bombay University. He was appointed Special Executive Magistrate by the Government of Maharashtra as well as the chairman of a committee concerned with the Halba/Halbi Koshiti problem. He received the Certificate of Merit from the National Foundation for Teachers' Welfare for valuable services rendered in the field of education. Finally, Dr. Ferreira was Hon. Professor at the G. D. Parikh Centre for Educational Studies and at the Institute of Indian Culture, where he also served as the deputy director of its governing body.

The scholarly works written or edited by Prof. Ferreira include: "Totemism in India" (1965), "Essays in Ethnology" (1969), "The Outlook Tower: Essays on Urbanization in Memory of Patrick Geddes" (1976), and "Nemesis – Critical Perspectives on Modernization" (1983). He was also a contributor to the "Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology in India," 3 Volumes (1972–1974).

Dr. Ferreira's love for books was extraordinary. For decades, every week on a Monday, he purchased at least two or three books from Strand Book Shop including grammars, dictionaries and a whole range

of encyclopedias. He donated hundreds of books to the Institute of Indian Culture. In view of his passion for books, his sister Phyllis suggested that one of the books he owned be placed in his coffin. The book selected for the purpose was an elegantly edited one with the title: GOD. There could be no better companion for dear Professor Ferreira during his final journey.

Dr. Louis D'Silva and Dr. S. M. Michael SVD

Itinerary Ear-Cleaners

Notes on a Marginal Profession in Urban Muslim Punjab

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen

It was not until the 1990s, when during sojourns in larger cities of Pakistan and North India I became aware of traditional medical practitioners who wandered the streets in search of clients to remove earwax. It proved difficult to satisfy my professional curiosity through ethnographic observation and conversation as these extraordinary looking men, wearing red headgear with iron sticks tucked under it, seemed to vanish as fast as they materialized all of a sudden at a street corner. Sometimes I could only catch a glimpse of such an ear-cleaner while passing by in a speeding rickshaw. Finally, in November 1999, I had my first chance to talk to one of them who was attending to a customer in front of the Tarannum Cinema in Lahore's infamous Hira Mandi area. This became the starting point for occasional, mostly unplanned meetings with ear-cleaners, mainly in Lahore but also in other Punjabi towns, in the course of anthropological fieldwork devoted to other topics. Thus, I am only able to present stray notes which were so-to-speak collected on the side. Nevertheless, I am tempted to do so because this marginal profession is rapidly disappearing from the urban landscape due to radical socioeconomic changes. Not a single ear-cleaner I met between 1999 and 2006 had an apprentice.¹

1 As ear-cleaning service is still in demand, this poses the simple question as to who is now fulfilling these needs for the poorer segments of society? Apparently, footpath dentists extract earwax for men and women working in beauty-parlours or offering this service indoors for ladies.

Fig. 1: Ear-cleaner Mohammad Khalid with a customer in front of Tarannum Cinema, Lahore/Pakistan (photo: J. W. Frembgen, November 1999).



Introduction

An ear-cleaner is called in Urdu *kān-sāf-karne-wālā*, *kān-kī-safai-karne-wālā*, *kān-kī-mail-sāf-karne-wālā*, or *kān-safai*, in Punjabi he is simply known as *kān-malai*. Practitioners of this exclusively male profession look for customers in densely populated neighbourhoods and public places in Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, and Multan, but also in smaller towns, for instance of the size of Dera Ghazi Khan.² In Lahore, for example, ear-cleaners stroll around and wait for prospective customers at Data Darbar, the largest Sufi shrine of the city, and the adjacent service lane on Circular Road which is encroached by large number of footpath vendors, furthermore at Railway Station, in Hira Mandi, at the gates of the ancient Walled City as well as at Lakshmi Chowk and at the entrances to bazaars. Two ear-cleaners with whom I talked in April 2006 told me that at that time only 10–12 practitioners worked throughout the city in different territories (*ilāqa*) divided amongst them. Unfortunately, I could not gather more information about this system of division. They also complained about being frequently derided as quacks by people in posh localities and markets where they were even driven out under the threat of informing the police. Their

medical practice as well as those of other traditional healers (*hakīms*, *jerrāhis*) is commonly derided as primitive and associated with fraud and quackery (cf. Ahmed 2001: 39). In the same vein, street gossip has it that *kān-malais* often wilfully hurt their customers' middle ear with sharp instruments to secure permanent clientele. Mohammad Sharif, a respectable elder ear-cleaner and healer (whom I met in November 2001 at Lahore Railway Station), was deeply disappointed about the lack of recognition by medical doctors in particular and by the public in general.³ He told me that he would like to leave his work if he could afford it.

Medical Practice

Itinerary ear-cleaners are first of all recognized in public by their *surkh topi* (red headgear) which serves as a “signal colour” to prevent someone inadvertently bumping into them and thereby probably hurting a patient. In his novel “Such a Long Journey” the author Rohinton Mistry aptly highlights this fact, describing an ear-cleaner in one of the old quarters of Bombay (1991: 101):

An earwax remover was busy at the corner, his customer wincing occasionally as the slender silver instrument entered, explored, and emerged. Gustad stepped carefully

² Mohammad Khalid, an ear-cleaner whom I met several times in 1999 and 2001 in Lahore mentioned the following number of families (“houses”) with this occupation in the whole of Pakistan: Lahore 15–20, Faisalabad 6, Multan 9, Rawalpindi 2, Peshawar 2, Karachi 100 (which means “many”; the highest number of “houses” countrywide as he emphasized, but he felt unable to specify their number). Khalid himself, who lived in Lahore’s Bakramdi area, had five daughters and four sons (none of whom became his apprentice).

³ Mohammad Sharif, whose father migrated from Delhi, had worked for a long time as assistant of a dispenser in the army. After retirement he was taught by *ustad* Gulzar Husain from Multan and became a professional ear-cleaner. He himself had acquired two apprentices (*shāgird*) over the years, who both hailed from Rawalpindi and learned from him for 2½ years.



Fig. 2: Ear-cleaner Mohammad Sharif with a customer in front of the Railway Station, Lahore/Pakistan (photo: J. W. Frembgen, October 2001).

around them. What would happen, he wondered, if someone jostled the man's arm while he was excavating? The thought made him shudder.

Ear-cleaning is thus a "risky job" (*khatarnāk kām*) only practiced from morning till late afternoon, "when light becomes insufficient for work," as they emphasize. When ear-cleaners stroll around a bazaar or neighbourhood, they call in Punjabi *kān sāf karālo* (let your ear be cleaned) or *kān dī safai* (ear-cleaning). The second item of identification, in addition to the headgear, is their specially made case (*dawai kā baksa*), consisting of different, sometimes foldable compartments, or much simpler just a shoulder bag for carrying their instruments and medicine. On April 16, 2006, I met Mohammad Shafiq at a street corner in Lahore's Hira Mandi who displayed a marvellously decorated box that he had embellished on the outside with coins and stickers – just for *shauq* (pleasure, fun) as he explained. The opened case appeared as a mini showcase showing not only a variety of medical instruments, bottles, and boxes but also Shi'ite devotional objects and small pictures of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Pakistan's most popular Sufi saint. Of course, this medical carrying case attracted the curiosity of potential customers.

The ear is first cleaned with cotton wool (*ruī*), after that wax (*kān kī mail*) is removed with the help of iron sticks with a slightly curved end (*kānta*). Clotted earwax is often kept in a small glass bottle as a proof of successful extraction and to convince undecided customers. Again Rohinton Mistry offers a vivid and humorous description of this demonstra-

tion of the need to get one's ear cleaned in his Bombay novel (1991: 107):

... the man extracted the long, thin, silver instrument and held it up for the customer to see. A glistening brown pellet, the size of a pea, was perched in the tiny scoop. "Sabaash!" said the customer, proud of his ear's performance. Like an impresario, he turned the other ear to the instrument, eager to show what this one could produce.

In addition to the *kānta*, surgical instruments are used such as tweezers (*chimtī*), sticks (*silai*) for applying oil, and sometimes a syringe (*pichkāri*) for inserting liquid into the ear as well as a specially shaped bowl (*katorī*) to collect this liquid. Finally, the ear is cleaned with hydrogen and/or oil, both applied with *silai* (which are tucked under the brim of the headgear). Ear-cleaners commonly use the following types of oil: *badam roghan* (almond oil), *gul roghan* (rose oil), *kaddu roghan* (pumpkin oil), and *roghan naryal* (coconut oil). For cleaning both ears they usually receive Rs. 20 (November 1999).

The following information on a signboard shows how Mohammad Islam, an itinerant ear-cleaner from Lahore, advertises his medical service on the roadside:

shifā min jānib Allāh – The Cure comes from God.

kānoñ kī behtarīn safāi karwāie – Get the best ear-cleaning.

nīz kānoñ kī tamām jumla imrāz maslāñ kān bahnā yā kān dard karnā – Besides against all kinds of diseases of the ear, such as against liquid dripping from the ear or ear ache.

nīz kānoñ kī safāi aur har qism kī taqlīf kā safī 'elāj kyā-

Fig. 3: Richly decorated medicine box of Mohammad Shafiq, Lahore/Pakistan (photo: J. W. Frembgen, April 2006).



jātā hai – Besides ear-cleaning, satisfactory cure for all kinds of pain is provided.

munjānib M. Islam – Message by M. Islam.

Furthermore, the price for *kān dhulwāi* (ear-washing) is marked in white on the upper right corner of the signboard as 30 rupees and on the upper left corner *kān safāi* (ear-cleaning) it is said to cost 15 rupees.

In addition to ear-cleaning, most of these medical practitioners sell a number of materia medica, such as pills for constipation and impotence as well as antidotes for snake- and scorpionbite and ointments to be applied to wounds. Some of them also offer dental treatment.

Caste Affiliation

Ear-cleaning is an inherited profession (*khandānī peshah*), as emphasized by Mohammad Sharif and others. They named Hakim Luqman as their patron saint who bestowed medical knowledge on their ancestors. When asked about their caste affiliation, all of the medical practitioners I met claimed to belong to the minority *zāt* (caste-like occupational group) of Shaikh Siddiqi. The question is now: Who was this Shaikh Siddiqi? Mohammad Islam,⁴ for instance, referred to him as a Hindu convert and the first ear-cleaner who lived in Delhi from where this

profession allegedly spread. However, most of the other ear-cleaners I talked to claimed descent from Abu Bakr Siddiq.

According to a popular tradition, Abu Bakr, the first of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs of Sunni Islam, had been Prophet Muhammad's best friend and most faithful follower. His praise name is as-Siddiq – “the believer,” “the faithful.” Abu Bakr's claim to be their eponymous ancestor has no historical basis and is an example of a fictitious Arabization, similarly to the Rajputization evident in groups' names among Indian peripatetic peoples, such as the Banjara. Developing an origin myth of noble descent related to the area of the idealised pristine Islam by an occupational group, which is looked down upon (because it has to do with the removal of “marginal stuff,” such as earwax), is an attempt to usurp higher status. Moreover, removing dirt from the ear is considered polluting and, therefore, associated with impurity (cf. Frembgen 2008: 12, 22). The claim of being recognized as offspring of the Prophet's most faithful companion, and thus belonging to the *ashraf* Muslim elite, represents a strategy for these itinerant professionals for constructing a “higher caste” genealogy. In discussions of the social and religious phenomenon referred to as “Ashrafization,” it is often observed that identity labels originally attached to Muslim rulers, conquerors, and outstanding personalities of Islam were appropriated by “low” Muslim castes for instrumental reasons to enhance their social status (cf. Rahman 1996: 87; Khan 2004: 56 f.). In North India, Shaikh Siddiqis represent a prestigious Sunni elite consisting mainly of traders who trace their descent to the Hedjaz, although the caste name Shaikh (in

⁴ Mohammad Islam, whom I happened to meet on 8 November 2001 near Data Darbar, was born about 60 years ago in Faisalabad; he was married and had one son and two daughters. His father had been a farmer of the Arain caste.



Fig. 4: Mohammad Islam's medicine box with signboard, Lahore/Pakistan (photo: J. W. Frembgen, October 2001).

Arabic meaning “learned,” “elder,” or “chief”) in fact indicates conversion to Islam. The caste name Shaikh is relatively common in Punjab and other parts of North India; the caste itself being divided in numerous sub-castes (Wikeley 1915: 141; Ibbetson 1916: 206–209, 225, cf. 35). Thus Indian ear-cleaners were probably low-caste Hindus who attempted to leave the Hindu caste system through conversion to Islam. In 1947, many of them migrated to Pakistan.

In the Muslim Punjab, impoverished individuals belonging to the caste-like groups of Arain, Bhatt, and Rajput also took up the marginal street profession of ear-cleaning and adopted in this way the identity of the endogamous Shaikh Siddiqis. This shows that Muslim non-*ashraf* *zāts* or *jātis* can be viewed as an organic phenomenon who flexibly use opportunities to raise their social prestige and climb the ladder within the system of hierarchical grading among Muslim castes. Thus the social factor connected with “Ashrafization” appears somewhat more prominent here than the religious factor.

Professional Strangers

Itinerant male specialists offering the service of ear-cleaning walking the streets of urban Pakistan are professional strangers or semistrangers, much like the dervish beggars, incense bearers, and masseurs, which I have discussed in earlier publications (Frembgen 2004; 2008). All of these occupations are characterized by socioeconomic marginality. As underprivileged “others,” ear-cleaners represent “The Stranger,” in the Simmelian sense, who has “no positive meaning; the relation to him is a non-relation” (Simmel 1950: 407). They stand out because of their conspicuous specialized service. Either born into the endogamous Shaikh Siddiqi *zāt* or loosely attached to this group as individuals, ear-cleaners also correspond to Stonequist’s concept of the “marginal man” existing on the fringes of Punjabi society (1937).

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