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Indus Delta in Pakistan**

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## Of Gutka Chewing Piety and the Economic Exploitation of Fishermen of the Indus Delta in Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the religious connotations of gutka chewing by poor fishermen render the practice a useful metaphor for their ambiguous social and economic position within the Muslim fishing communities in Pakistan. The fishermen I lived and worked with resented the moneylenders of Baghan, the *Pesh Imam* or prayer leader of the main mosque, union leaders and social activists, and viewed them all as outsiders and authority figures. This tension was evident in the case of the *wiyaj* (interest) that moneylenders charged fishermen, who then became indebted, allegedly to support their gutka consumption. Both acts (*wiyaj* and chewing gutka) are legally and socially prohibited but widespread in everyday life. This paper argues that beyond the stigmatised blood-red gutka stains lies the essential life of the fishermen, who tell of different ways in which the union leaders and moneylenders create financial burdens for them, helping us understand everyday life within the complex processes of people's relationships to religion, society, and the market economy in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Gutka piety, social activism, credit, interest, indebtedness, extortion

They say everywhere in the *laar* [Delta], “Even our spit is worth five rupees.” Chewing gutka and spitting it out is an everyday ritual—a never-ending sacred act of indulgence.

—Nazir Jat  
the author’s key informant in the Delta

In the Indus River Delta region of Pakistan, there is a substance that permeates nearly every sphere of daily life. Gutka, a mixture of crushed tobacco, wax, areca nut, catechu, and other flavours, is a mild stimulant designed for chewing that leaves tell-tale, deep red stains on the lips, tongue, and teeth of users. Gutka chewing has become a normalised cultural addiction; much like caffeine dependency, most fishermen in the Indus River Delta can barely function in the morning before putting gutka in their mouths. But unlike consuming caffeine or other stimulants



Figure 1: The author with Nazir

popular in many industrialised societies, gutka chewing in this impoverished region of Pakistan has religious, social, and economic implications. Gutka, a stimulant available in every village and neighbourhood market, has attained the status of religious artefact. Dismissed and reviled as a primitive and hazardous practice, the gutka habit is very much a capitalistic, market-oriented commodity, intimately related to the local social hierarchy and economy.

Gutka is ubiquitous; even in remote villages without roads, water, or electricity, it is universally available, appearing as if by magic in an otherwise impoverished area. It weaves itself into the fabric of every community by operating via its own system of exchange (Mauss 1969) outside the market through sharing, borrowing, exchanging, gifting, and scavenging. Its stains serve as visual markers of belonging and insider status. Conversely, the visual evidence of gutka chewing is considered a stigma by outsiders and directly affects the fishermen's economic and social status.

Moneylenders charge them additional interest, union officials extort illegal fees, and social activists recognise their existence only when it fits their political agenda.

This paper uses the pervasiveness of gutka as an ethnographic vantage point to rethink the question of piety for fishermen of the Indus Delta. Located in southern Pakistan, the Indus Delta faces water shortages, poverty, and ecological degradation from the development of dams and water infrastructure in the upper Pakistan region of Punjab. The Indus Delta stretches from the eastern coast of Karachi to the western salt marshland of Rann of Kutch in southern Pakistan, covering the entire shoreline of Sindh from north to south, with a population of approximately 1.5 million people. Geographically, the Delta is located in four different administrative areas: Karachi, Thatta, Badin, and Rann of Kutch. Physically, most of the Delta is situated in the Thatta District.

Fieldwork for this research was conducted from January 2012 to August 2013 in various sites in Karachi and the Delta area. During eighteen months of fieldwork, I lived mainly in Baghan and its surrounding areas while following the everyday cycle of the fishermen and their socioeconomic activities. I resided in various *otaq* (male guest houses) belonging to my key informant, Nazir Jat, in Baghan and other people in Keti Bandar, Gul Muhammad Jat, Arab Jat, and Machar Colony.

According to famous Muslim scholar Al-Ghazzali (c. 1056–1111), Prophet of Islam Muhammad said, “The faith of a servant is not put right until his heart is put right, and his heart is not put right until his tongue is put right” (Al-Ghazzali 1991). By chewing gutka, local fishermen believe that they are refraining from the kind of idle talk

and banter that might be seen as sacrilegious. I therefore propose that, to the fishermen, chewing gutka is an act of piety, one that explains how a commercial product can create religious and social value. Through inserting a stigmatised object (gutka) into the sacred sphere of piety and the gift exchange system, the fishermen have made the act of chewing a devotional practice.

Though scholars have discussed ways in which the Islamic concept of piety has been used to support political reform (Mahmood 2004), little attention has been paid to the idea of silence as an act of piety. I assert in this paper that the virtue of being silent through chewing gutka provides critical commentary about both the fishermen and those who denounce their gutka chewing. I then explain how ordinary Delta fishermen become heavily indebted to shopkeepers who help perpetuate the gutka-chewing habit while simultaneously judging the fishermen as “non-Muslims.” I argue that these shopkeepers exploit fishermen in the name of religion, charging them an exorbitant interest rate—an act that is prohibited in Islam—simply because they can, given the prevailing market conditions. In the last section, I discuss how the Karachi Fisheries Harbor, an important locus for fishermen, is controlled by union leaders who claim to represent the impoverished fishermen while creating the very circumstances for their exploitation. Examining the situation of these fishermen through the lens of gutka use sheds light on the rampant social injustice and discriminatory notions of religiosity in the everyday lives of Indus Delta people.

### **Gutka Piety**

Imported from India on fishing boats,

gutka became popular in the 1990s. That Nazir Jat—a local fisherman—chewed gutka was not surprising. The fact that his six-year-old son, Waseem, also chewed was an indicator of just how widespread and accepted gutka chewing is. Whenever I visited Nazir’s village near Baghan, I often pressured Waseem not to chew gutka. But whenever Waseem wanted some, Nazir would invariably give him a bit. The boy then proceeded to make his tongue and mouth red, showing us his stained features to gain attention. He might stop for half a day, but then he would try to find leftover foil gutka wrappers in the garbage and lick them to make his tongue and mouth red.

No one talks much when chewing the sweet, creamy substance. This silence, gutka users claim, “makes us calm. It stops us from talking, gossiping, and bad-mouthing. This makes us good Muslims.” In other words, gutka users justify a substance known to cause cancer—in addition to unmanageable debt—by relating its effects to piety, as it is generally believed that to be silent is to be pious.

Throughout this region, men, women, children, and even wild cats and street dogs bear the mark of gutka with their seemingly blood-stained tongues and faces. Deep red liquid drips off lips and chins and onto shirts and sleeves. To visitors unaccustomed to this sight, everyone looks like a vampire. But to locals, *not* chewing gutka differentiates you as “other.” You are seen as an outsider—one who will not reciprocate and exchange gutka, the communal commodity that is the key to insider status. Not sharing gutka sets you outside of the system of gift exchange, outside of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Images of chewing and spitting gutka are a powerful expression of its desirability, and gutka itself is a useful sensory montage for navigating

the lives of the fishermen. There is a difference in how it is perceived by local villagers versus people who live in larger towns and work in more stable, higher-paying jobs. Outsiders malign gutka as an addictive substance and discriminate against this so-called “cultural trait” of the Indus Delta’s “gutka-eating subjects,” seeing them as indebted, drunken, broken, and poor.

### **The Exploitation of Fishermen**

Dr Sahib was the only doctor available in the town of Baghan. He had been a leftist political activist and social worker, but now he was limited to practicing medicine. He believed that the fishermen were getting into debt from consuming gutka. A gutka habit costs 30 rupees (USD 0.30) per person per day, on average. Dr Sahib argued that gutka was not only a serious medical problem for fishermen but a financial burden as well, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation. Even if they had no money for food, they would take a loan on a high interest rate to buy gutka and satisfy their addiction. In return, they would give their catch to a moneylender on his terms, which were often disadvantageous to the fishermen.

Many people trying to tackle the gutka epidemic have turned to development initiatives such as micro credit projects, social awareness regarding the gutka problem, and community mobilisation initiatives, as a potential solution. Dr Sahib was not optimistic regarding these efforts. In theory, this kind of grassroots organising and education-driven engine for change would help to make gutka users aware of the risks and costs of their habit. In reality, however, Dr Sahib has observed that such

social development is mostly limited to posting signboards. There are at least two dozen such signboards from different NGOs erected outside the village to promote their projects, all covered in gutka spit. As Dr Sahib said, “even village names are buried in gutka spit.”

For Dr Sahib, gutka was an emblem of all sins, and he was not alone in this opinion. It was amazing to observe this attitude not only in a left-leaning political worker but also in the moneylenders, the *Pesh Imam* or prayer leader of the main mosque, the union leaders at Karachi Fisheries Harbor, and social activists. For all these groups and individuals, the idea that gutka was a social ill affected how they related to fishermen in everyday life. For example, in the case of fishermen’s relationship with moneylenders, even though *wiyaj* (interest) and chewing gutka are both legally and socially prohibited, they are nonetheless widespread in everyday life, and they are essential to discrimination against fishermen as irresponsible and poor members of society. The desire for gutka is precisely related to the amount of *wiyaj* a moneylender collects. Charging *wiyaj* is a prohibited act, according to the Quran. However, *wiyaj* has been a constant presence in the Indus Delta since before British colonial times. Local merchants claim that *wiyaj* is just another acceptable form of business. The religious polity is imbued with the market realities of the local economy, where *wiyaj* has never been considered a religiously prohibited act. What makes *wiyaj* legitimate and even possible in the first place are the other aspects of everyday business practices and their intersection with religious activities like praying in the mosque, performing Haj in Mecca, and helping widows. Religious acts are a way of earning blessings; however, there are ambiguities in what it means to be

Muslim, and these seem to be directly related to an individual Muslim's socioeconomic status.

### **Qaraz of the Moneylender**

Let me share an example of how Muslim and Hindu businessmen charge the fishermen *wiyaj* on the pretense that they are not true Muslims. Haji Jan Muhammad Memon was a trader and moneylender in the community. I once asked him why he charged *wiyaj* when people bought things from him on *qaraz* (credit). He did not seem offended or angered by my inquiry, simply replying, "This is my business; I am not charging *wiyaj*. You do know I am Memon by caste. For a long time, my forefathers did the same. You must know that, don't you?" He continued, explaining his understanding of the logic and legitimacy of his practice:

I help people to pay me after six months or in a year. Why should I lend my money to someone for nothing? If I give him relaxation, then I need my profit on that investment. This is an investment of money. You might not be able to understand it. You educated people think you know Islam better, but I am also Muslim; I pray in the mosque every Friday in *jamiat* (congregation), and I went to perform Haj in Mecca. I give old women charity. This is all because of this business. It is not *wiyaj*.

The market economy of common fishermen and poor people is connected with these *dokan* (shop) owners. Through this mechanism of indebtedness, a moneylender buys fish at lower rates from the fishermen who have credit on his

account. On the one hand, this connection creates a never-ending system of indebtedness, but on the other, moneylending businesses keep flourishing. Unlike agriculture, fishing nowadays has become an expensive enterprise. In addition to a boat, one needs fuel for the engine, ice to chill the fish, and a good amount of food to survive at sea. Sailors and crew are paid in advance. Not everyone has the capacity to bear such expenses in the anticipation of a good catch. In all such cases, *dokan* owners lend money, and in most cases, the fishermen end up in debt. Haji Jan Muhammad Memon's *dokan* is a profitable business enterprise because of the *wiyaj* system.

I wanted to know why the rate of interest charged by the moneylenders was so high (30–50 percent), so I asked Haji Jan Muhammad Memon. To modify my approach and get him off the defensive, I nuanced my question by using the word "profit" instead of "*wiyaj*." This time he was pleased with my question and responded, "These fishermen are not even Muslim...If you ask them to recite the *kalma* [the testimony of being Muslim], they will respond with 'What is that?' You know one can't be Muslim unless he can recite the *kalma*." I was not surprised by this statement. Muslim and Hindu moneylenders claim that charging non-Muslims *wiyaj* is not a prohibited act according to local customs of moneylending. Most traders and educated people claimed that fishermen were ignorant about even the most basic facts of their religion and therefore not true Muslims. Both Muslim and Hindu moneylenders persistently used this view to legitimise the practice of *wiyaj*. This somehow also justified the high rate of interest they charged.

## **Karachi Fisheries Harbor**

As there are ambiguities about who is considered a proper Muslim, so is there ambiguity about the roles of social activist union politicians at the Karachi Fisheries Harbor, where fishermen of the Indus Delta sell their catch. When the everyday politics of social activist groups such as Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum (PFF) intersect with the Karachi Fisheries Harbor's political control, the borders between activism and extortion become blurred. In order to gain control over the harbor, the union takes money from fishermen, effectively becoming part of a system of exploitation that yields no benefit to the fishermen themselves—a system the union is supposedly fighting.

Union leaders collect illegal taxes called *bhatta* for every truck unloaded at the Karachi Fisheries Harbor. Like everyone else, Ali Jat pays *bhatta* to union leaders. These leaders sit next to the main entrance of the harbor, and no vehicle is allowed to enter without paying. Fishermen are often targeted by the union, fisheries society officials, and middlemen who arrange an auction system and pressure them into paying more money. They also pay a cut to *dalal* (intermediaries) for arranging the auction. Ali Jat always gives his catch to one of the big fish traders in Karachi. The entire catch enters international markets, but the fishermen never receive a fair price. The fish trader gets all the benefits, as he has all the global connections.

In a way, the PFF is very much the product of union politics. It considers Karachi Fisheries Harbor to be a major place of exploitation because the fishermen have neither control over harbor management nor authority over the auction system. The PFF also demands that the fishermen of Lyari<sup>1</sup> be given jobs. Its

political influence provides control over the lower ranks of harbor employees.

However, the fisheries cooperative society and the union are always tussling over control of the harbor and the authority to make decisions. Karachi Fisheries Harbor is supposed to be administered by the district government, the fisheries cooperative society, the union, and the Sindh provincial government's Ministry of Fisheries. These groups form complex political positions for bargaining and contesting authority over the harbor. Most of the union and political members are part of the *bhatta* system, including PFF union members. Although the PFF initially built momentum by taking part in the union politics of the harbor, today, according to Ali Jat, it is part of the problem.

## **Conclusion**

The fishermen of the Indus Delta, though generally presented as gutka-eating subjects or "primitive" indigenous community groups, seem to be very much a part of the everyday market economy of Pakistan. They are connected with provincial, national, and transnational networks, histories, and social movements. For example, I was surprised that when a national protest march was organised against a controversial film on Islam, the Jamiat Ahle Sunnat<sup>2</sup> used the event to create a network connecting the people of the Indus Delta to religious grids on national and transnational levels. During this march, fishermen who were indebted and generally considered not to be authentic Muslims (because they don't know how to recite the *kalma* properly) were protesting right along with officials like Haji Jan Muhammad Memon. Somehow, I observed, fishermen who are not otherwise considered Muslim

“become” Muslim when they participate in demonstrations.

Similarly, when fishermen become indebted, they become part of the market economy of the Indus Delta, in which gutka is one of the most important commodities. But for the fishermen themselves, gutka is not a commodity of consumption, desire, and immorality; through gutka, they enter into a space of sacredness. And yet chewing gutka is precisely a sign, an indicator, and an index for those outsiders like Dr Sahib and Haji Jan Muhammad Memon that fishermen are beyond reformation.

One wonders at the stigma when looking at the sweet shops and gutka shops in the markets with their pyramids stacked in a similar fashion. Gutka fetishism enters everyday life in a way that goes beyond just being an object of desire, a consumer product, or a stigmatised habit. It moves further, into a moral economy of gift exchange, a system based on the capacity to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Gutka is part of that larger system of the market economy, one where *wiyaj*, *bhatta*, the everyday life of the fishermen, and the Jamiat Ahle Sunnat, function together in the same space.



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## NOTES

1. Lyari is an old and historic area of Karachi where most of the Baloch fishermen live.
2. The Jamiat Ahle Sunnat is the Barelvi, a Sunni religious group that has Sufi and Muslim saint-centered religious ideologies. It is inclusive and therefore popular among the rural and urban masses.

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