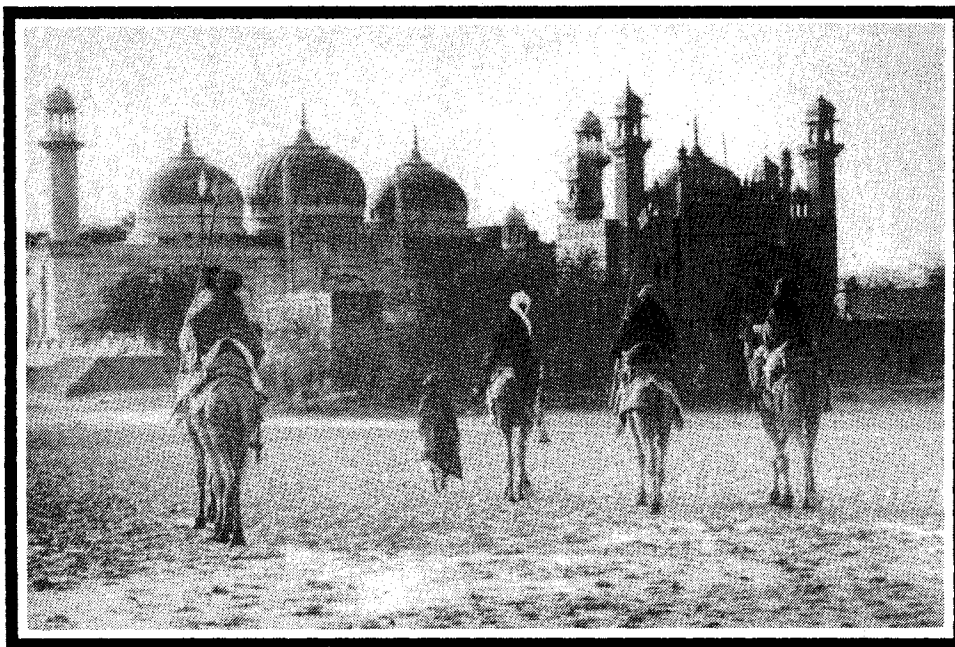


INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Multan, Pakistan
March 15, 1992**ON LOCATION**
with
ZARGUL

by Carol Rose



Filming at the Darawar Fort in the Cholistan desert.

So, you want to be in pictures? The cliché wasn't exactly how Pakistani film director Salmaan Peerzada approached me to work on his latest film, *Zargul*. Instead of promising to put my name in lights, Peerzada warned that he might not have money to finish his film, that we would be working in difficult desert conditions and that the censors might ban the movie in Pakistan.

So, how could I refuse? If I had no chance to make it in Hollywood, at least I could get a glimpse of Lahore's "Lollywood." I would learn film-making techniques from one of the best directors around. I would visit areas of Pakistan rarely seen by tourists. And I might -- just might -- play a small part in a revolution in the Pakistani film industry, or even in the country itself.



Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing about South Asia.

THE PLOT

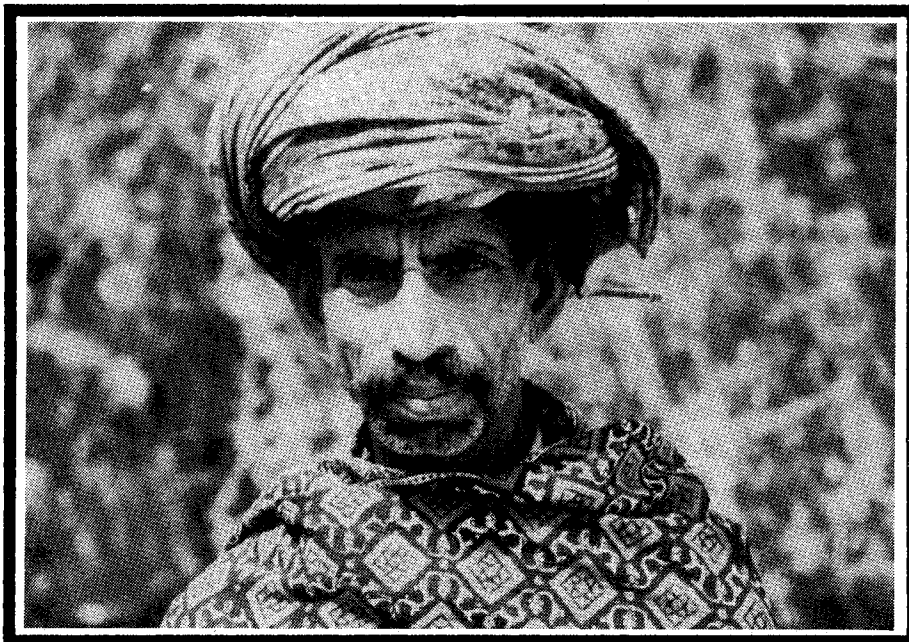
To appreciate the uniqueness of Zargul, you need only to glimpse at the typical film fare dished up in Pakistan. Most feature buxom dancing girls and brainless muscle men, who jiggle and brawl through two hours of mindless violence. So pornographic are most of these movies that few educated Pakistanis (and even fewer women) would dare to enter a movie house.

Peerzada has set out to make a film where a strong story line replaces fighting muscle men and world-class cinematography takes the place of dancing girls. The hero is "Zargul," whose name means flower of gold. He is a Pashtun from Pakistan's tribal areas whose family is killed in a vendetta when he is a boy. Zargul is kidnapped and put into a child labor camp, from which he escapes. He takes shelter with a Christian Anglo-Indian teacher in Lahore, who raises Zargul to be a devout Muslim. Zargul grows up to be an Islamic spiritual folk hero -- a Sufi saint -- who helps villagers by building schools and defending them against the feudal lords who rule Pakistan.

In the meantime, the owner of the child labor camp becomes a candidate for the National Assembly and a lackey of a feudal landlord -- or Nawab. The film is the battle of the common

<p>CAPITAL CINEMA</p> <p>From Friday 13th March</p>  <p>NAGINA Urdu Color</p>	<p>PALWASHA'S CINEMA</p> <p>From Friday 13th March</p> <p>6TH WEEK</p> <p>QANUN</p> <p>ZAMA PA LAAS KE</p>  <p>Pushto-Color</p>
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Typical film fare in Pakistani features dancing girls.



A Saraiki man in the Cholistan desert.

people against a corrupt system of government; Zargul against the politicians. The story is told -- in English -- through the eyes of an American newspaper reporter named "Jack."

- CUT -

LOCATION: Dirt track leading to the Cholistan Desert, Punjab

SCENE: Film crew attempts to reach location

We have been on the road since dawn: 17 people and hundreds of pounds of camera equipment packed into two pick-up trucks and a dilapidated van. We are trying to reach an ancient Hindu fort in the middle of the desert to shoot a scene while the light is still strong. The food purchased early in the morning is starting to reek as it rots in the hot sun. So much for lunch.

A canal runs alongside the road. Where its waters touch the sand, fields of sugar cane emerge like green oceans stretching as far as the eye can see. Palm trees sway like sailboats on the gentle breeze. White cranes sit atop enormous black water buffalo in the middle of the fields. Local village men, dressed in bright pink, red, and yellow wrap-around skirts, or lungis, stare unsmiling as we pass.

Suddenly the road is under water. A farmer has flooded his cane field by diverting the canal across the road. One of the trucks sinks into five feet of water and sand. I am reminded of the scene from "Lawrence of Arabia" when the little boy drowns in

quick-sand, yelling " 'awrence, 'awrence!" as he disappears into the muck. Local farmers bring a tractor and chains to pull the truck out. The other truck and the van turn around and take the long route to the desert. The detour means at least one hour delay. The director mutters something about losing light.

-CUT-

LOCATION: Salmaan Peerzada's house, Lahore

SCENE: A lifelong dream

"I started thinking of the story 17 years ago, after I read a story about a child who had escaped from one of the slave camps in Pakistan," says Peerzada, 48. "Then two years ago the idea came to me of linking up an American journalist and a Pakistani hero-outlaw to tell the story."

Peerzada is something of an outlaw himself. He descends from an ancient Sufi saint named Khawaja Daud Balkhi. In fact,

**I'm always scared
because you never
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unIslamic." --
Salmaan Peerzada**

the name Peerzada literally means -- descendent of a peer, or Sufi saint. Khawaja Daud Balkhi cast off his worldly possessions and became a mystic religious leader, wandering from Afghanistan to Kashmir as he preached. The Sufis traditionally are anti-cleric,

therefore they are opposed to the Mullahs and consider themselves populist leaders in the best tradition of the Koran.

Peerzada's father, Rafi Peer, studied film in Berlin with Max Rheinhardt in the 1930s. But Rafi Peer's career in the Berlin theater was cut short when the Nazi's came to power. Rafi Peer hid Rheinhardt in his apartment for three days before the famous film-maker fled the country. Then Rafi Peer returned to Lahore.

From there he wrote dozens of plays and stories in three languages of the subcontinent: Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. His first film -- "Land of the Downtrodden" won three awards in the 1947 Cannes film festival.

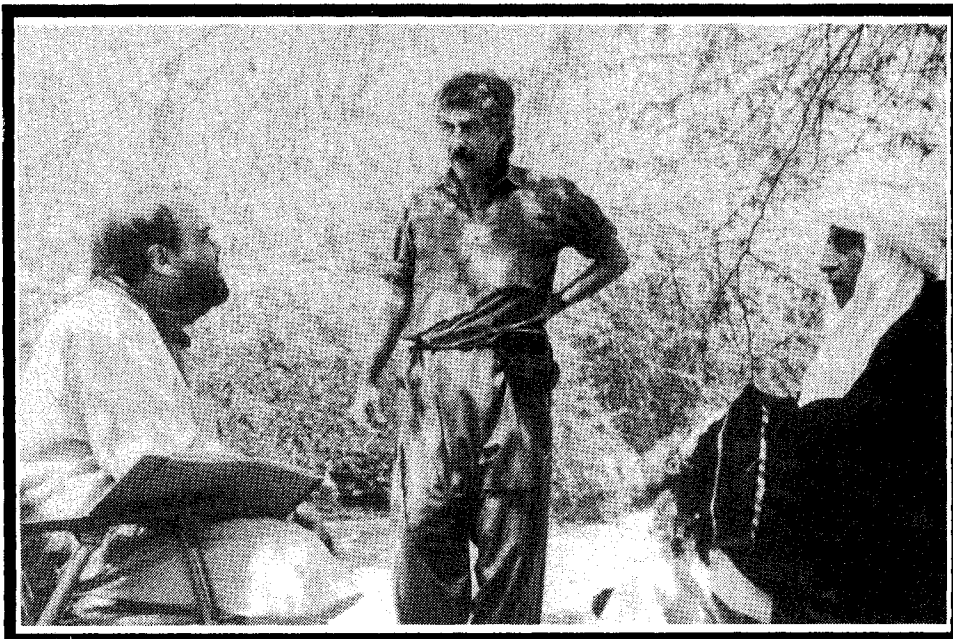
Rafi Peer's five sons have followed in his footsteps as artists and rebels. Salmaan Peerzada, as the eldest child, is perhaps the most defiant of them all. As a teenager in the early sixties, Peerzada went to London to work on films. He acted on the stage and appeared on Prime Time television programs. After the death of his father in 1974, he returned to Pakistan where he started a theater company with his brothers and starred in Jamil Delhavi's film, "Blood of Hussain." That film was banned by the

martial-law government of Zia ul-Haq and later released in Britain on Channel Four and the cinema.

At the same time, Peerzada began work on his own film *Mela - Circus* -- which also was banned in Pakistan prior to its release in 1982. The Pakistani government tried to seize the film footage from *Mela*, but Peerzada managed to escape with most of the film intact to England, where he finished the film and released it on Channel 4. Subsequently, Peerzada was tried in absentia in Pakistan for corruption and smuggling -- charges which he fought and won. But his brothers, all of whom are in the arts, were banned from Pakistani films for two years.

In 1990, Peerzada returned to Pakistan to make *Zargul*, which he describes as his "most ambitious" film yet. "I'm always scared, because you never know who will say that the film is unIslamic," says Peerzada. "A lot of people here have in-built censorship. We don't have a tradition of saying what we feel like saying in the arts. But I cannot subscribe to that. You have to be free to express yourself; there can be no compromise. Martial law destroyed an entire generation when it comes to religion."

Sounding like the Sufi saint from whom he descends, Peerzada adds: "I believe that the idea of religion is freedom -- and any religion that stands in the way of freedom is not acceptable."



Director Salmaan Peerzada (center) discusses a scene with actors Steve Masty (left, portraying the Western journalist) and Mahmud Sidiqqi (right, portraying the feudal landlord.)

-CUT-

LOCATION: Ancient Hindu fort in the Cholistan Desert, Punjab

SCENE: Zargul meets the evil Feudal Lord

The desert is magnificent: open, flat, nothingness. But the sand tells a thousand stories: jeep tire tracks, buttocks-shaped camel prints, human footprints where someone either very brave or very lost tried to walk. Even death is told in the sand: the thin squiggly line of a snake track runs into the lace-like footprints of a mouse; the two tracks meet and a scuffle is imprinted in the sand; then the snake track continues with no sign of the mouse.

After a two hour drive into the desert, the horizon is broken by the site of an enormous fort. This is Darawar -- a thousand-year-old Hindu fort now owned by the local feudal landlord. It rises from the desert floor as if rising from time itself: a massive brick bulwark. Just behind it are the tombs of the feudal lords -- or Nawabs. Each tomb is topped by a white dome and has walls covered with blue-and-turquoise glaze tiles painted with flowers and geometric patterns.

In front of the ornamental tombs are dozens of tiny sand mounds. A camera man watches me. "Those are the graves of the slaves who built the Nawabs' tombs," he says, pointing to the unmarked mounds.

A little girl tugs at my pants. Her brown face is coated with sand, her brown eyes are staring in awe at my strange blue ones. In her hand she holds a quilted pillowcase of red, yellow and green. Someone must have worked weeks to make it.

"Thirteen rupees," she says. Fifty cents.

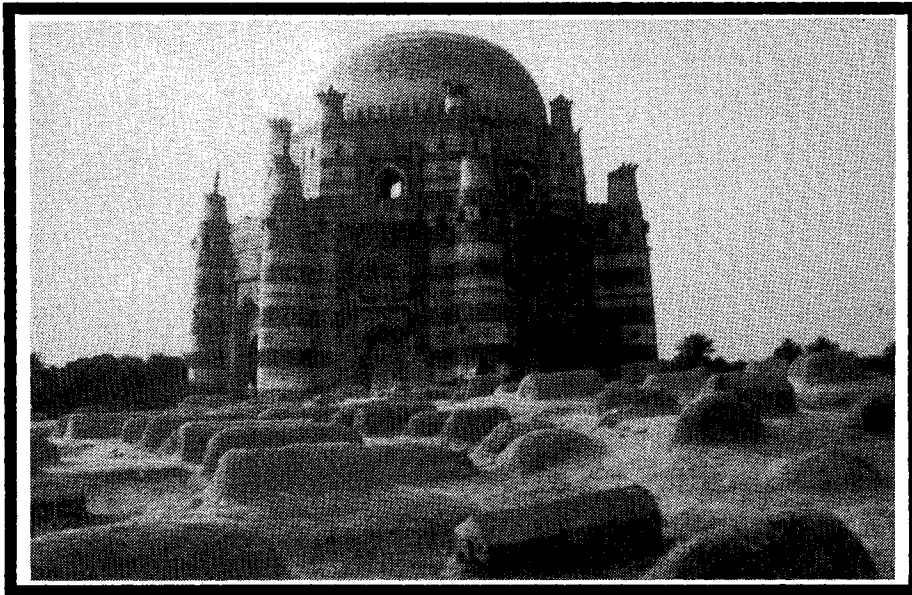
"Where do you live?" I ask.

"Here," she says. I look around. The desert stretches to the horizon in every direction.

"Yes, but where is your house?" I ask.

She looks puzzled. "Here!" she says. Only then do I realize that she is the daughter of a Saraiki tribesman -- and possibly a nomad.

"Okay, let's go!" shouts the director. Zargul (actor Imran Peerzada) is preparing to meet the evil Nawab (actor Mahmud Siddiqui) at the fort. The camera is poised to film Siddiqui and four local camel herders riding toward the fort. They are dressed in native Saraiki clothing: bright maroon and purple turbans, pink and blue pajama-style shirts and pants, flowing red and black capes.



Blue-tiled tomb of a Sufi shrine in the city of Uchhe. Dirt mounds in the foreground are graves of the slaves who built the tomb.

"Take one...rolling...Mark it...Get that boy out of there!" shouts the director. One of the local boys is hiding in a bush in view of the camera. One of the crew chases him away.

"Take two...rolling...mark it...ACTION!"

Mahmud Siddiqui's camel dashes across the desert in the wrong direction. "Cut!" yells the director.

"Take three...rolling..." Two donkeys walk into the picture frame. "Hold it," says the director, sounding exasperated. "Someone get the donkeys out of there."

"Move your ass," whispers one of the actors.

- CUT -

LOCATION: Guest house, Bahalwapur, edge of the Cholistan desert
 SCENE: Lessons from a desert tracker, Yar Mohammad

We could easily have died in the Cholistan desert. By the time we shot the last scene, the sun was already low on the horizon. Most of the crew had gone without lunch, the water had run out by mid-afternoon. Two weeks earlier, a couple on a motorcycle were found dead in the desert; they had driven in circles for hours before their fuel ran out. Their shriveled bodies were found lying next to the motorbike.

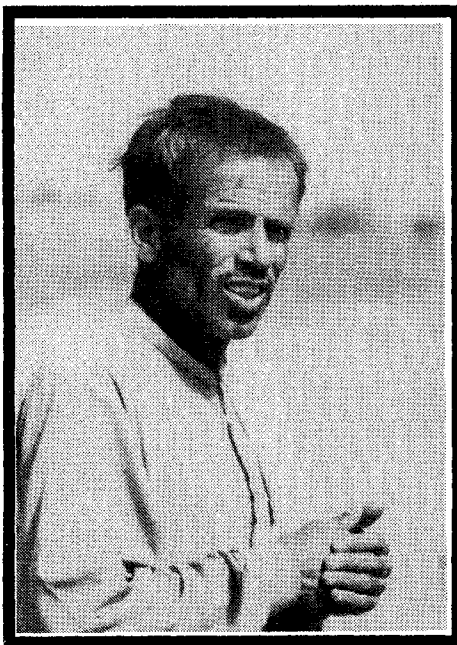
Fortunately, we had with us a man by the name of Yar Mohammed. His names mean "Friend of the Prophet," but I think he was just about everyone's friend that night. Sitting in the lead truck, he guided us safely across the sand, navigating by the stars. When we finally reached the guest house at the edge of the desert, I ask him how he learned to become a desert tracker.

"The most important thing when you go out is to keep a good attitude, to keep whatever you hear and see in your heart as a confidence and never spread it around," says Yar Mohammed, 46, whose tanned face looked as though it were chiseled in a sand storm.

Yar Mohammed's remark that discretion is important no doubt came in response to having witnessed the petty jealousies and constant sniping within the film crew. (As for myself, I chalked the in-fighting up to the artistic temperament of the director -- but I shall follow Yar Mohammed's lead in choosing not to divulge the details.)

"When you go into Cholistan you must keep your mind and attention on exact details, because even a two minute lapse of attention in the desert and you will be lost," said Yar Mohammed. "At night I look to the North star to guide me. But by day I watch for certain trees, bushes and shrubs -- remembering every detail so that I can later identify them and find my way out."

Yar Mohammed learned tracking from his father, who learned it from his father, and so on. All were camel herders of the Saraiki tribe. Now, Yar Mohammed is teaching his two young sons to track in the desert.



Yar Mohammad: Desert Tracker

"Plenty of people have died out here," says Yar Mohammed. "The biggest mistakes are made when it gets dark or they are caught in a storm. If I get lost I will sit quietly and concentrate. Only when my mind is resolved will I move. You must never move forward when you are not sure where you are going. If you must, move backwards, following your tracks."

Even an experienced tracker occasionally gets lost in the Cholistan desert. Three times Yar Mohammed has been lost, three times he has been bitten by snakes, once he

spent four days in the desert without water.

"If you are stranded you can eat the flowers of the pok plant or the seetu berry, but be careful because there are many poisonous plants in the desert," he says. "If you must sleep in the desert, first dig a small trench around yourself to keep away the snakes. And if a jackal or wolf comes, try to find a tree to climb. When walking at night, carry a staff and thump it on the ground to scare away the jackals."

Yar Mohammed prefers to travel by camel rather than by jeep, since a camel always finds its way to water or to the edge of the desert. "If you have a camel, just sit quietly on it and it will take you home. And if a dangerous spot comes, the camel will go out of its way to avoid it. Camels have a sixth sense -- they will avoid the jinns."

Jinns are the evil spirits that haunt the desert, usually the spirit of a man who has been killed at a particular spot. "They appear in many shapes and forms -- sometimes as animals, sometimes as sounds -- but always in a form that frightens a man," he says. "If a jinn finds you, you must say whatever prayers you know and try to go away quickly. If a jinn gets you, you will become terribly ill and die."

Yar Mohammed's brother was killed by a jinn. "I had an older brother who was hunting in the desert," he says. "He saw a deer and fired once, but the shot went through it. He fired again, nothing happened. On the third time, the deer finally fell. But for three years my brother was ill and then he died. The deer was a jinn."

-CUT-

LOCATION: My house, Islamabad

SCENE: A discussion of censorship with the Producer

The arrival at my house of Salmaan's brother, Usman Peerzada, and his wife, Samina, has caused a stir in my neighborhood. The husband-wife acting team are the biggest stars in Pakistani television drama these days. Usman is tall, square-jawed and handsome; Samina's skin is like porcelain and her black tresses cascade down her back like waterfalls. But in Pakistani film and television, it isn't enough to be beautiful. Usman and Samina are also tough and savvy.

As executive producer of Zargul, Usman will need all the toughness he can muster to push the film through the Pakistani censor board, which is made up of actors, producers, members of the Parliament, and representatives from the police and the bureaucracy. Still, he is sanguine.

"I don't think we'll have any problem with the censor

board," says Usman. "There is no violence, no sex, no dances in this film. And Pakistan has a tradition of showing corrupt politicians on serials. Like any other country, Pakistan is loaded with corrupt politicians. But we are not showing Pakistan as barbaric or Islam as fanatical. We are showing that Pakistan is plagued by power plays and people are not able to run their lives like they want to -- perhaps because of the corrupt politicians or sometimes because of the Mullahs."

**"The Mullahs have no real support of the people in Pakistan."
-- Salmaan Peerzada**

Usman speaks from experience. In 1987, he and Samina starred in a television drama in which they portrayed a husband and wife who were divorced (in traditional

Muslim fashion, the husband said "I divorce thee" three times). Soon after the television show aired, some Mullahs declared in the newspapers that Usman and Samina -- in real life -- were considered divorced. Under Islamic law, they could remarry only after Samina married a second man and consummated that marriage, then divorced him and remarried Usman.

"I was pregnant with my first child at the time, so I was pretty upset," says Samina. "At first Usman thought it was a joke, but it turned out not to be a joke at all."

The incident was referred to an Islamic review at the Al-Azhar mosque in Egypt which declared that the marriage between Samina and Usman remained valid despite the roles they portrayed on television.

The other big problem for the film is money. Although the Punjab Tourist Development corporation has agreed to finance half of the film, the Peerzada brothers have had difficulties raising the rest of the funds. It isn't a lot of money, by film standards. The film's entire budget: \$300,000.

"To make this film in the United States would cost well over \$20 million," says Salmaan Peerzada. "If I had Spielberg's budget for 'Hook,' I could make 200 movies in Pakistan."

- CUT -

**LOCATION: Shah Rukne-Alam Shrine, City of Multan, Punjab
SCENE: Zargul meets his future wife**

Disheveled fakirs -- those who have renounced worldly possessions in their quest for spiritual enlightenment through Sufism -- wander around the Punjabi city of Multan. A group of musicians sit at the entrance to the Shah Rukne-Alam Sufi shrine, playing drums, a harmonium and a wooden flute. One of the fakirs is hanging around the film crew. He is dressed in ragged clothes

and wears a long, shaggy grey beard. Incongruously, in his hand is a book, in Urdu, entitled: "How to pick up girls."

Like the Nawab tombs of the desert, the Sufi Shrine is decorated with blue-glaze tiles. A wall surrounds the enormous domed building. We remove our shoes at the entrance to the brick-tiled courtyard before entering. In the courtyard, veiled women are feeding pigeons in one corner while others light oil lamps on a metal pagoda-shaped stand. In the middle of the courtyard is the shrine itself -- a 300-foot tall domed building.

Inside the shrine is a ten-foot high marble canopy, beneath which are tombs of Sufi saints covered with red and gold cloth and tinsel. The air is heavy with incense. Worshippers circle the shrine, their murmured prayers magnified by the echo-chamber effect of the domed ceiling. Many stop to kiss the marble canopy, while others sit next to it reading verses from the Koran. I join the march around the canopy, my bare feet cooled by the smooth turquoise-colored tile floor. A man approaches me and presses two white balls of sugar into my palm. I stare at them with curiosity. "To cheer you up!" whispers one of my companions.

**"Have you no respect
for Islam?" -- Sufi
Shrine caretaker in
Multan.**

At the entrance to the building, the director and camera men are working to perfect a camera angle. The actor who portrays Zargul is sitting in the doorway, peering over his shoulder at the camera.

"Come look through the lens," says the director. As I peer through the camera, I see a beautiful frame: the actor's face is bathed in sunlight, his body is in the shadows. An oil lamp is burning in the foreground. The floor is a dazzling blue. On film, life takes on an ethereal beauty.

The magic of the day at the shrine is disturbed in the late afternoon, when the crew is relaxing in the courtyard. A caretaker of the shrine approaches the director to complain: he and the crew were smoking cigarettes and eating food in the courtyard. This is the month of Ramadan, when devout Muslims forsake food, water and tobacco during the daylight.

"Have you no respect for Islam?" the man asks.

- CUT -

LOCATION: Lahore, Salmaan Peerzada's House

SCENE: A discussion of religion, politics and film

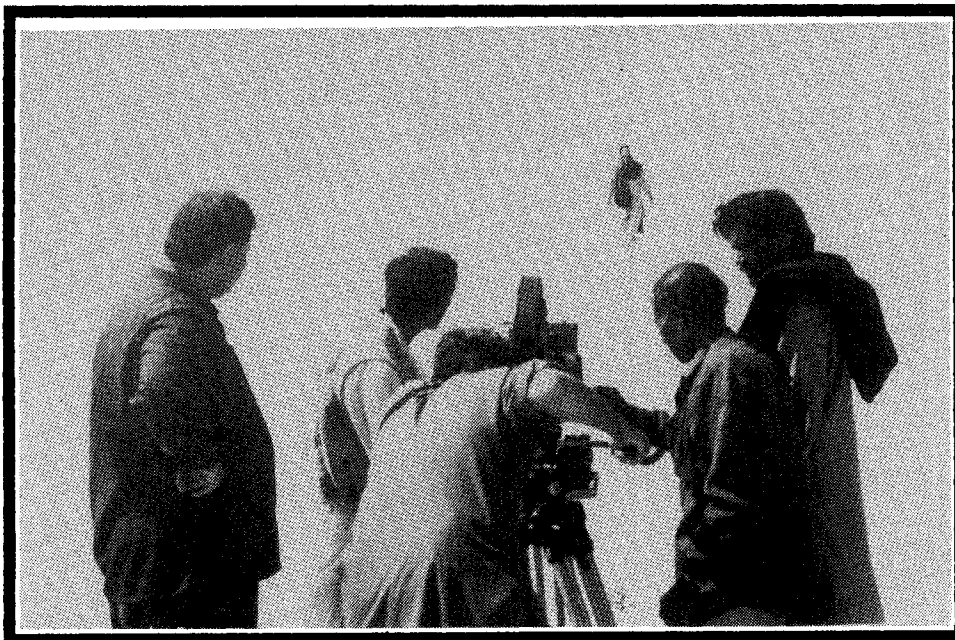
On the surface, Zargul is less politically heavy-handed than Salmaan's Peerzada's other film. In *Mela*, he showed a Mullah, or

Islamic religious leader, stroking a young boy's behind. In contrast, the hero in Zargul is portrayed as a deeply religious hero, a Sufi saint.

"Zargul is religious, so no one can say that the film is anti-Islam," says Peerzada. "But as a Sufi, he is totally opposed to the structure of the clergy, or any kind of repressive system, whether it is religious or political. Remember, it was from the Sufis that the Knights of Malta and the Knights of St. John adopted their structures.

"Also remember that the Mullahs have no real support of the people in Pakistan," says Peerzada. "They have the brown-shirt oriented kids in the universities who are organized and armed. They preach that all films are pornographic and that video shops and beauty parlors are unIslamic. They go into cinemas and tear them up and steal money. But they do not have the support of the common people.

"Someday there is going to be a politician who calls them down," he adds. "I'd like to think this film would help someone to do that."



- CUT -
- PRINT IT -

(Photos by C. Rose)

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