

The Ignored Dardic Culture of Swat

Zubair Torwali

Introduction

The term ‘Dardic’ was first used by Dr. Gottlieb Welhem Lietner in his book *Dardistan* published in 1866, 1886 and 1893 (*Dardistan*: Lietner, G. W.). Lietner writes, “Herodotus (III. 102-105) is the first author who refers to the country of the Dards, placing it on the frontier of Kashmir and in the vicinity of Afghanistan” (*Dardistan*, 1893: 1-4).¹ Lietner named the land from Kashmir to Afghanistan, including northern Pakistan, Dardistan while the people were referred to as Dards – a persianized word meaning ‘pain’ for what is termed as Dadikai by Herodotus in the 5th century BC. ‘Darada of Painni’ has been translated as ‘People of the cliffs’² as almost all the Dardic people were, and are, confined to mountainous valleys (*Journal of Asian Civilization*, Vol. 34, No.1 p. 130).

“In Tibetan sources the Darada are known as Darta”³ (UNESCO, Vol. III, p. 385), whereas “in their descriptions of India, the Puranas speak of the Darada as the inhabitants of Kashmir and Gandhara.

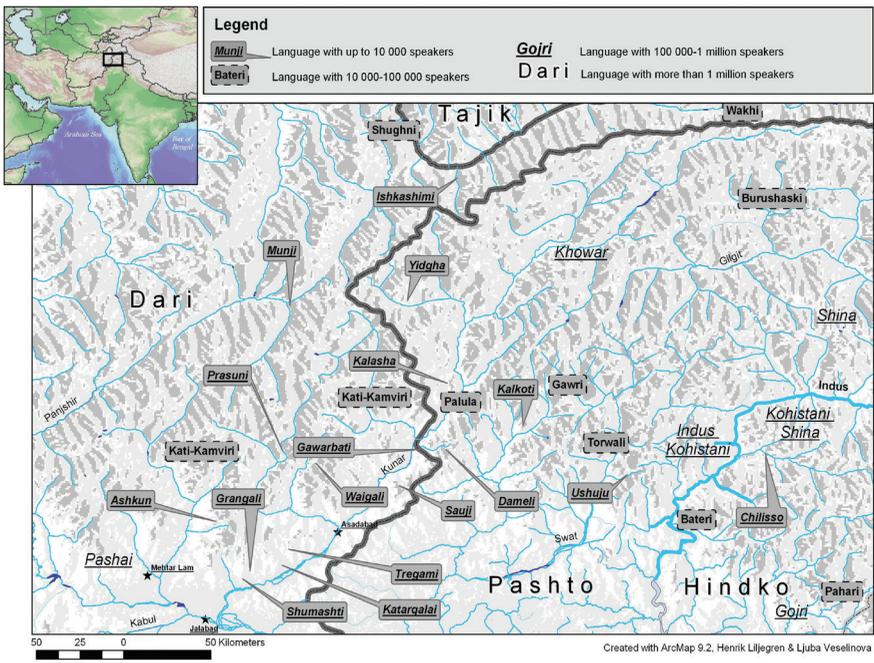


Figure 1
Map of Hindu Kush languages.
Source: Author

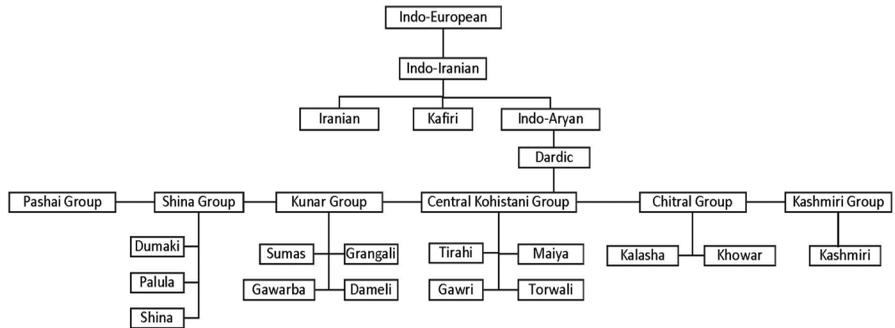
They are repeatedly mentioned in the Ramayana together with the Odra (the Uddiyana)” (Inam-ur-Rahim and Alain Viaro, II p. 59).⁴

Dardic Languages

The Dardic languages are not well studied and have no remarkable written traditions except the Shina and Kashmiri languages. The latter is even recognized as a state language by the Government of India, while the former is well known to many American and European linguists and scholars. The Dardic languages are usually divided into six groups as done by John Moch in his essay *Dards, Dardistan, and Dardic: An Ethnographic, Geographic and Linguistic Conundrum*.⁵

Figure 2

Dardic Languages.
Source: *Dards, Dardistan, And Dardic: An Ethnographic and Linguistic Conundrum* by John Moch Ph.D and Kimberley O'Neil



1. Chitral Group
 - i. Khovar
 - ii. Kalasha
2. Kunar Group
 - i. Dameli
 - ii. Gawar-Bati
 - iii. Nangalami-Grangali
 - iv. Sumashti
3. Pashai Group
 - i. Northeastern Group
 - ii. Southeastern Group
 - iii. Southwestern Group
 - iv. Northwestern Group

4. Central (Kohistani) Group

- i. Gawri
- ii. Torwali
- iii. Maiya (Indus Kohistani)
- iv. Wotapuri-Katarqalai
- v. Tirahi

5. Shina Group

- i. Shina proper
- ii. Phalura or Palula
- iii. Dumaki

6. Kashmiri Group

- i. Kashmiri proper

Dardic Occupation of Swat

Today, the Darada communities are predominantly Muslim except the famous Kalasha who live in the valleys of Brir, Bomborate and Rumbur in Chitral. They are hardly 4,000 in number and are socially under pressure to shift to the dominant culture and faith. However, they still adhere to their own mythology, rituals, shamans and festivals and believe in their mythological pantheon.

The Kalasha and a few other Dardic communities, such as the Shina, are well known to scholars due to their being geographically isolated from other dominant communities of the Gandhara area; however, the ones living in the Swat Valley are often ignored due to the overwhelming majority of Pushtuns in the valley. These are the Torwali and Gawri (Kalami) communities of the Central Kohistani Group of the Dardic communities. Today they inhabit the idyllic part of the Swat Valley known as Swat-Kohistan. In the early eleventh century, when Mehmud of Ghazna defeated Raja Gira, the last Hindu king of Swat, many of the indigenous inhabitants were either killed or driven away. "The Hindu and Buddhist local population had no choice but to convert to Islam or to be killed. The part of the population, which did not convert to Islam, was driven into the mountains north of Madyan" (Inamur-Rahim and Alain Viaro II. p. 61).⁶ This area is called Swat-Kohistan and the people are generally called Kohistanis by the Pushtuns of Swat. Swat-Kohistan remained "Yaghistan" (lawless) till the rule of Mian Gul Abdul Wadud, generally known as Badsha Sahib, the first ruler of Swat during the state era 1917-1969, who captured the area in 1923 (*Story of Swat* 1962: p. 78).⁷

The Torwali and Gawri tribes are said to be ancient inhabitants of Swat. "In Butkara, near the present Mingora, under the strata of the Buddhist period, Italian archaeologists found tombs showing a long occupation of the site. Thus, the scientific analysis of a skull, probably of one of the most ancient inhabitants of valley, indicates a Torwali human type similar to the present inhabitants of the Swat-Kohistan. From the findings, archaeologists conclude that in the second millenary, or even earlier, groups of invaders entered the valley bringing with them Indo-Aryan and Dard languages" (Inam-ur-Rahim and Alain Viaro II. p. 34).⁸

Vestiges of Dardic Culture in Swat

Torwali is one of the Dardic languages spoken in north Pakistan. It is one of a number of languages generally grouped together as Kohistani. According to George A. Grierson, Torwali is a true Dardic language (*Torwali: An Account of a Dardic Language of Swat-Kohistan*, p. 3).⁹

Presently, the Torwali tribe of Dardic origin is estimated at about 110,000, living in the area beyond the town of Madyan towards Kalam. A considerable number (about 30%) of Torwalis have immigrated to the cities of Karachi, Quetta, Hyderabad, Peshawar and Rawalpindi permanently.

The Torwali and Gawri communities have many things in common with a slight difference in the way each of these communities name their tangible and intangible culture. The lifestyle and culture of both the communities are fast shifting along with their endangered languages. Rapid changes are underway in their way of life because of a number of factors described later in the paper.

Home Life

The extended family members lived in a single room, which was large and divided into various portions according to the structure of the ceiling. This room was simultaneously used as a kitchen, bedroom and dining room and had a single bathroom without a latrine. The back of the room was also used as a stable and a storehouse.

The houses were made of mud, stone and wood. Only the well-to-do families could engrave their front doors and pillars.

Food Habits

The food contained a simple dish mostly *saag*, spinach and corncakes. Wheat bread was not common as this crop was not known. In its place barley bread called *rhod* was used. Milk products such as curd, butter and cheese were used commonly. Butter was made by stirring the curd in a pitcher made of mud with the help of a wooden tool called a *mehdaen* or cream separator. The food contained no spices. Stone salt was melted by rubbing it in the *saag* dish. Wheat bread and meat was served only during festivities such as marriages and *bilaeth*. *Bilaeth* is a term used for large meal gatherings during certain rituals such as praying for God's grace in the afterlife. In *bilaeth*, pure *ghee* with honey was also served as a meat alternative. The food was served in vessels made of either wood or mud. Utensils made of copper and other metals were very rare. Pots made of mud were used for cooking, storing water and other liquids. Tea was not common in the past. Often melted and clarified butter, *ghee*, was poured into the dish with the help of pans. A special pot, *dhoan*, was also used for carrying water or *ghee*. The food was put into one of the large pots and people ate from it in groups. The corncakes were soaked in sauce with some *ghee* sprinkled over them. Mostly there were woolen mats to sit upon while eating, however, wooden seats were also used.

Furniture

In the past, furniture was made simply. Beds were made of wood stalks and ropes. These ropes, made from animal hides, were braided together to make the beds tight. Chairs were not common and were used mostly by wealthy families. There were two types of chairs, both called *shaen*. The seats were low, about six inches from the ground and were made of rope. One type included a straight back, made from engraved wooden planks. A simpler version had no back. *Shaens* large enough for two people were also made.

Maize grains were stocked in a large wooden box called an *ashaan*. The flour was stocked in a smaller wooden box. These smaller boxes called *taen* were often engraved with beautiful symmetrical figures. *Taens* were also used for keeping clothes and money. There were no carpets; woven woollen rugs called *poray* were used instead. Later came a more refined woven woollen mat called a *lamsay*. Rugs made of grass were also common in the past.

Shaen are still in use but *ashaan* are only used in more isolated villages situated far away from main roads. Mostly they have been replaced by aluminum trunks. The *taen* are no more in use. Rich luxury furniture such as sofa sets and dining sets have become common now.

Clothing

Men owned a few clothes only. One set was new and was kept for special events while the other was for daily use. Hard oval leather caps wrapped with long strips of cloth were worn by men. The common people could not wear such caps. *Pokhols*, woollen caps folded many times up to the blade and *Kurakuli*, hard conical caps made of animal hides came later. In winter, a woollen and hand-woven coat called a *goan* was worn by men. For sleeping, a mat called a *pelaes* made of goat's wool was used.

Women used to wear *shalwar kameez*. The shirt was embroidered with colored thread and small pieces of silver. These shirts had large wide sleeves and an embroidered collar. The women's trousers were folded many times like the Balouch traditional men's trousers. On the head, the women wore a black blanket called a *taa*. This was both for decency, *purdah* and protection in the cold climate. The older women wrapped their heads with small scarves of black cloth called *shaeghaen*. Open hair was not considered graceful, so the women tied their hair into braids. On special occasions, women also wore colorful shawls as this old Torwali couplet informs us:

Huramza mozi ye daryiab si lal thua. Dhuth lhaghur asheem o sha zed zarin shawl thua.

To the rival, Huramza is like a pearl from the sea. She has red soft lips and wears a crimson shawl on her head.

Footwear

There were no boots except the barge-like shoes called *khozore* decorated with silk thread. The rich men and women both wore them. A type of wooden shoe called *kharpa* was also used and was an alternative to slippers.

Men also wore *thawat* in winter. The *thawats* were not shoes but animal hides which men wrapped around their feet upto the knees. These were especially used when there was snow. A kind of special shoe made of

braided hay (rice crop hay) was also in use. These were also made for a bride. The number of braids could exceed seven.

Goan, *khazore*, *kharpa* and *thawat* are no longer in use. The embroidered shirts are also not in use. The use of the *pokhol* is not common any longer and is being gradually replaced by white caps mostly made in Dir. The *Karakuli* is in use by a few notables only. However, it is still regarded as a sign of grace.

Rituals

Marriage

Girls and boys used to be married at the young age of thirteen years. While the girls were not allowed to choose their mate, a boy could easily send his family to the girl's house for the marriage proposal. After agreeing to the proposal, the couple was betrothed through the *nikah* (marriage bond) ceremony. The marriage ceremony used to be conducted at a later time. There were no *dolies* (a wedding palanquin for the bride) at first; these were introduced to the culture later. The bride used to be led to the bridegroom's house by a close relative. This ritual was carried out late evening or early morning. The dowry contained a wooden chest in which the bride's clothes were carried to her husband's house. The dowry included cattle, a goat, a cow or a bull. As there was no separate room for the newly married couple, the bride was seated on a mat stretched in a corner of the multi-purpose room. The bride was also accompanied by a *saet* (close female relative) such as her mother's sister or her brother's wife but rarely by her father's sister. This ritual is still in practice. The property right of the bride upon the bridegroom, called *mehr* (dower) was common but not practised. The wife usually conceded the property of *mehr* to her husband. Its amount was also small. The *mehr* in the form of jewelry was not much. The ornaments used then were of low quality silver. Gold was not common. There were no written agreements regarding the *mehr* and *nikah*.

Now the dowry is very large. It includes furniture and daily-use items. Gold jewelry is common and its quantity is determined during the engagement negotiations. People now tend to write agreements regarding the *mehr* which includes a house, land and jewelry. In both the bride and bridegroom's houses, a communal meal was and still is

served to close relatives and friends in the village. The meal consists of a single dish and rarely included wheat bread.

People were invited to marriage ceremonies by special envoys called *kotwaal*. Their job was not only to invite people at the time of marriages but also to inform people of someone's death, large meals and *ashar* (a local festival). These envoys, along with blacksmiths, drummers, pipers, barbers and circumcision surgeons were considered low caste, even though they played an important role in the community. They are called *Qasab Go*, which literally means artisans. A formal procession, called *jaen*, was usually organized by a close relative or friend of the bridegroom to his house soon after the marriage. It included scores of people waving large, colorful folded flags called *tugh*. It was a way to honor the bridegroom. The more *tughs* visible in the procession, the more the social prestige of the family of the bridegroom or the bride was as this Torwali *Žo* indicates.

*Kamal Tugh-a si bor sawad Anath si bawa
Mhi ghinu si samaam shid nu thu Aphara*

Kedam (a village name) was made a bouquet of *Tughs* (flags) by Anath's father.

It is the arrangement to marry me and my detested friend is not informed

Local musicians accompanied this procession. The piper played his *surni* (pipe) while the drummer played his *dhumaam* (drum). All these instruments were locally made. This procession also had cattle as a gift for the groom. No such procession exists now. In villages, where there is the wedding cradle there exists the procession. The *tughs* are no more. After a few days, seven, the bride's companion was/is led back to her house with many gifts including raw and cooked food. This ritual is called *satama*. The bride is then sent back to her husband's house by her parents in a ritual called *rukhsati* (seeing off) after her coming home on *satama*. There was a consistent custom of sending gifts, usually food items, to the married woman by her parents on special occasions like *Eid*. This custom is still in practice. The gifts sent with the bride or her companion when the latter was 'seen off' by the groom's house, were and still are distributed among the neighbors as *naman*. *Naman* usually

consists of wheat bread fried in ghee, mixed with *gur* (raw sugar), fruits, chickens and other food items. Now the rich people make some jewelry for the *saet* as well.

Greetings

Barbarye was a common word of greeting. *Kherset aap* was/is another word for greeting. The usual Pakistani peace greeting, *salam*, has by now replaced *barbarye*. The younger women used to bow when greeting the old ladies. They even touched their feet. The old lady in turn kissed the younger one on the forehead. This practice is rarely observed now.

Social Gatherings

People used to gather at a common house usually owned by the chief of the village. This was normally called a *bhetak* or a *hujra*. People also used to sit around the fire pit in mosques in winter. In the mosques, the elderly used to tell folk stories, share their experiences and discuss local politics.

In the *bhetak* people entertained themselves with music. The instruments used were the *sitar* or *rabaab* and a mud pitcher with a neck. The open end of the pitcher was tightly covered with either hide or other flexible material. The *Torwali Zo* was the only song sung in *hujras*. Besides music, jokes, anecdotes and riddles were also a means of entertainment in the *hujras*. The *hujra* and mosque fire-pit gatherings are not in existence now. Listening to and playing music has also decreased. The old *Torwali Zo* gradually vanished and has been replaced by a parody of famous Urdu and Pashto songs.

Festivals

There were no festivals except the two *Eid* celebrations of the Islamic calendar. New clothing and *Eid* greetings were common. No greeting cards were used. The village chiefs were visited and greeted on *Eid* days. This trend gradually lost its importance. A small number of people now exchange greeting cards.

A common festival known as *asher* was celebrated. It was celebrated at the time of reaping and sowing crops, cutting hay, threshing maize grains from the cobs and building a house. People gathered to work together. During this event, music was played by professionals. The

workers used to sing Torwali *Zo* while working. For *asher* of threshing maize grains, a special type of Torwali verse was made by poets. It was called *phal*. *Phal* was sung differently from *Zo*.

Yeyi sanam yeyi aaj me pande sanam yeyi-a
He yae Badakhshan si gha peshpesh te qadam dey-i-a

There comes, comes my beloved along the way today.
 She takes steps like the mare from Badakhshan.

Hi shala si ka na thu a thung de de kiy juda
Isi misaal alimo si ga sanam zid palara

Heart is not like a piece of wood that I should chop with an axe.
 It's like a creeper/vine that is coiled around my beloved.

Ashar is not very common today.

Honor and Family Grace Rituals

Tribal fights and generation to generation enmities were common upon issues such as land, elopement and such others. As there were no courts, land related issues were settled by force. Before the government of *Wali* (before 1925), the local *Jirga* had the function of both police and court. After the *Wali's* government, *hakims* (judges) settled disputes. In this government, the police was very powerful as everybody used to fear the *nowker* (policeman).

In case of a girl's elopement with a boy of her choice, the couple was sought and shot to death causing enmity between the two families for generations. Often people tried to mediate and reconcile the dispute. The procedure for the reconciliation was to punish the boy's family indirectly. As the girl's elopement of choice was considered a severe disgrace, her family was compensated by giving them some cash and a girl as well. This girl, in many cases, would not be of age at the time of reconciliation. Only after the settlement, the girl who had eloped, now married, was allowed by her father's family to enter their house. This was called *dar*. To have *dar* means to have reconciliation. If the mediation failed to settle the dispute, there would be prolonged enmity between the families till vengeance was sought.

Now, in elopements or court marriage cases, the reconciliation method is the same without prolonged enmity. Only a stand-off between the families exists for a long time. People go to the police in such cases. Honor killing has almost ended. The penalty for reconciliation is the same as it was before.

Rites of Passage

Birth

At the birth of a male child, a feast would be held in the house to celebrate the birth. Relatives and neighbors came to congratulate the new born baby boy with merry making, dancing, listening to music and having a meal together. They brought gifts containing food items as well.

The birth of a female child was mourned. The mother was despised by her relatives and was considered responsible for giving birth to a female child. Even the husband would not enter the house. The mother was not treated well during her recovery period.

This attitude has changed to an extent; however, the birth of a male child still takes superiority over that of a female. The mother of a female child is no longer cursed by relatives. Gifts are now common on such occasions.

Circumcision

The child was circumcised between the ages of two and five years. The professional drum player called *dom* performed the circumcision. The *sunnat* (circumcision ritual) was also celebrated by inviting the relatives and neighbors to a meal. Now children are usually circumcised at an early age by doctors instead of the *dom*.

Puberty

Here puberty means the age at which fasting and praying becomes obligatory on the child. Nothing has changed in this rite. However, in some families the fasting of a child, even if he/she is underage, is now celebrated.

Old Age

An old person was respected and was not supposed to do manual work. There is a myth regarding a custom which involved throwing old people from a rock called *maazlu/maaslu baat*. A large basket made of the stems of certain shrubs, containing round pieces of maize or barley bread was also thrown into the river along with the old person. There is no evidence of this custom; however, there are places — rocks and cliffs — in the Torwali speaking area, which have names like *maaslu/maazlu* or *maarthalu*. These words seem to be the derivatives of *Maash Thalu* (to throw a man). A place near Mingora, which is now a public park, is called *Fiza Gut* but in Pashto it is called *Qaza Gut*. *Qaza* means death and *Gut*, in Pashto, is stone or rock. Maybe the stone/rock has the same story as the *maaslu/maazlu baat*. If true, this is evidence of the claim that Swat actually belonged to the Torwali people.

Anniversaries

Birthdays were never celebrated; however, now a small number of people have started to celebrate them. Death anniversaries were commonly observed. A large meal was/is served on the death day by the relatives each year. This was/is called *tilaen*.

Death

When somebody died, a large number of people came to the dead person's house, the women for mourning and the men for burial. The women cried in musical accents. The Islamic rites of bath, coffin and prayers were fulfilled and the dead body was laid to rest. There was a large meal served while the dead body was still lying at home. After the burial, there were seven smaller meals by the relatives on successive evenings. These were called *niyashams*. There were considerably bigger meals on the evenings of each Thursday for seven successive weeks. These were called *shugaer*, (Fridays). It is perhaps due to the sacredness of Friday in the Islamic religion. Another reason may be that here people link the preceding night with the next day. On the last Friday, the *chehlum* (fortieth) meal called *dubeshum* was served. People would come to the house of the dead for three days and condole with the relatives. The people gathered at the funeral were also paid either in cash or in kind with *gur*, soap and such. This is called *iskhaat*.

Now, there is no mass meal at the time of burial. Some people still hold

the *niyashams* and *shugaer*. The *tilaen* is rarely practiced. The *iskhaat* is not common but a few rich families still practice it.

The dead person is buried in a rectangular wooden casket about 5 feet deep. The dead body is laid on the ground inside the casket and wooden planks are nailed on top of it. The tombs are sometimes surrounded with a wooden structure as well.

Conclusion

Swat used to attract high profile guests due to its beauty. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of England visited Swat in 1962. Similarly, in summer thousands of tourists used to pour into Swat in search of solace from the scorching heat. Every visitor and resident of Swat is well aware of its azure lakes, waterfalls, crystal clear streams, lush green pastures and fields, fruit-laden orchards and the cool breeze during the summer but what most of the residents and tourists ignore is Swat's rich cultural and ethnic diversity which adds to its natural beauty.

Besides the majority Pushtun community, Swat is home to the Dardic communities — Torwali and Gawri — that add to its history and cultural diversity. These Dardic communities are under threat of not only a language shift but also of a culture shift. Being ignored and marginalized, these communities, like many other sister communities, regard their culture and language as 'barriers' in the way to their development leading them to abandon their culture and language. This causes the death of not only their identity but also of an invaluable human heritage for which Swat is equally famous the world over.

Endnotes

- 1 G. W. Lietner; *Dardistan*, 1866,1886 and 1893: pp. 1-4, New Delhi
- 2 Luca M. Olivieri; *Behind the Buddhist Communities: Subalternity and Dominancy in Ancient Swat*. Journal of Asian Civilization, Special Issue Vol. 34, No.1 July 2011. pp. 123–141, Taxila Institute of Civilizations, Taxila
- 3 UNESCO Vol. III, *The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750*

- 4 Inam-ur-Rahim and Alain Viaro; *Swat: An Afghan Society in Pakistan*, 2002, Peshawar
- 5 John Moch, Ph.D and Kimberley O'Neil; *Dards, Dardistan and Dardic: An Ethnographic, Geographic and Linguistic Conundrum*. Retrieved from www.mockandoneil.com/dard.htm
- 6 Inam-ur-Rahim and Alain Viaro; *Swat: An Afghan Society in Pakistan*, 2002, Peshawar
- 7 Muhammad Asif Khan; *The Story of Swat, As Told by the Founder, Miangul Abdul Wadud Badsha Sahib: 1962*, pp. 78-88, Peshawar
- 8 Inam-ur-Rahim and Alain Viaro; *Swat: An Afghan Society in Pakistan*, 2002, Peshawar
- 9 George A. Grierson; *Torwali: An account of a Dardic Language of Swat-Kohistan, 1929*, London; New Delhi, 2001: pp. 1-7