

# Pakistan's blasphemy laws: Immanent approaches

Film screening + conversation with Arafat Mazhar

Friday, 24 January  
6:30-8:00pm

SOAS University of London  
Wolfson Lecture Theatre, Paul Webley Wing



Join multimedia artist and activist Arafat Mazhar for a discussion on Pakistan's blasphemy laws. How can we understand them; how have people challenged them? In searching for new approaches to these questions, we start from a speculative point of departure: a screening of Arafat Mazhar's short animated film *Shehr e Tabassum*. We will then hold a collaborative conversation between Arafat Mazhar, activist and academic Hashim bin Rashid, James Caron (SOAS History Religions and Philosophies), and you, the audience.

## Film Synopsis

*Shehr e Tabassum*, or *City of Smiles*, is Pakistan's first cyberpunk Urdu short film. It is an intimate exploration of what life and society under a totalitarian government is forcibly reduced to. At first glance, the city of Tabassum glistens with technological advancements and the city invites you to be a part of this wonderful spectacle. But a closer look at this terrain reveals the oppression festering underneath. *Shehr e Tabassum* is the story of what it takes to challenge hegemonic narratives being perpetuated by powerful institutions.

**Abstract**

Echoing Pakistan's contemporary situation of an embedded hegemonic discourse around blasphemy that invites violent defence against counternarratives and reformation, Shehr e Tabassum introduces the viewer to a city of apparent prosperity and technological marvel but one where citizens are under great scrutiny and their bodies are policed at all times; where the act of not smiling is an act against the state. In a city where freedom of expression is absent, the viewer is challenged to ask themselves how much liberty they may be willing to give up in the name of security.

**Bio**

Arafat Mazhar is the founder of Engage Foundation for Research and Dialogue, a multi disciplinary research institution; Shehri Pakistan, an online platform for civic education in Urdu, co-founder of Soch Videos, an online news and investigative journalism company, and director of Shehr e Tabassum, a hand drawn Urdu animated short film produced by Puffball Studios, also founded by him. Over the past 9 years, Arafat has combined his passion/love for research, design, art, music and the generation of meaningful discourse around one of the biggest issues in contemporary Pakistan, blasphemy, culminating in his seminal report "The Untold Truth of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws", a string of online interventions including animations, games and children's books.