

AIPS Senior Fellowship Report

Significance of Research to Pakistan Studies:

The radical reconfiguring of the role of women and gender relations that marks modernity has made its impact felt across the world. My chapter-in-progress on this topic interrogates how these changes have affected the historically-male clerical tradition. In recent decades a class of clerical women has emerged. The establishment of this new cohort of female religious experts is especially pronounced in the minority Shi'a sect in Pakistan. Khanum Tayyaba Bukhari, listed amongst the 500 most influential Muslims in the world, belongs to this new cohort.¹ These women challenge not just the men in their own sect but also publicly debate 'ulama from the majority Sunni sect. My work investigates how gender roles and authority are being reconfigured amongst the Shi'a clerical community of Pakistan and its repercussions for traditional Islam – a vital topic that to date has not featured in any academic study.

The abovementioned chapter on Shi'a female religious authorities in Pakistan is part of a larger monograph-in-progress titled *Traditional Islam and Modernity in Pakistan*. The contributions of my monograph are broad and far-reaching. My monograph provides insights into some of the most interesting and under-/un-researched aspects of traditional Islam in Pakistan: the rise of female Shi'a clergy; the impact of technological advancements on *fatwa*-issuance and Islamic law in seminaries; the intersection of blasphemy debates and dreaming culture amongst Barelawi clerics; and Deobandi 'ulama's relationship with, and understanding of, the nation-state through the prism of the pre-modern Islamic legal tradition. Through focusing on these issues my research provides novel insights into the relationship between Islam and modernity, while simultaneously advancing the much-needed humanistic study of traditional Muslim clerics – a group ordinarily dismissed by liberal Muslims and demonized by the Western media. In so doing, my work contributes to disciplines ranging from Religious Studies to Anthropology. While making these contributions, *Traditional Islam and Modernity in Pakistan* situates Pakistan at the heart of its study and thus integrates the study of Pakistan's religious life into larger debates about modernity in the humanities. In so doing it puts Pakistan Studies more broadly in conversation with a variety of humanities disciplines. Thus, my work offers a corrective to any assumption regarding the parochial and/or insular nature of the discipline of Pakistan Studies. Simultaneously, my research advances vital knowledge about Pakistani clerics among academics and students in the United States, Pakistan and beyond. Therefore, it contributes to AIPS's goals of promoting and disseminating knowledge about Pakistan in the United States and Pakistan.

Importantly, my theoretically informed analysis allows me to situate Pakistan not as an outlier, but as one country, like all others, where religious authorities are deeply impacted and transformed by modernity while localizing modernity in the process. This scholarly rehabilitation of Pakistan's image is especially important when we exist in a global political climate where Pakistan is viewed in largely negative terms and is hardly ever categorized in scholarly analyses alongside countries in the global north.

¹ "Khanum Tayyaba Bukhari," *The Muslim 500: The World's Most Influential Muslims*, 2020, <https://www.themuslim500.com/profiles/khanum-tayyaba-bukhari/> (accessed October 24, 2020).

Key Outcomes:

- 1 – Researching female Shi‘a female religious authorities in Pakistan has deepened my interest in Shi‘ism in Pakistan.
- 2 – In studying Shi‘a *‘alimat* in Pakistan, I connected with a couple of Pakistan-based scholars who have written on Pakistani Shi‘ism. I look forward to deepening those connections and possibly working on projects together in the future.
- 3 – In thinking about how to analyze my primary sources, I am increasingly turning to writings on Shia female religious leaders in other location. In other words, my AIPS sponsored research had led me to become a comparativist, albeit to a limited degree.

Deliverables:

1 - Thanks to the AIPS senior fellowship I was able to conduct fieldwork focusing on female Shi‘a clerics in Pakistan. In researching female Shi‘a clerics, I was able to draw on my existing long-standing connections cultivated through previous ethnographic research and personal relationships. Since 2010, I have been conducting ethnographic research on male Shi‘a clerics. My primary research site has been Jami‘a al-Muntazar, an expansive seminary in Lahore which is the foremost intellectual hub for Shi‘a life and scholarship in Pakistan. As part of my fieldwork, I spent time at the ‘Azza Khana Bargah-i Fatima, a women’s mourning hall in Jami‘a al-Muntazar, where female clerics frequently preach and commemorate the Prophet’s family. I attended several dozen study sessions led by Khanum Fareena Shamsi. The texts discussed in these study sessions ranged from the Quran (in Arabic) to Najh al-Balagha. I also attended women-only study sessions held in the homes of Shi‘a women.

2- I had the chance to interview and have informal conversations with several Shi‘a *‘alimat* as well as Shi‘a females who attended these study sessions.

3 - I was also able to reconnect with my male Shi‘a clerical interlocutors who are based in a variety of *madrasas* in Lahore and Islamabad. These are *‘ulama* whom I have known since 2012.² I had several conversations with these male clerics regarding their perspective on the rise of female Shi‘a clergy.

4 – I am in the process of transcribing my interviews and reading secondary sources that inform my analysis. I will soon begin writing on my findings and I look forward to presenting and publishing my work.

² See Saif, *The ‘Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan*, Chapters 4 and 5. These chapters give a sense of my ongoing relationship with several significant Shi‘a clerics in Lahore and Islamabad.