

AIPS Fellowship Final Report

Project Title: Navigating a Toxic Space: Ecological Disaster and Infrastructural Restitution in the Urban-Rural Periphery of Lahore

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1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

Environmental crises are increasingly shaping the future of South Asian countries and in 2022, following devastating floods, Pakistan took center stage in the global debate on disasters, climate reparation, and damages. The increasing number of climate-related disasters and endemic pollution of groundwater and air are cocreating the context in which the government and technocratic experts devise and implement new infrastructural projects, disaster management policies, climate change related reform, social welfare, and so on. My project scales back the lens of environmental disaster to examine groundwater contamination in Pakistani villages – which is no less disastrous than any other disaster – but occurs over a longer period and underground, unseen. By studying the effects of environmental pollution over two decades in two Punjab villages, my project offers important insights into how the environment has been historically studied and theorized in colonial South Asia and postcolonial Pakistan. It explores the ways in which the nature and environment came to be enrolled in the postcolonial state's development projects starting in the 1960s under the Cold War stratagem termed the Green Revolution. My project critically explores the development state's obsession with large infrastructural water projects that were used as political weapons and symbolic markers of development and growth. It looks at how these state prerogatives actively shaped conditions for disparate communities and vulnerable populations on the ground as well as the environment.

My project is situated in villages that lie at the border of Kasur and Lahore districts and have rapidly changed over the past decades owing to industrialization, dry ports, real estate markets, and growth of Lahore city. One of the ways in which the people who live in these villages have experienced the effects of development is bodily injury and deformity through consuming contaminated water. I study how development and its corollary, humanitarianism, have shaped social and political relations of people with water in the wake of environmental disasters.

The research I conducted in the early spring of 2022, allowed me to read news reports on toxic contamination of the environment against medical records, hospital bills, photographs, etc, collected by family members of the children affected by toxic contamination in 1998. It can take several years for groundwater contamination to be “discovered” and, as my study of provincial archives, family archives of medical records and news articles¹ suggests,

¹ A large portion of which was conducted thanks to this AIPS fellowship

announcements about toxic water's effects on people's bodies and health often accompanies news of large donor-funded drinking water infrastructural schemes. The schemes open avenues of employment and financial opportunity for people living in these villages and are framed as humanitarian assistance to emphasize the beneficence rather than duty or obligation of the state. I examined the news cycle of toxicity against various documents collected by residents of two villages documenting their medical histories and mentions in news articles over the last two decades. Following indigenous feminist anthropologist Eve Tuck's call for research on vulnerable communities that centers desire rather than demands on the state, I examined how demand for filtration plants was created as a direct consequence of development initiatives.

My ethnographic research situates Pakistan as a country that is central to imagining the future of the world under conditions of climate change and environmental disasters. The villages I work in have been sites of development activity and reform for over two decades, and yet the number of health-related problems have only increased. The depoliticizing work of statistically enumerating health concerns and effects of toxicity have turned the villages I work in into laboratories for experimentation of various policies and machines for living in a damaged environment. A detailed ethnographic analysis of these conditions and villages will add to knowledge about the ways in which climate change and unfettered development are collectively shaping the lives and livelihoods of Pakistanis.

2. Key Outcomes:

1. I identified several families where multiple family members had been affected by drinking contaminated water in 1998. They had kept meticulous records of the health of the affected family member and the promises made by the government in communiques and newspapers. I managed to obtain and photocopy the documents in the folders.
2. I met citizen scientists and political activists who were collecting data and raising awareness about water contamination in various bordering neighborhoods of Lahore. I managed to collect interviews and data from them and wrote a news article on it.
3. I made contacts in the Punjab Archives and Government Punjab Public Library to get access to newspapers and documents on water infrastructure and public health initiatives starting in 1857.

3. Deliverables:

1. I held formal and informal talks with the students and political activists of Haqooq-i-Khalq Party who had organized medical camps in Lahore neighborhoods and were collecting blood and water samples to test for presence of various contaminants.
2. Although the article was published later in the year, it has been in the making for several months: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/1018795-of-toxic-city>
3. I was able to reconnect with several of my interlocuters and set the ground for extended fieldwork later.