

Rethinking the Question of Fishermen through Gutka Piety

This paper discusses how gutka chewing, bhatta (extortion), and wiyaj (interest) help us to rethink the question of fishermen in Pakistan. During my doctoral research, the fishermen I lived and worked with resented the moneylenders of Baghan, the Pesh Imam or prayer leader of the main mosque, union leaders, and social activists. This tension was evident in the case of the wiyaj that moneylenders charge fishermen, who then became indebted, allegedly to support their gutka consumption. Both acts (wiyaj and chewing gutka) are legally and socially prohibited but widespread in everyday life. The paper argues that beyond the stigmatized blood-red gutka stains lies the essential life of the fishermen, who tell of different ways in which bhatta by union leaders and the wiyaj of the moneylender create financial burdens for them. These lived realities of the Indus Delta help us to understand everyday life within the complex process of people's relationships to religion, society, state, environment, and the market economy in Pakistan.