

Significance of the Presentation

My paper entitled, “Khwaja Sira: Dissent, Sex/Gender Activism, and State Regulation in Pakistan,” presented at the 2016 Feminist Pre-Conference at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, WI, was the only presentation to represent research on Pakistan at this year’s pre-conference, where the range of papers presented explored the timely theme of “Sexuality, Gender Identity and Sedition.” The presentation examined the form that sedition and dissent have taken in Pakistan with respect to the struggle for the rights and recognition of non-normatively gendered people, and how this type of resistance both overlaps with and diverges from seditious practices within the broader context of South Asia in the contemporary moment of anti-nationalism.

Over the years in Pakistan, the persecution of women and religious minorities has increased, cases of blasphemy have been in the limelight with celebrities and ordinary folk alike being accused of and punished for blasphemous speech, and anti-Pakistan and separatist sentiment has been swiftly repressed through arrests and forced disappearances by security agencies. In such a sociopolitical environment, where even the most unlikely acts have been framed as dissident and sacrilegious, what cultural resources are available to marginalized and stigmatized populations, such as khwaja siras, for engaging in acts of dissent? This paper examined the practices of khwaja sira activists who sidestepped the trappings of sedition and dissent by anticipating potential pitfalls and avoiding any possibility of being accused of anti-establishment activities. Instead, they employed forms of identification and subtle acts of refusal that not only impeded potential allegations of anti-nationalism but also complicated notions of dissent through engagement in indigenous modes of resistance that privileged ambiguity over certitude.

This paper contributes to the field of Pakistan Studies by making a timely empirical contribution to the sparsely explored territory of sexual and gender diversity while highlighting contemporary trends in social justice in Pakistan. It also contributes to the anthropology of Pakistan and South Asia by examining the concept of ambiguity, a theme that frequently emerges in the literature but remains woefully under-theorized despite its significance to the region’s psyche, sacred beliefs, and communication systems. In addition, it diversifies activist and feminist analyses by theorizing ambiguity as a form of resistance.