

Lyari Town and the Politics of Race in Pakistan

Funds from the American Institute of Pakistan Studies Summer Research Grant were used to carry out preliminary research for seven weeks in several boxing and football clubs in Lyari to investigate the meanings these sports hold for athletes and residents in the neighborhood. Part of this project is historical and therefore aims to locate Karachi's history in the Indian Ocean, showing the flows to and from the port city to the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Literature also suggested that labor used on the port were former slaves of African origin as well as people from the Persian Gulf, seeking employment. For this purpose, I also regularly visited the archives at the Karachi Port Trust, going through yearly reports and minutes from board meetings. I was able to see from the year 1890 as that is what is housed at the KPT library. Even though these meetings and annual reports did not have much on the labour used on the port, Port officers report had information about the Karachi port opened for emigration in 1898 to East Africa for labour to work in the construction of the Uganda Railways. There was also information about pilgrims leaving from the port in Karachi, which can be understood as one form of circulation of people in the Indian Ocean. Another important aspect of this circulation was the ways in which the city being affected by plague and cholera through the movement in the Persian Gulf was always a concern and the British authorities kept a thorough record of it. Therefore, the movement of not only labour but pilgrims and disease became important in the Indian Ocean.

For the ethnographic part of the project, I visited boxing and football clubs. I spent time in one of the boxing clubs which is now open to female athletes as well. I spoke with several female athletes at the club, getting to know why they hold boxing in high esteem and why they are hoping to be professional boxers. I spoke with coaches as well who told me about the management of the clubs, their participation in national tournaments as well as their boxing experiences. Some of the coaches themselves played boxing professionally and represented Pakistan in international tournaments like the Asia Games as well the Olympics. They also acquainted me with the history of boxing in the neighborhood prior to the partition and after the formation of Pakistan, as well as the present state of the sport. They have also given their permission for me to carry out fieldwork in the club when I start work for my dissertation. My trip coincided with the FIFA World Cup this summer. I attended screenings of live football games in local clubs of the neighborhood, in order to get acquainted with the viewing practices of the sport in the neighborhood. Presently there are over a hundred football clubs in Lyari, I built contacts with five of these local clubs. The coaches recalled their experiences of how the sport was once patronized by various government institutions and how that has declined over the years. Another ethnographic component in this project is to see the ways in which Lyari gets represented by the media. In order to understand the dynamism present in the processes of representation, for my dissertation research I plan to trail journalists and photographers as they report on Lyari from issues as broad ranging as crime to political news, sports and social issues. With the funding from the American Institute of Pakistan Studies I was able build contacts with several journalists and photographers working on Lyari. They have allowed me to trail them on their reporting assignments which would help me analyze the relationship between Lyari's residents and journalists and help me answer my larger research question about the mediated production of racial categories in the neighborhood.