

LOCALLY SOURCED IN PAKISTAN: RECOVERING THE LOCAL IN HISTORY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

A PROPOSAL FOR AN AIPS SPONSORED WORKSHOP IN ISLAMABAD

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In an influential article on the Pakistan Crisis of 1971, Philip Oldenburg describes the nation of Pakistan as “insufficiently imagined.” Economic, political and security experts often identify this insufficiency as driving various failures by the Pakistani state. Instead of alleged state failures, this workshop focuses on analyzing and highlighting “the view from the locality” in Pakistan. In its ideological formulation, the concept of Pakistan as a new state was in fact often juxtaposed against narrower local, regional, or tribal identities. Localism, in the eyes of Pakistan’s ideological champions, was something to be overcome in the name of the nation. But in reality, the relationship between the local and the national in Pakistan has never been so oppositional. Rather, the local has often provided a framework in which the meaning of the nation has been mobilized, constrained, and negotiated. To focus on “local history” is thus to open new windows on what it means to be Pakistani in a variety of contexts. This workshop will explore questions about how local spaces impact ideas about identity in Pakistan and enrich what it means to be a Pakistani.

A major aim of the workshop will thus be to identify and describe local histories, cultures and politics in Pakistan, and to probe their importance for understanding the politics and culture of Pakistan. Participants will ask a series of critical questions about the research that they (and others) present at the workshop. What constitutes the local as a distinctive arena for the study of history, culture and politics? Is it always best defined geographically, or can we think of it in other ways? What roles do distinctive local configurations of politics, culture and identity play in shaping people’s everyday lives and imaginations? How does the local shape the meanings of the regional and the national? How can we bring together insights derived from distinctive local histories to shape larger histories? The workshop will be based on the assumption that greater attention to the local will significantly enrich recent Pakistani history. But it is also based on the assumption that there is a large storehouse of knowledge and sources on local history in Pakistan that has often been bypassed in the search for the larger centralized, national story.

A group of scholars asked similar questions at an April 2014 AIPS workshop in North Carolina. Titled “Dislocating Pakistan: Reconstituting People, Reconstituting Space,” this workshop addressed how “external” phenomena (e.g., historical legacies that predated Partition and identities from beyond the territorial limits of the Pakistani nation-state) shaped and constituted regional and local identities. The AIPS-PIDE workshop will differ from the 2014 North Carolina one in several ways. The 2014 workshop only involved U.S. trained scholars who taught in the United States. The AIPS-PIDE workshop, in Islamabad, will include both U.S. and Pakistani trained scholars. It will also integrate Pakistani Ph.D. students who are writing and/or who recently completed a dissertation. Beyond fostering better working relations between Americans and

Pakistanis, the integration of scholars from different levels and backgrounds serves methodological aims that were not part of the 2014 North Carolina workshop. Scholarship in Pakistan that addresses history, culture and politics can be exceptionally rich in local detail. At the same time, such scholarship also often does not connect to interpretive frameworks and narratives that are not part of the nation-state. The workshop will encourage participants to comparatively make interconnections between their presentations and those by others. An outcome of this comparative process will be for participants to identify and describe how specific non-national frameworks and narratives broaden (or narrow) their understanding of research presented at the workshop.

The AIPS-PIDE workshop will also differ from the North Carolina one in its aim to develop a vision of Pakistan Studies that draws local bodies of research into conversation with each other to forge historical, cultural and political linkages across spaces *within* Pakistan. This vision remains committed to the close-grained analysis of specific locations but also seeks to dislodge localized research from the “insufficient” spaces that Pakistani nationalism often ignores. This vision also aims to better align the study of Pakistan with contemporary methodologies in the social sciences and humanities that abstain from choosing between local knowledge and broader forms of analysis. The workshop’s overarching goal is to not only expose and but deepen—methodologically and in terms of content—the participants’ (and, hopefully, the attendees’) understanding of Pakistan’s rich local repositories of history, culture and politics.