

## AIPS Fellowship Final Report

**Project Title:** *Weathering Crisis: Self, State and Environmental Disaster in Punjab (1707-1849)*

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### Significance to Pakistan Studies

The significance of my work to Pakistan Studies lies chiefly within the realms of environmental histories and Punjab studies. Within histories of Pakistan, environmental history is a small but growing and important subfield. As Pakistan reels from year after year of monsoon floods, scholars are turning to the past to understand the particulars of climatic variability and drought-flood cycles. My work attempts to provide the social and cultural context for climate histories of Pakistan, focusing on the ways that climate events, river course changes, and even the regular monsoon cycles have been agents of change and enduring cultural and social phenomena in Punjab in particular. While others have written about environmental histories of Pakistan from the vantage point of the colonial ecological and political transformations in the canal colonies and the Indus basin, I query the immediate pre-colonial period, helping to fill the lacuna that has existed in Pakistan studies concerning not only precolonial histories but especially precolonial environmental and cultural histories, throwing into sharp relief the specific legacies of colonial capitalism and their enduring effects on the environment and ecologies of modern Pakistan.

Secondly, my work is focused on a period within the history of Punjab that is marginalized within Pakistan Studies. While the wartime militarization and establishment of canal colonies in Punjab is well studied within Pakistan Studies, the immediate predecessor of the British in Punjab, the Sikh Empire, is rarely examined through a historical lens within the ambit of Pakistan Studies. The siloing of disciplines and of histories within modern national boundaries has meant that the studies of the Sikh Empire have become posited as 'outside' of Pakistan Studies and 'at home' either within Indian histories or religious studies. I propose that an examination of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, covering the twilight of Mughal power and the rise of the Sikhs allows for an original and expansive look at the impact of

environmental phenomenon within a landscape of political instability, and the ways that these phenomena come to define a united province of Punjab under the British as it did not exist in the precolonial past.

As such, the significance of my work lies both in the querying of the increasingly important cultural and social aspects of an environmental history of Punjab as well as a more fundamental question about the making of Punjab itself—and its conceptualization across various empires: Mughal, Sikh and British.

### Key Outcomes and Deliverables

In my time at the British Library, University of Edinburgh Special Collections, SOAS Library and the Royal Asiatic Society Archives, I came across a wealth of material that could potentially lead to new insights and different sections of my dissertation. Firstly, I found a variety of tracts written by European travelers, Company officials and soldiers highlighting the necessity of the British annexation of Punjab, among them John Briggs, R. Baird Smith, and Henry Steinbach. An aspect common to all these writings that I may explore in a shorter project culminating in an article, at a future date, would be the references to Punjab's soil, climate, products and abundance as arguments in favor of annexation. The justification for annexation is almost always provided in terms of the fruits of the land, in spite of and not because of the peoples inhabiting it.

Secondly, there is much work to be done on the detailed and minute reports available from the Punjab Meteorological Office set up in the aftermath of annexation. There are day to day reports on the weather and for a later project on the colonial era management of and transformation of the rhythms of life in Punjab as attuned to its environmental and ecological cycles, these reports could prove very useful.

Lastly, and this is most relevant for my project, I found many Persian historical documents—histories, folk romances, revenue records and poetry collections—that are prefaced with or include data about the geography, flora and fauna and ecologies, human or otherwise, of Punjab. Although my dissertation will include an analysis of some of these, I am interested in further exploring the ways that these cultural artifacts present the 'space' of Punjab through these descriptions. How does space become place? What kinds of spatial practices are involved in the

placemaking? What role do understandings of space and place play in the self-making endeavours of the authors of these historical documents?

Seeing as I applied for this project in the preliminary fieldwork and archival research portion of my dissertation year, the deliverables are mostly concerning my dissertation itself. First, the descriptions mentioned above have helped me to draft the first chapter, which focuses on the shifting historical understandings of Punjab, the centrality of the rivers to these narratives of place and the understandings of difference within and beyond the imagined borders.

The second chapter that has taken shape as a result of this archival trip has been one focusing on the state responses to environmental phenomenon, relying mostly on information gleaned from various *tarikhs* I have been able to consult in the archives, as well as all five lithographs of the *Umdat ut-Tawarikh*, which I found in the Royal Asiatic Society archives.

Lastly, something that I have begun work on is the article on the arguments for the annexation of Punjab as narrated by Company officers and administrators as well as European travelers. As the dissertation project develops, it may become a chapter, but as of now I am writing it as a separate article to be published in a field specific journal.