

Maira Hayat

Big companies, small bureaucrats: water and governance in Pakistan

Paper abstract

My paper analyzes (i) ongoing litigation between a handful of local companies and the Punjab Irrigation department with respect to a sudden hike in the irrigation water tax rate; (ii) a Sindh High Court case involving a multinational bottled drinking water company and its extraction of groundwater, and (iii) the proceedings of a committee constituted by the Punjab Irrigation Department (PID) – with which I promptly tagged along on their inspections of industrial units dumping effluent into the Hudiara drain – in August 2015. Based on this field research, spanning most of 2015 and early 2016, the paper examines corporate–state relations, the disparities in their relative financial capital, and how these structural power inequalities play out everyday. I argue that how – if at all – these power differentials unravel or become deeper, depends on intensely private encounters and behavior (such as I took part in during the PID committee’s proceedings, inspections and tours). I also look at the politics involved in measurements of pollution, waste and effluent discharge – the seemingly ‘unscientific’ motivations underlying the ‘scientific’ findings of the committee. The paper aims to contribute to scholarship on anthropology of states, bureaucracies and corporations (including commentary on methodology and the challenges of ‘studying up’ (Nader 1972)).