

Matt Cook Travel Grant Report

I presented a paper, “A Local Society on Trial: Bhaibands, Amils and the Annexation of Sindh,” at the conference/workshop “Locally Sourced: Recovering the Local in History, Culture and Politics in Pakistan.” This conference/workshop was in Islamabad and consisted of two day-long sessions of papers and discussions that focused on the role of “local studies” in the development of Pakistani history and culture.

My paper examined Sindhi “Hindu” merchants (i.e., Bhaiband) and their support for the British East India Company. It related this support to socio-cultural distinctions *within* the Bhaiband community. It also argued that European perceptions about Bhaiband support for the Company’s annexation of Sindh did not adequately explain merchant enthusiasm for the British Empire in Sindh. The paper looked beyond the role of money/politics and explored how local social relations illuminated Bhaiband support for colonialism. I detailed the story of the Bhaiband merchant Seth Naomul and argued that his support for the Company was a vehicle for challenging local socio-cultural distinctions from within his own community.

The significance of this presentation to the field of Pakistan Studies was that it (re)contextualized the historical expansion of British political power into the Sindh region. It utilized socio-cultural rather than just political-economic frames of reference to trace the key role that the influential Bhaiband community played in Sindh’s annexation by the British. This (re)contextualization recovered key non-communal “voices” from Sindh’s past that are often obscured in Pakistan Studies.