

The British abolition of slavery in 1833 was celebrated as an epic, global event – the victory of freedom over unfreedom in an age of revolutions. The triumph of this moment was attenuated, however, when abolitionists turned their gaze eastward and discovered to their horror that there were more “slaves” in British India than had been emancipated in the entire British Caribbean. The complexity of India’s social milieu where caste, kinship, and patron client ties embedded all individuals in networks of belonging, rendered the question of who exactly was a “slave” an altogether puzzling, and vexed issue. My dissertation focuses on how the colonial legal regime in India sorted, categorized, and codified a certain understanding of slavery, and captures the multiple vectors of this process into the early twentieth century. My project traces the emergence of the legal topography of Sindh in modern day Pakistan as my delimited case, a case of a colonial site impacted by larger global processes of legal regime building. I situate this preoccupation with definitions as part of the order making strategies of empire focused on the legal codification of categories in general, and “slavery” and “free” labor in particular. Tightly integrated into Indian Ocean maritime trade networks circulating goods, ideas and of course, enslaved peoples, Sindh was, furthermore, characterized by many different kinds of “slaveries”, as well as a unique history of interaction with the colonial legal system

For this project I am requesting **three months** of support for on-site archival research in Karachi, Sindh from April to June in 2018. Looking at the period following the legal abolition of slavery in India – signified by the passage of the Indian Slavery Act of 1843 – up until 1930, I will examine how the colonial legal infrastructure differentiated between slavery and other social and labor relationships analogous to slavery, in particular bonded labor. How does this definition change over time? Who are the parties who mobilize, or more importantly, dispute this definition? Instead of reifying this concept with my own definition, my project traces this reification as the empirical process of interest in and of itself.

The two sites that I propose to carry out my research at are: 1) *The Sindh High Court Library* which contains case records, trial records, legal commentaries, and judicial decisions dating back to the colonial era; 2) *The Sindh Archives* which contains correspondence with the judicial department, cases channeled from local courts, and reports on ad hoc legal proceedings carried out by political agents. Having carried out initial archival research in the India Office Records in London, it is clear that investigating local legal repositories will be imperative. Gathering this primarily legal material will help me deepen my understanding of how embedded colonial legal institutions were in Sindhi society, and how marginalized groups engaged with the law. Through these cases, in addition, by focusing on depositions, and paying attention to the litigants’ stories and testimonies, I can use these sources as a way to discern the grievances, and social histories of those Indians who seldom appear in the archive.

Once I advance to candidacy in March of this year, I will be ready to hit the ground running and begin collecting data for my dissertation. During my time in Sindh I will be affiliated with the social science faculty at Habib University in Karachi as a visiting scholar. This support will be imperative as I continue to expand my networks in the scholarly and activist community. Originally from Pakistan, I have lived, worked, and carried out research in Pakistan on previous occasions. This trip collecting legal materials will be a crucial step before I turn to the next phase of research for my dissertation. This will entail mapping the emerging political terrain of injustice claims in the region. My larger dissertation the research question is: *Does the law, by naming “slavery” as the thing to be abolished, create a conceptual tool of political resistance for a diverse range of bonded or marginalized groups?* In order to answer this question, however, I first need to analyze, in detail, the impact of colonial law in Sindh, and the extent to which slavery is invoked as a legal category by both colonial agents, and Indians, on the ground.