

Navigating a Toxic Space: Ecological Disaster and Infrastructural Restitution in the Urban-Rural Periphery of Lahore

Abstract: Around 20 years ago, residents of Kalalanwala and Kot Asadullah, near Lahore, Punjab, first started reporting spine and bone deformities among children. This was one of many problems they had identified starting in around 1996 when several plastics, chemical, pharmaceutical, assembly and wires manufacturing plants opened in the vicinity. They noticed a drastic drop in agricultural productivity and health of their cattle. However, in 1998, when dozens of children's limbs started to get deformed, the residents took up the issue with electoral representatives and went public against the factories which, they claimed, were dumping effluents directly into the aquifer. The issue gained media coverage and bowing to public pressure, the government temporarily sealed the factories. However, high levels of heavy metals and contaminants present in the water meant that agriculture, their primary economic mainstay was no longer viable. The largest landowners in the villages sold off their land and left, while those who could not afford to move out had no choice but to look for jobs in the same factories, they believed were responsible for their predicament. Within this context, my research focuses on rural life where the question of obtaining and sharing water is especially marked by discrimination against lower caste groups considered 'ritually' impure. It asks: How do communities navigate ongoing effects of both a toxic event and attempts to mitigate it?