

AIPS Summer Research Grant in Pakistan, 2014

## **Grant Proposal**

Ahsan Kamal  
ahsankl@live.unc.edu  
+1.919.360.9012

Institutional affiliations:

PhD Student,  
Department of Sociology,  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,  
Chapel Hill, NC, USA.

Lecturer (on study leave)  
National Institute of Pakistan Studies,  
Quaid-e-Azam University,  
Islamabad, Pakistan.

Tentative title:

### **Water, dams, and disasters in postcolonial peripheries: the stories of Mirani Dam**

Mega-floods have repeatedly engulfed Pakistan in recent years. Subsequently, a new form of contentious politics is emerging in peripheral, under developed, and remote areas affected by these disasters. These movements are defined by their local character and demands for financial compensation from the state in lieu of damages to houses and sources of livelihood.

But do the articulated demands reflect the felt loss and complex grievances of local communities and peoples? What processes undergird the framing of movement demands, and how are these impacted by the discourses and narratives of other actors, including state officials, development actors, NGOs, and violent state and non-state actors?

To answer these questions, I will focus on the seven year long *Mutasreene* (the affectees of) Mirani Dam movement and trace the discursive formations of its participants, which include local community members, activists from nearby areas, and a wider but small network of national and international supporters. Mirani dam was commissioned in 2002 by the Musharraf government as part of mega development projects in Balochistan province. Built on the river Dasht near Turbat city, the dam caused severe floods in the upstream area within a year of its completion. Thousands of people were affected by the backflow floods, which have

largely been ignored or subsumed under the 2007 wider floods in Sindh and Balochistan provinces.

Preliminary interviews, participation in movement activities, and site visit have allowed me to observe that the stories and protest repertoire of movement participants highlight personal and communal losses, and feeling of helplessness in the face of the broader violent conflict in the region. However, the movement participants have persisted and mobilized their limited resources effectively to gain significant grounds. Yet, as the movement "advances," the gap between articulated demands and felt loss appears to increase.

To investigate the appearance and widening of this gap and to trace its linkages with broader political transformations, I intend to: (a) collect official documents and material produced by the movement, and (b) conduct interviews with local activists, movement supporters, development experts, and state officials. The AIPS grant money will be used in December 2014 to visit Lahore, Islamabad, and Turbat for fieldwork, which will supplement data collected during 2012-13, through participation in various camps set up by the movement in Lahore, Islamabad, and Turbat (Balochistan) and interviews with 15 activists, supporters and several government officials.

The study will be a unique contribution to the study of social movements, contentious politics, and state formation processes in peripheral regions of Pakistan. I intend to engage with literature on social movements, political ecology, and postcolonial geographies to make theoretical contributions. Social movement scholars tend to evaluate the storytelling and emotion-laden performances for their instrumental value (for example, for successful recruitment). By considering the gap between loss and demands, the research will highlight the ontological clash between local communities and the state. In so doing, the evolving nature of the postcolonial state and its anxieties will be evaluated in the current era of state formation processes in Balochistan.