

## **Dissertation Workshop, AIPS Islamabad-May 17-19, 2010**

Final Report: Kamran Asdar Ali

The second dissertation workshop for PhD and MPhil candidates in Pakistani Universities was conducted in Islamabad in May by Humeira Iqtidar (LUMS and Cambridge University) and Kamran Asdar Ali (University of Texas, Austin). This workshop series is a collaborative initiative between Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan and AIPS and the first one was held in May of 2009.

The theme for this particular dissertation workshop focused on anthropological concerns of studying diversity and difference within social spaces. The workshop sought to discuss issues of gender, class, religious and ethnic difference in an historical and anthropological framework. Within this context, the call for proposals encouraged the potential participants to engage with the social-historical and critical understandings of urban practices in Pakistan. However, the range of proposals that were received did not always follow the guidelines. Due to social anthropology not being taught at many universities, the co-coordinators decided to select those candidates whose research were broadly related to the advertised parameters.

The twelve participants were from disciplines of Sociology, History, Linguistics, Social Work, Political Science and Business Studies. The students' research interests focused on issues of social change, ethnic difference, poverty, gender hierarchies, province-centre relationship and the language question in Pakistan. They also came from universities as diverse as Khairpur in Sind to Kohat in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Only candidates from Universities in Baluchistan were missing in the selected group, something future coordinators may want to keep in mind when recruiting for their workshops.

The three day workshop was divided into specific sessions. For the morning session the students came prepared having read pre-selected articles that had been sent to them prior to their arrival in Islamabad. The other three sessions each day were dedicated to discussing student proposals. These sessions consisted of short presentations followed by open and rigorous discussion on the topic. They were conducted as a graduate seminar with the coordinators intervening only to guide the discussion and to raise pertinent questions. The over all atmosphere remained one of intellectual curiosity and academic challenge. The seriousness of engagement was indeed remarkable and the candidates, who in many cases were lecturers in their respective universities, were eager to question their own established points of view. This said, what was also evident was the unevenness of training in different universities (e.g. lack of mentoring in some cases) and the non-access to academic journals, books and other online resources.

The students themselves, as elsewhere, were serious and dedicated. Yet an important question for the co-coordinators was how to translate their enthusiasm into a sustained academic focus in their respective fields of study. These are broader questions that need to be discussed as this excellent initiative develops further with subsequent workshops in the coming months. Perhaps based on a cumulative experience over 2-3 years a dialogue can be initiated between AIPS colleagues and HEC of Pakistan or with particular programs in Pakistani universities.

Finally and importantly the workshop could not have been organized without the support of the HEC, but mostly without the hard work, attention to detail and generous hospitality of the very able staff and colleagues at the AIPS office in Islamabad.