

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report

Project Title: “City of Knowledge: Lahore’s Urdu Bazaar as engine of Print, Urbanity and Self-fashioning”

Author’s Name: Osama Ahmad

Dates for Project: 15th December – 23rd January

Location: Lahore, Pakistan

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

Tentatively titled “City of Knowledge: Lahore’s Urdu Bazaar as engine of Print, Urbanity and Self-fashioning” my dissertation traces the efflorescence of Urdu print culture in mid-nineteenth century colonial Lahore and demonstrates how this led to the formation of the Urdu Bazaar – a social space that endures even today. This interdisciplinary dissertation functions at the intersection of History of knowledge, Book History and Urban studies making key interventions in each of these fields and as such it also makes contributions to the academic study of Pakistan.

It does so by putting the Urdu Bazaar and Lahore at the heart of its scholarship. History of knowledge is a burgeoning academic discipline in History and most of its practitioners are centered in European and North America and focus on primarily these regions as well. My dissertation, with the Urdu Bazaar and Lahore at the heart of its scholarship, introduces Pakistan as a key site of academic research for this field. In my dissertation, I focus exclusively on Urdu textual sources – books, magazines, periodicals – and this is a conscious effort to highlight the diversity and quality of Urdu scholarship from Pakistan. There is a strong tradition of Urdu scholarship dating back to the mid-nineteenth century in Lahore and my project will bring more attention to the local writers and publishers that are sustaining it even today. Finally, my dissertation also sheds a new light on the city of Lahore as well – as a city of print and knowledge. In doing so my project will make major contributions to Pakistan studies by introducing the wider academic communities to unique social spaces in Pakistan and by showcasing the importance and richness of Urdu scholarship.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

- Key Outcomes: This five-week long winter research and writing trip in Lahore has been very productive and will prove useful in completing my dissertation. I spent the academic year 2022-2023 in Lahore for archival research and fieldwork. Subsequently, I returned to Brown to resume my teaching duties and to critically reflect on the materials gathered during fieldwork. In addition to writing my first chapter, I was able to pinpoint areas of improvement, and this trip enabled me to return to Lahore and collect more targeted materials (in the Punjab Archives and Punjab Public Library), renew academic relationships with local scholars and most importantly conduct interviews with the local publishers and printers working in Urdu Bazaar. During this trip, I was also able to witness the book printing process in-situ to better and talk to the people directly involved in the process. Cultivating such relationships is key for my project and this trip was crucial in sustaining these relationships.
- Key Deliverables: This trip has been very productive in making significant progress towards writing two dissertation chapters. Additionally, I was also able to collect materials and conduct interviews that are critical for completing the third chapter that I will be presenting at the Harvard-Yale-Brown Book History Conference on 6th May 2024.