

Muntazir Ali
Final Report
AIPS Short-Term Research Grant
Project Dates: 07/2021 – 11/2021

Between Samarkand and Delhi: Conceptions of Space and Belonging in late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Centuries' Chitral

In the summer/fall of 2021, I conducted preliminary archival and ethnographic research for my dissertation. I worked in the Archives Library in Peshawar, Municipal Library, and two private collections in Chitral. I also conducted interviews, attended poetry-recital and story-telling sessions in Chitral. I read Persian court documents, genealogical tables, and histories-in-verse; Khovar folk tales and poetry; Urdu travel literature, and English official dispatches, correspondences, and gazetteers.

The research allowed me a crucial initial glimpse into the rich and complex meanings of place, the various modes of place-making, and how place has been invested with meaning in this part of the world. In contrast to the British colonial imaginings of Chitral as a “frontier,” “an empty space and a potential site of conquest,” the Chitral imagined in the Persian and Khovar literature is invested with multiple and intersecting moral, religious, and affective valences. These representations of Chitral overflow the canvas of geographical proximity and center/periphery binary painted by the logic of imperial conquest, centering Chitral as an important node in a much broader cultural and historical realm connected by the *adab* of the Persian language.

The research contributes to Pakistan Studies by critiquing both colonial-imperial frontier ontologies and postcolonial/national imaginings of territorial limits. It provides insights into the operation of both colonial and postcolonial domination and draws into central focus indigenous material and discursive practices that resist and destabilize both colonial and nationalist master narratives of history, geography, and cultural identity. More broadly, the research centers the “frontier” as a site of historical investigation, opens up a space for alternative forms of agency sovereignty, and connects histories that have become bifurcated in the area studies paradigm.