

Organizing Difference: Hindu Panchayats and Local Government in Sindh

In the summer of 2015, I seek to study local Hindu Panchayat (council) organizations in Karachi and Hyderabad to understand modes of self-organizing and regulation inhabited by the Hindu religious minority. My dissertation project looks at how Pakistan's Hindu minority makes claims upon the state via the law and local governance, given widespread exclusion and discrimination. How are the realms of law and state traversed in Pakistan from the margins of its citizenry? What role do such organizations play in allowing Hindus to forge belonging in Pakistan? How can a religious minority create political life through law and organization in "lawless" and violent cities such as Karachi? How do these panchayats locate themselves within the project of the nation and the state?

The 1947 Partition and lasting enmity between India and Pakistan led to a precarious position for Pakistan's Hindu population (Zamindar 2007, Nair 2011). Pakistani law provides neither constitutional safeguards for its religious minorities as neighboring India does, nor does it place them in the legal category of *dhimmis*, protected non-Muslim subjects under Sharia law (Lau 2006). Religious minorities thus occupy a nebulous legal space in the country. Within this framework, how do Hindu panchayats produce (or not) belonging to Pakistan?

The "panchayat" (assembly of five) is an old South Asian form of local rule. Colonial rule encouraged village panchayats as self-government. Pakistani military regimes cultivated local government as suitable democratic participation despite concern that it was not national enough (Naqvi 2013). However, these panchayats are urban organizations configured around religious difference. They are relatively new: many were set up in the mid-1990s across urban Sindh. Further, they seem to be successful in making claims upon the state. During a previous trip, I met a Hindu family seeking state protection in a protracted confrontation with a Muslim neighbor. Their strategy for gaining protection mobilized a network of Hindu panchayats, which often undertake advocacy and legal help on behalf of their community members. Many Hindu temples closed down by the government have also been reopened or their demolition contested through concerted legal effort by such panchayats indicating a growing confidence in maneuvering official and legal channels.

My primary focus will be the Karachi Hindu Council and the District Hindu Panchayat, Hyderabad. Both cities have witnessed much deep-seated ethnic and sectarian strife. Building a minority political life through law and organization acquires a different valence against the backdrop of a violent, "lawless" city (Gayer 2014). Thus, I will pay attention to the interplay between law and locality through the relationships of panchayat members to the city. The panchayats can also be seen as brokers between the local and extra-local forces of law, as investigated primarily in archival work on court cases and petitions to police. I will spend 4 weeks in Karachi and the next 4 in Hyderabad, involving myself in the affairs of the councils. I will interview members of the two councils with whom I have made contact previously, and seek permission to attend meetings. I will participate in discussions among panchayat members and other members of the community on the Panchayats' role. I will ask to look at the Panchayats' records to learn more about their history, interview lawyers who work for the councils, and try to gain access to ongoing legal hearings.

By understanding Pakistani Hindus' modes of self-organizing and engagement with the state, I hope to become more cognizant to the Hindu experiences of being a Pakistani citizen. I will also demonstrate how panchayats are attentive to their marginalized constituency, and thus enable Hindus to produce traction in a country where their presence is largely invisible.

Works Cited

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