

Project Title: Reimagining the World, Remaking the Region: Textual Traditions of Geography in Modern South Asia

My dissertation examines the role of regional intellectuals in South Asia—specifically, in the western region of Sindh—in transforming Islamicate and British textual traditions of geography over the late pre-colonial (1750-1843) and early colonial (1843-1900) periods. Across the threshold of colonialism, textual production remained a significant means for constructing and performing power and regional intellectuals continued to be important if ambivalent contributors to imperial textual projects. In the eighteenth century, as decentralization in the Mughal Empire wrought far-reaching change, these intellectuals experimented with the Mughal textual tradition, thereby, forging new relations of power, which were mediated not by the person of the sovereign, but by the spaces of “region” and “world”. I will examine the emergence of this modern territorialized political imagination in late pre-colonial Sindh through the project of the scholar, Mir Ali Shir Qani (1727-1788). Writing in the lingua franca Persian, Qani reworked the Mughal tradition of history to accommodate Islamicate geography, reconfiguring a tradition of narrating time to narrating space. The court in Sindh adopted some of his innovations, signaling a restructuring of the sovereign’s relationship to his subjects and territory. When the British began to produce geographies in the Sindhi vernacular to disseminate a worldview that centered its empire, regional scholars writing these texts within the colonial bureaucracy resisted. I argue that by incorporating late pre-colonial geography to the British tradition, they subverted colonial attempts at epistemic hegemony and facilitated considerable but unacknowledged continuities across the rupture of colonialism. A study of eighteenth and nineteenth century textual traditions of geography will enlarge our understanding of changes in knowledge production and power relations in pre-colonial South Asia that were in turn formative to colonial forms of rule.