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AIPS 2019 Short-term Research Grant

Funds from the American Institute of Pakistan Studies Short-term Research Grant were used to carry out preliminary research for approximately three months in various state-run and non-governmental hospitals and clinics in Azad Kashmir. I spent my time shadowing psychiatrists in several cities, interviewing them about their research in the region and asking about post-2005 earthquake changes in the region. I also devoted time to conducting long-form interviews with patients about their case histories. Additionally, I also shadowed and interviewed two faith healers in the region.

From my participant observation and interviews I gathered that the earthquake in 2005 marked a major shift in the health infrastructure in Azad Kashmir. Not only did the earthquake demolish several major hospitals, but the reconstruction efforts were funded by international aid that poured into the region. A lot of the disaster relief aid went into reconstructing Pakistani military hospitals. Additionally, I found out that international workers in the post-2005 political landscape spent a significant amount of time conducting “mental health first aid” training in the region. I was able to examine the effects these mental health trainings had on local practices of care and cure. I interrogated newer vocabularies of suffering, as well as the ways in which patients combine faith healing and psychiatry. My interviews with psychiatrists allowed me to observe the antagonisms between scientific rationality and Islamic concepts of healing, as well as the multiple ways in which doctors aim to translate across these ontological dissonances. My research at the time of breakout of war tensions between India and Pakistan in August 2019 also revealed that cross-border firing acted as a frequent trigger for outbreak of or relapse of psychic distress.

Overall, I was able to trace questions of lack of adequate care resources in Azad Kashmir as well as how the Pakistani state mediates psychiatry in the region. By examining the quotidian practices of illness, injury, and healing I was able to interrogate how “bigger” questions (about state, war, sovereignty and so on) can emerge from the everyday complexity of life in the margins.