

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

Summary: In the Summer of 2020, I propose to conduct preliminary archival and ethnographic research for my dissertation in Peshawar and Chitral, Pakistan. I will work in the Tribal Research Cell of the Home Department, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Municipal Library, District Records, and private collections in Chitral.

Research Statement: My dissertation, provisionally titled *Between Samarkand and Delhi: Mapping Conceptions of Space and Belonging in late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Centuries Chitral*, aims to investigate differing and interacting discursive formations of Chitral as a cultural and geographic space and their influence on the subsequent religious and political history of the area. Specifically, I look at British frontier-making ideas and practices in the later part of the nineteenth century that serve to situate Chitral within a British Indian ambit by construing it as a “border outpost” in British imperial calculations vis-à-vis the Russian empire. This “in-between” status of the area is in contrast with narratives of spatial imagination and cultural belonging, preserved in Persian and Khowar poetry, folktales, and songs, that imagine Chitral as part of a much larger historical and geographical continuum extending from north India to the khanates and emirates of Central Asia. The complex interactions of these ideas and practices not only help us understand the subsequent political history of Chitral, but also allow for a recuperation of indigenous forms of destabilizing colonial representations of history, geography, and cultural identity.

Program of Study: For my archival research, I am seeking two main genres of historical and literary sources. In the Tribal Research Cell in Peshawar, I want to look at colonial-era documents dealing with the “princely state” of Chitral. This includes dispatches of the British residents in Gilgit and Chitral, starting from 1878 and 1895 respectively, correspondences between the *mehtars* of Chitral and officials of the British Indian government, and gazetteers of British India on the North-West Frontier. In the Municipal Library in Chitral, I will be looking at Urdu travel literature on the area that is not readily available elsewhere and also literary works in Khowar, mainly poetry and short stories. In two private collections, I hope to be able to look at Persian manuscripts, in the broad genres of court documents, genealogical tables, and poetry, going all the way back to the mid-seventeenth century.

The ethnographic component of my research is geared toward a preliminary attempt to excavate forms of relating and belonging that look beyond the post-Partition boundaries of Chitral, specifically to the cultural nodes of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, and that continue to find expression in literature as well everyday sociopolitical discourse. I will attend poetry-recital and story-telling sessions, and conduct in-depth interviews with a few elders who witnessed the birth of Pakistan and Chitral’s accession to the new country.