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Narrative Report: Race, Visibility and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in a Pakistani Port Town

In November 2019, with the aid of American Institute of Pakistan Studies, I began my dissertation research in Karachi, Pakistan. I conducted participant observations at boxing clubs, accompanied reporting assignments of journalists who were covering sports events and also interviewed journalists who have been writing news stories and feature articles on Lyari Town. On days when there was no reporting taking place, I visited Sindh Archives where I looked at their collections of English and Urdu newspapers to study the ways in which the neighborhood was represented historically and how that representation may have changed.

While conducting participant observations at boxing clubs, I examined the day to day training given to amateur female boxers. Here, not only were questions of gender became important for my research but also central to boxing was the crafting of one's body. Gender is a well established topic in Pakistan studies, with notable work from the history of the women's movement to the gendering publics and the access to urban space. Boxing practices provided a space where I can also think of these questions in relation to the body, and the body itself as a medium through which people, particularly boxers and other female athletes, form their own subjectivities as well as assert an embodied form of citizenship in the country. To this end, I also attended tournaments that were held in stadiums on national holidays like Jinnah's birth anniversary on December 25, a Sindh-Balochistan provincial tournament in January and an International Womens Day tournaments on March 8. Though the women's day tournament was exclusively for female boxers, featuring only one male junior-level fight, the other two were predominantly male. Attending these tournaments helped me understand the boxing world of Lyari and how it is mediated through the intersections of body, ethnicity, gender, class and the nation.

At the archives, my project opened up to new questions about sports history, not only of Pakistan but also in South Asia. Sports has generally remained at the margins of South Asian historiography. While examining newspapers to dig reports on Lyari, I was astounded by the ways in which sports coverage was especially comprehensive. Within this archive of news stories, I observed that Lyari was either given coverage on the metropolitan pages, as a poor and under-developed neighborhood needing the attention of local governments, or it made an appearance on sports pages, particularly in stories on football. This opened up an avenue to extend my research beyond the purview of boxing but also to incorporate another sport in it. Football played an important role in Lyari's history and also its relevance to Pakistan's history. Examining football as it appears in newspaper coverage would give me a chance to think of the relations between visibility, sports and history-writing from a perspective that remains not only marginal to Pakistan studies but also South Asian studies.

In order to examine journalistic and photographic practices, I interviewed sports journalists and other human-interest story writers not from Lyari Town and other parts of city. By looking at journalistic practices as they happen on the ground, I will be able to detail the experience of reporting on Lyari, not only by its own residents but reporters not from the neighborhood. Sports journalists are disappointed with the lack of coverage football and boxing are given. Journalists writing about politics and crime lament the years of reporting only on violence in Lyari, has negatively stereotyped the neighborhood. Journalists and documentary filmmakers argue that focusing on athletics and artistic practices show "life" in Lyari beyond violence. In their own ways, journalists are using media visibility to address and undo absences and stereotyping in reporting.. I also assisted a vocational training institute in the neighborhood to hold workshops on mobile

phone journalism. Here, I met with amateur photographers who were interested in learning more about journalism and photography, and how that can be implemented in their own communities.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 pandemic my research was interrupted. Conducting participant observations in sports clubs like boxing gyms was extremely unsafe, sporting events were cancelled in the city, and archives were closed for public. Reporting and any documentary film making work itself was brought to a halt. The workshops were shifted to an online platform which was interesting in itself to think about media access in a working class neighborhood. In these circumstances, apart from the workshop, I continued my research by talking to people on the phone and doing informal telephone interviews with sports editors, cultural critics, and journalists. Instead of historical research in the archives I continued gathering stories on the internet. However, despite the interruption, the fellowship has enabled me to begin my dissertation writing.