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Site of Research: London, United Kingdom
Purpose: Archival Research

Abstract: Making the Modern Slum and Urbanizing Poverty in Karachi, 1870-1918

My dissertation project investigates the formation of the two earliest shantytowns of the Bombay Presidency, Lyari in Karachi and Dharavi in Bombay. Through archival work, I attempt to trace migrations into these cities. I examine first, the initial forms of social and material incorporation into a growing urban society, and second, successive alienation and disenfranchisement which institutionalized downward mobility and made out of these migrants the “urban poor”.

Due to the time period of my study being located in the turn of the nineteenth century, it was important that I don't regionally divide Karachi and Bombay, and instead see them as two locations within the larger administrative unit of the Bombay Presidency. As a methodological strategy, I treated the entire Western coast of South Asia as a research site, and pursued empirical questions about rural to urban migration and the contours of housing policies, attitudes towards the poor, and the control of urban space in the two cities. Moving between this larger regional-comparative perspective and local detail was enabled by the meticulous organization of the collection in the “Asia, Pacific and Africa Reading Room” at the British Library which houses what used to be called the India Office Records. The British Library is a truly remarkable place to work and I am immensely grateful to the American Institute of Pakistan Studies for making my research there possible.

The strategy of treating all of Western South Asia as one site while at the same time being mindful of the differences within has resulted in novel findings which I am excited to pursue as I develop my dissertation. Both because of its administrative unity within the colonial period and because so many migrants moved up and down the western coast, I have found that the largest numbers of migrants into both Karachi and Bombay came from Ratnagiri and Cutch. In addition, I have learned that Lyari is likely a much older shantytown than Dharavi; Dharavi was likely not densely settled until well into the 1930s, 1940s and beyond, whereas Lyari was a site of urban reform, renewal, and even complaints as early as the 1910s. These two findings are of the type which enable an understanding of urban impoverishment that moves outside of the nationalist imagination, so that Karachi's urban poor don't become constrained as “Pakistan's” poverty problem until well after 1947. This allows us to understand some of the deeper historical processes which have resulted in urban disenfranchisement and alienation, and of course the obstacles to overcoming the successive slum-makings which continued into the 20th century.

Some of the colonial period documents I am able to consult at the British Library include Municipal Commissioner's Reports from 1915-1918 for Karachi, pamphlets on urban improvements and town planning which were lectures given by Mirams in 1916, a

colleague of Patrick Geddes, one of the fathers of urban planning, and the “Census of the Cities of the Bombay Presidency from 1922 and 1933.” I also consulted Bombay’s Municipal records and was able to trace several key figures who moved between the two cities. For the period prior to World War I, I pursued histories of land tenure in Sindh along with Western India in order to identify reasons for migration to cities, and some of the earliest attempts at settling Karachi by early British residents. I even had the privilege of pursuing what the terms “poor,” “pauper,” and “indigent” would have meant prior to the British Crown, when regional and local rulers were still producing the discourse of poor relief. To inquire after this, I searched the “Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India” which helped me identify how the meaning of “poor” has changed.

Without the support of the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, I regret that I would not have been able to make use of the immensely well organized and hospitable facilities at the British Library. Such a great collection of records and the willingness of the staff to assist an early stage historian with navigation of the records has made my research both exciting and rewarding. I was able to do the challenging work of placing Karachi’s poorest dwellers within their proper historical circumstances in a time before they were understood as Pakistan’s impoverished citizens, and understand their development within the larger economic and social processes which encapsulated the vast majority of the Western subcontinent through the turn of the nineteenth century. Working at the British Library allowed me to pursue comparative questions vis-à-vis Bombay’s urban development, and situate Karachi within its broad colonial context. For this wonderful opportunity, I am immensely grateful to the American Institute of Pakistan Studies. Understanding how peasant migrants connected town and country and built the slummed urban space before diverging from each other through the politics of regionalism, nationalism, and Partition is an invaluable perspective on the long history of slum-formation in Karachi.