

**AIPS Suhail Zaheer Lari Memorial Fellowship**  
**The Socio-epistemic Ecology of Coal in Tharparkar (Sindh-Pakistan)**

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This proposal is for a monograph based on my doctoral research which was a multi-sited ethnographic work conducted at three sites – Sahiwal coal power generation plant, Multan-Sukkar Motorway and Tharparkar coalfield for 18-months in 2019 and 2021-2022. For this postdoctoral work, I seek to return to my field site in Tharparkar (Sindh) and the state-society transactions around its coal extraction. The Tharparkar coalfield (spread over 10, 000 sq. km with 175-200 billion tons of reserves) is one of the top priority projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The inauguration of this project in 2018 has continuously been dubbed by the state and international/private mining actors as a historic, transformative and futuristic achievement contributing towards energy autonomy of the country. It is considered to be the realization of the so called “*Thar Dream*” that guarantees (coal-based) industrial-economic growth and development in Pakistan.

In this work, I begin with the proposition that Tharparkar’s coal ecology does not merely thrive on the grand developmental visions and narratives advanced by the state or the mining/power generation entities. Rather, at its foundation lies the ecology of knowing, the social practices and transactions of belief/truth/fact making that, on the one hand, offer evidence for the claims of “transformation” enabled by the extractive industries and reflected in the fast modernizing infrastructure, employment avenues, and wealth generation in the Tharparkar desert and its agro-pastoral economy. On the other, these practices invisibilize, normalize, or outweigh the facts of environmental impacts of coal extraction and power generation. In arguing so, I underscore that the environmental change brought by Tharparkar’s coal is not only material but it is also undergirded by social, cognitive and psychological processes. To support this, I explore (i) how practices of knowing coal and belief/truth/fact making contribute to coal’s promise of prosperity and (ii) how various actors and agencies participate, negotiate, sustain, and dispute these exchanges. I label these social exchanges around knowing and believing as production of the *socio-epistemic ecology of coal* – i.e., social aggregation/promotion of beliefs/facts/truths about coal excavation (in Tharparkar) and creation of new ways of knowing and being in pursuit of the prospects for poverty alleviation, upwards social mobility, empowerment and change. I argue that the socio-epistemic ecology of coal in Tharparkar, in turn, not only informs national energy policy and discourse but also strengthens legitimacy of the coal as a resource within the future energy governance of Pakistan. My aim, through this monograph, is to expand and diversify ethnographic perspective of CPEC’s environmental governance foregrounding Tharparkar coalfield given the ways in which coal-linked infrastructure-economic development advances in Pakistan.

The Lari Memorial Fellowship will help defray expenses of this nine-month project - June 2024-February 2025. I plan to spend six months (June-December 2024) in the field – Tharparkar, Karachi, and Islamabad – followed by three months of analysis. Based on my earlier ethnographic work, I seek to redirect my inquiry to the practices around *knowing* coal, its promise and the ways in which these actors, agencies, and processes contribute to belief/truth/fact formation — or to challenge these versions. I will use three ethnographic/qualitative techniques to explore my questions – archival and media content analysis; participant observation and interviews. Key deliverable of this work is a book (tentatively) divided into five chapters – (i) historical analysis of the expert/epistemic communities around Tharparkar’s coal; (ii) developmental interventions in Tharparkar as belief making drive and ways in which these are disputed; (iii) fact-framing/environmental communication on Tharparkar’s coal by local media; (iv) everyday knowledge practices in Tharparkar around coal and (v) coal-centric formal learning in Tharparkar’s engineering and technical institutes. The broader impact/intellectual merit of this work is its contribution to the nature-society scholarship on/from Pakistan. This ethnographic case from Tharparkar foregrounds resource exploration in Sindh laying bare the split personality of Pakistani state that seeks both the coal as well as renewable sources for its future energy governance.