

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report

Project Title: South Asians in Migration

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Location: Mexico City, Mexico

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

The migration of Punjabi individuals from the region now divided between India and Pakistan to the United States was shaped by economic aspirations and geopolitical challenges. Many sought to improve their economic circumstances by seeking opportunities abroad, with the intention of returning to their homeland after accumulating wealth. However, U.S. immigration laws during the early twentieth century, particularly those aimed at restricting non-European immigration, made this difficult. The 1917 Immigration Act, which instituted an "Asiatic Barred Zone," excluded most Asian immigrants from entering the country. This legal environment forced Punjabi migrants to reconsider their plans, often preventing them from returning home or even reaching their intended destinations in the United States.

In response to these legal barriers, some Punjabi migrants turned to alternative routes, including traveling through Mexico in hopes of entering the U.S. by circumventing immigration restrictions. This path, however, was fraught with challenges as U.S. border enforcement intensified in response to rising concerns over Asian immigration. The efforts of these migrants to navigate the restrictive policies highlight the ways in which they contended with a broader system of exclusion designed to limit Asian entry into the country. This history of South Asian migration to Mexico provides a critical lens for understanding how these individuals adapted to, resisted, and sometimes subverted U.S. immigration laws.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

The key outcomes of this project include a detailed mapping of South Asian migrant trajectories through Mexico, supported by extensive archival research conducted in the Mexican National Archives. This allowed me to trace the movements, challenges, and strategies employed by these migrants as they navigated U.S. immigration restrictions. I also engaged with immigration scholars in Mexico City who are interested in migration between Mexico and the United States, including the understudied experiences of Asian migrants. These conversations provided valuable insights into the broader patterns of transnational migration in the early twentieth century. This research forms the foundation of the book project I am currently working on, which seeks to explore how South Asian migrants contended with a larger system of immigration enforcement, revealing new dimensions of global migration and border control.