

Lyari Town and the Politics of Race in Pakistan

Karachi's politically volatile neighborhood Lyari Town has long been in the news for its gang violence, drug dealing, and ethnic strife (Gayer 2014). After recent operations against criminal elements, it has also gained traction in the media for producing talented boxers and footballers. This is seen as an anomaly: the rare presence of talent against a backdrop of routine violence, in a context where cricket enjoys nationwide popularity. Furthermore, the popularity of boxing and football in news accounts is regarded as symptomatic of a history of migrations along the Indian Ocean. The African diaspora community, the Sheedi people, in particular, are highlighted for participating in these sports. Focusing on the interplay between citizenship, visibility, and race, this project investigates the racialist logics through which Lyari's place in the nation is determined. How does the media hyper-visibility of boxing and football racialize Lyari's Baloch and Sheedi peoples? What kinds of socialities does this produce? And how does it trouble dominant formations of Pakistani national identity from the vantage point of marginalized groups?

I place Lyari in the historical context of the development of the port in Karachi and the Indian Ocean slave trade to investigate its present day legacies in Pakistan. The laborers who worked at the port hailed from Baloch villages surrounding the neighborhood (Suhail 2015). The port also attracted migrants "from the Iranian part of the Makran coast as well Makranis of African origins — [the] Sheedis" (16). Among this labour force were also former slaves granted freedom by the British, who settled in Lyari, which the colonial administration then termed 'black town' (Hasan 1993). I ask how the racialized logic that governed this proletarian diversity in Lyari (Lufti and Suhail 2017) continues to haunt Karachi today? To what extent is Lyari's present image as a ghettoized neighborhood embedded in the history and geography of the Indian Ocean? Moreover, how does this long history of migration bring to bear different cosmopolitan cultures in Karachi?

From July to September 2018, I will travel to Karachi to conduct preliminary research in the field. I will spend four weeks in boxing clubs in Lyari, attending boxing practice in at least two of them — one at Kakri Ground and the other in Khambela, where I made contacts during a trip last summer. The club at Khambela boasts attendance from at least twenty girls, most of whom are residents of Lyari. Kakri Ground is one of the oldest football fields in Karachi and has a boxing ring. Immersing myself in the activities of the boxers and their coaches will give me an idea of how different conceptions of race and gender inflect the everyday life of these aspiring boxers. During the next four weeks, I will involve myself in the affairs of football clubs in Lyari. Many footballers from Lyari play for teams representing public corporations. I will examine how through sports, young Lyari athletes construct and imagine identities for themselves and acquire social prestige both locally and on a national scale? How are journalistic and photographic practices responsible for providing athletes this prestige? How do athletes relate to media exposure on their participation in these sports? What is the relationship between the local imaginaries constructed by young athletes and the global iconicity of sports like boxing and football?

This project contributes to the literature on citizenship and ethnic identities in Pakistan by showing its racial underpinnings. It shifts the conversation away from Lyari as an epicenter of ethnic strife and violence in Pakistan's financial hub, to show how this violence 'otherizes' and racializes the people of the neighborhood. Yet, the residents of Lyari navigate the racializing limits of national identity to claim belonging to a wider geography of the Indian Ocean. They participate in nationally marginal but globally iconic sports to produce unique cosmopolitan cultures in Karachi. This research untethers Karachi from the territorial boundaries of the Pakistani nation state and South Asia, and instead situates it as a node in the Indian Ocean.

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