

The Neutral State: Political Performances and Knowledge Practices in Karachi's Waterscape
Usmaan Farooqui
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Like other burgeoning South Asian cities, access to water in Karachi, Pakistan is characterized by shortages, leaky infrastructure, and ineffective public institutions. Scholars, in turn, explore the myriad forms of so-called “informal” claim-making that emerge as populations try to secure scarce resources in circumstances where formal institutions are weak. But, while scholarship in this vein focuses on how practices such as patronage and kinship fill perceived gaps in governance, there is a lack of sustained empirical and theoretical attention given to the role played by low-level state officials in either facilitating or constricting the informalized politics of the urban poor. In this paper, I address this question by focusing on everyday water access in one of Karachi’s most water starved informal settlements. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with the settlement’s city water operators, I show how the politics of these public officials not only shapes the nature of water access, but also leads to larger political outcomes related to governance and political authority in Karachi’s informal settlements. This paper begins by examining the importance of urban knowledge in facilitating water access. In a context of severe hydraulic uncertainty where water supplies are unpredictable, I first demonstrate how water operators must materially produce information about the settlement’s water supply levels, timings, and schedules through daily “checking” practices to account for when and where water is supplied to the settlement. Access for the settlement’s residents in such circumstances becomes just as much about securing information as it does about securing water supplies. I then shed light on how water operators who, as producers of this information, become uniquely situated actors that shape the settlement’s larger political landscape. Specifically, water operators use their position as knowledge producers to claim “neutrality” in a local context where access to water is colored by discourses of corruption and theft. In demonstrating how state officials keep themselves insulated from the everyday politics of water access, this paper makes two larger arguments pertinent to urban scholarship on South Asia. First, it points to how the state enacts a unique logic of governance in informal settlements by actively relieving itself of the responsibility to intervene in local politics and hence encouraging informalized claim-making. Second, it points to how the state in South Asia manages to retain its political authority as a cohesive governing entity despite its inability to provide basic services.