

The Dalit Movement in Sindh

In the summer of 2019, I propose to conduct archival research pertaining to the twentieth century history of the Dalit movement in Sindh. Specifically, I am interested in searching for the records of the Sindh Scheduled Caste Federation, which was active in the 1940s and corresponded with major Indian Dalit leaders such as Jogendranath Mandal. According to some of the correspondence between Mandal and members of the Sindh chapter of the Scheduled Caste Federation cited in Mandal's autobiography, their pre-1947 perspective on the importance of Pakistan as a site of emancipatory anti-Brahmin politics played a significant role in persuading Mandal to join the Pakistani government after Partition in 1947 (Sen 2018). I am interested in examining the available historical records in Karachi and Jamshoro (Hyderabad) to see what more can be learnt of the life of this organization. Specifically, I will search the Sindh Legislative Assembly records in the 1930s as well as correspondence among political leaders in Sindh, at the Sindh Archives in Karachi, and the library of the Institute of Sindhology at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

My dissertation broadly pertains to the articulation of Hindu religious minority and caste identity in Sindh, asking three interrelated questions. How do Hindus participate in politics in Pakistan, and what makes their participation meaningful to them? What stakes are there in considering their political projects for a wider understanding of citizenship in Pakistan? Based on fifteen months of ethnographic and archival fieldwork in Sindh from 2016-2018, my dissertation project traces various strategies through which members of the Hindu community articulate aspirational strategies for their political and social flourishing, and how these transform into claims made on the Pakistani state. Over the course of my ethnographic fieldwork in Sindh, I interacted with circles of contemporary Dalit activists in the region and came to learn of a nascent, if ambitious, political project to realign the politics of minority and that of religious identity in the country by insisting on an acknowledgement of the history of caste-based dispossession and discrimination in Pakistan. These contemporary activists see themselves as resuscitating a lost tradition of caste activism in the country.

In the national archives of Islamabad, I found resonance with these contemporary concerns as I learnt that that in the years before the creation of Pakistan, sections of the Dalit movement had made common cause with the Pakistan movement (albeit cautiously) before Partition on the basis of a shared anti-Brahminism, most prominently in the figure of the East Bengal leader Jogendranath Mandal, federal minister of from 1947 to 1950 in Pakistan in addition to being the president of the East Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation in East Pakistan. However, by 1950, Dalit groups found themselves legible to the state only as Hindus despite any earlier promise or hope that in Pakistan, Muslims and Dalits alike would find political empowerment in clear delineation from upper caste Hindus. Yet an analysis of these developments for my dissertation projects would be incomplete without making the connection between Mandal and recent trends. This aspect of my research could not be completed during my earlier fieldwork due to funding, yet remains an integral question and gap in my data.

It is these connections I hope to explore in the summer of 2019 by studying more about the history of the Sindh Scheduled Caste Federation, and its ties to the pan-Indian Dalit movement, and to Sindhi politics (Ansari 2018). Although emerging scholarship on caste activism and peasant movements in Bengal have complicated our understanding of the political milieu before 1947 (Kamal 2007, Bandyopadhyay et al 2014, Sen 2018, Uddin forthcoming), the serious study of the history of caste activism is as yet missing from the history of Sindh. The activities and concerns of the Sindh Scheduled Caste Federation thus present the possibility of excavating new understandings of regional and caste alliances at a formative time in South Asian history.