

Pakistan's waterscapes – waste, sovereignty and the many lives of the Indus Waters Treaty

My application proposes three months of summer research on the river Ravi in Pakistan's Punjab province. I will start by studying the effects of the Ravi being 'given' to India under the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960. I will conduct this research in three phases: **Phase 1**, July 2013 – ethnographic research in Shahdarra, a settlement on the western bank of the Ravi in Lahore; **Phase 2**, August 2013 – ethnographic research at the Green Bench of the Lahore High Court where the River Ravi Commission conducts hearings; **Phase 3**, September 2013 – archival research at the National Archives of Pakistan (NAP) in Islamabad. This research will help me with site-selection for long term dissertation fieldwork, which I intend to begin in May 2014, as well as sharpen my research focus. My dissertation is (tentatively) titled, *Ecologies of hope, hydrologies of failure in postcolonial Pakistan*.

**Background:** Pakistan is among “the world's most water-stressed” countries (World Bank 2008); with a Falkenmark index of 1000 m<sup>3</sup>, official discourse on water in Pakistan is increasingly adopting the language of crisis.<sup>1</sup> At this moment, research on the social history of the Ravi – one of Pakistan's central rivers, integral to Lahore's history and identity – will be very valuable. I will explore the relationships between national sovereignty, alterity, and ‘the commons’ through the life—and death—of a river. The Ravi originates in Himachal Pradesh (India) and flows into Pakistan's Punjab province. The Ravi has many stories to tell: those of national rivalry; the nationalization of natural resources; the nature of decision-making under military rule (when the IWT was signed in 1960, Pakistan was under General Ayub Khan's rule); and the travel of experts from the global North to the global South.

The World Bank-brokered IWT ‘gave’ the three eastern rivers of the Indus water basin (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej) to India, and the three western rivers to Pakistan. In the words of one of my interlocutors who has lived in Shahdarra for the last fifty years, “*They killed it. They killed our river. Imagine, killing a river!*” Through participant observation and interviews with river dwellers along the Ravi I aim to answer questions such as: How are high-level national decisions understood and *lived* by people such as my interlocutors? Who, or what, is *other*-ed in this process of trying to make sense of a river's death? The Ravi is an incredibly fertile site through which to study national imaginaries, ‘the other’, and human agency. Except for literature on the IWT that saw it as a victory for international diplomacy, or documented the economic-legal aspects of the treaty (Abbassi 2011, Gulhati 1973, Tabassum 2004), there has been no ethnographic study of the impact of the ‘loss’ of rivers such as the Ravi on people's everyday lives, livelihoods, and imaginaries.<sup>2</sup>

**Research Plan – Phase 1:** I will spend the first month in Lahore, conducting ethnographic research with a community of small dairy farmers on the bank of the Ravi at Shahdarra<sup>3</sup>. This will involve interviews with men and women who have lived in Shahdarra for over five decades; I initiated contact with this community on my last research visit to Pakistan in December 2012. From their accounts we can learn about the ‘slow death’ of the Ravi—how were lifeworlds affected by the IWT? How do these people, who have historically been tied so intimately to the river, understand and make sense of the ‘death’ of the river? What does ‘high politics’ look like on the ground?

**Phase 2:** I will spend the next four weeks conducting ethnographic research at the recently set up Green Bench of the Lahore High Court.<sup>4</sup> I will attend hearings of the River Ravi Commission, interview Commission members, and accompany them on their fact-finding missions to specific locations on the Ravi to measure flow of effluent into the river. I will focus on how the project to clean the Ravi – both its discourse and practice – is being authored and implemented. How is ‘civil society’ coming together, and what kind of expertise is being invoked?

**Phase 3:** I will spend the final month, September, at the National Archives of Pakistan (NAP) in Islamabad. In National Assembly archives – from 1948, when India stopped the flow of water into Pakistan for eighteen days, to 1960 – I will study parliamentary debates on what form a water-sharing arrangement with India should take. My preliminary research has shown that after the treaty was signed, National Assembly debates between West and East Pakistan members became increasingly polarized. East Pakistan members of parliament complained that the issue of flooding in East Pakistan never attracted the attention of the central government, as did West Pakistan's water-sharing problem with India. Can we read the prelude to the 1971 creation of Bangladesh in these conversations? This makes my research even more significant, as conversations around 1971 have been scant in Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> 2008. Briscoe, J and Qamar, O. *Pakistan's water economy: running dry*. World Bank.

<sup>2</sup> Zubair Shafi Ghauri's *Ravi kinaray kii Harrapa'I bastiyan* (2005) (settlements along the Ravi from Harrappan times) is a rich historical-archaeological study. David Gilmartin's research (1988, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2013) on irrigation in Pakistan, and Imran Ali's 1989 study, *The Punjab Under Imperialism 1857-1947*, will provide an invaluable base for contemporary anthropological research such as mine.

<sup>3</sup> neighborhood of Lahore on the bank of the Ravi.

<sup>4</sup> funded by the Asian Development Bank. I have been in touch with Justice Mansoor Ali Shah who was at the forefront of this ‘green justice’ initiative - I have been welcomed to do my research in his court over the summer.