

Research Statement

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My research project departs from the observation that the transformation of the Indus Rivers from gods into machines under British imperial rule was brought about “by a diligent practice of the new disciplines of knowledge” which Partha Chatterjee (1995) recognizes as “texts of power”. Accomplice to colonial hydrology was a colonial sociology which imagined, represented, and materialized a certain order of water and society in colonial India and thus laid the foundation for a new set of hydro-social relations. In this materialization of discursive formations in the canal colonies of the Punjab certain other ways of perceiving, imagining, and representing water and society were made less real, less legitimate, or entirely invisible. My research will explore the following interconnected questions: how did people make sense of this transformation? How did they understand their own role in the colonial practices of managing and allocating water? How did they connect with water and nature before the onset of colonial modernity? What forms of social, political, and economic structures it instantiated?

I intend to use a combination of ethnographic and archival research to find answers to these questions which are becoming even more important as the available water supplies diminish. I am applying for this grant to facilitate my summer pre-dissertation research trip to Pakistan to achieve two major objectives. First, I will spend a large portion of my time in Pakistan conducting preliminary archival research. For the first month and half of my research in Lahore, I want to locate and visit the archival resources relevant to my work. There are several potential sites, including the Punjab Archive which holds records dating back to 1809, the Ministry of Irrigation headquarters, the Provincial Public Works Department, and the head office of the Water and Power Development Authority. In this part of my research I am specifically interested in the archival evidence of the negotiation between spiritual and cultural aspects of water and its more utilitarian, economic meanings. I also hope to trace the details of different material and symbolic transactions around water. Through my archival research, I intend to trace the official discourse on water constructed and maintained by the officers of the colonial government and complement it with the ethnographic component to trace the contours of people’s discourse on water through a careful observation of practices connected with the use and management of water. Second, in the last two or three weeks of my stay in Pakistan, I will build on this archival work by laying the groundwork for the participant-observation research I intend to conduct next year. During this second phase, I will familiarize myself with the field and select the site for my larger ethnographic fieldwork in the Nili Bar; a huge geographical area between the rivers Ravi and Sutlej. I also hope to begin the work of making personal connections and collecting life-histories and personal narratives of the people who witnessed and experienced the transformation of *Nili Bar* from an arid wilderness to perennially irrigated green fields.

Conducting preliminary dissertation research this summer is vital to the progress of my doctorate. If I am awarded a Summer Research Grant by the AIPS, it will help me immeasurably to build a foundation of archival research as well complete the initial groundwork for the ethnographic phase of this project.

Chatterjee, P. 1995. *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.