

The Indus Delta: Rethinking the raison d'être of the Last Frontier

Abstract

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This paper presents an argument that bureaucratic uses of “the last frontier” by the British Empire have constructed sense of fixations of representation regarding the Indus Delta region, located currently in the southern Pakistan. Through bringing in concepts from human geography, political ecology and ethnography, I present social and cultural history of the Indus Delta to show how the region, far from being a desolate frontier, was an integral part of the broader Indian Ocean world.

The research begins by reading through Indian Office Records (London)- dealing with major theme that how the idea of the Indus Delta as a frontier space is actively produced and reproduced by the British Empire as bureaucratic raison d'être (1843-1947). This raison d'être was constructed against the failure of the Indus delta as not being a suitable water channel for navigation. This process was framed through an experts, engineers, geographers and bureaucrats. Interestingly such raison d'être continues until present and there is recurring sense of the Indus delta as the last frontier of the Pakistan in the imagination of state. In the post-colonial state of Pakistan, this imagination of the Indus Delta remains well and alive, working through new troupes of ecology and environment.

In an attempt to push against this imagination of the Indus Delta this paper will narrate narratives of imagined and lived connections between people in the Indus delta and the broader Indian Ocean world. During the two years I spent in the area for ethnographic fieldwork, I engaged with many families with continued relations of trade, marriage and religion with people living in other territorial non-contiguous sites around the Indian Ocean. Through bringing in concepts from human geography, political ecology and ethnography, I present social and cultural history of the Indus Delta to uncouple the notion of the last frontier into showing the Indus delta as important region of the Indian Ocean, connected with the wider sea and land trade networks.