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Organizing Difference: Hindu Panchayats and Local Governance in Sindh

My doctoral dissertation is concerned with the way religious minorities in Pakistan encounter and recreate bureaucracies. From June to mid-August 2015, under the terms of the AIPS Summer Grant, I conducted preliminary fieldwork on modes of self-regulation and organization inhabited by Pakistani Hindus. While in Karachi, I conducted several interviews with members of a national-level panchayat, as well as the Pakistan Hindu Council, and gained a broader understanding of how the panchayat system was structured and functioned. I also conducted some archival research of colonial-era local government systems in order to establish a sense of the historical trajectories and legacies that mark such systems. I was primarily interested in exploring this because the panchayat system hews closely to the structure of informal caste panchayats from the colonial era, even though both caste-panchayats and more formal village-level panchayats were abolished in Pakistan in its first few decades. The preserved official records present one avenue of research to contribute richly to the field of Pakistan Studies, that will require more time than I had this summer to examine fully. Lastly, while in Karachi, I worked with a small legal aid organization that coordinated with village and district level panchayats in various areas of Sindh to redress the particular legal problems and entanglements faced by Hindus. I spent the remainder of my summer in the much smaller city of Mirpurkhas. There I interacted with office-bearers of the town Hindu Panchayat, visited their offices, as well as attending to other scenes of minority encounters with Pakistani government such as the district court, NGOs, and shrine and temple management. Focusing on bureaucracy and local government in this manner through the optic of difference and minority expands the way these debates have thus far taken place in Pakistan Studies. I hope to elaborate on these aspects further once I undertake dissertation fieldwork.