

Canal Colonies in Punjab: Labor, Property, and Water in Colonial India (1842-1935)

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In 19th century colonial India, as wheat cultivation enclosed the land of five rivers (*punj-aab*) in legally constituted ideas of property, the Indus water machine desacralized the deified *Sindhu* and ensconced its previously itinerant people within a web of modern canal irrigation infrastructure, settlement colonies and global debt. My research seeks to understand how the discursive and material understating of land, water and its peoples were transformed by the colonial settlement of canal colonies in Punjab. Departing from the proposition that the colonial knowledge-power nexus engineered both Hindustan's social and material landscapes, a claim taken to be self-evident in histories of South Asia and architectural history of the British empire alike, I ask: how specifically, did the nexus of agrarian reform extract value as property from wastelands, as labor from bodies, and water as resource from unruly rivers? More pointedly, in the quest to expand the arable frontier, how did techniques of settlement, honed over a century of colonial rule in North-East and South India-- infrastructural engineering, land reform, peasant indebtedness, international investment and scientific agriculture—underwrite the settlement of canal colonies in aid of wheat cultivation in Punjab?¹ And, most significantly, how did unruly river goddesses that eschewed infrastructural order, itinerant tribes that refused settlement, and wastelands that embraced infertility become dissidents?

My objective, as such, is not to shift focus away from questions of power and politics or to make a claim for the agentive nature of the nonhuman, following the ontological turn in STS and the humanities. Weaving together methodologies from architectural & urban history, and anthropology, my research centers the multi-disciplinary material and spatial history of the canal colonies—as sites, material objects, and spaces imbued with meaning, ideology and value. This approach, I argue, allows the apprehension of the colonies as the thing itself, and its position in broader regimes of signification; it imbricates schemes of spatial transformations with regimes of subject formation and economic development. Building upon existing scholarship on political ecology and environmental histories of place, it reframes histories of 'drain of wealth' and violent imperial rule by grounding its attention in the materially empirical in the nexus of agrarian reform in Punjab. Instead of seeking the local, spiritual or cultural meanings of land and water to counter the colonial histories of both as resource and aesthetics I ask: How did the high resource requirements of wheat cultivation transform the very idea of land and water as property, and value (revenue);² and, how did the rhythms of wheat cultivation create and spatialize the laboring body of the farmer that prior to her settlement in the canal colony lead an itinerant life?³ Extending settled agriculture in Punjab entailed creating it where it did not yet exist: wheat cultivation infused the very rhythms and nature of life and land in the region, as well as their epistemic meaning and ontological significance, with colonial duress. In turn, I ask, how did colonial bureaucracy fold local indebtedness and global capital into a singular orientation?⁴

The AIPS grant will facilitate pre-dissertation research work in Pakistan to seek answers to these questions, which in the context of diminishing water resources and CPEC funded development in Pakistan have only become more acute in recent years. The grant will fund ten weeks of preliminary archival research in Lahore and Islamabad. I have identified the relevant archives and started gathering the necessary permissions to access documents pertaining to the public works projects initiated for canal construction, village settlement plans, water laws and property rights in Punjab. Particularly important in this regard are sources pertaining to the tenure of colonial administrators, including Malcolm Darling's 30-year career as Assistant Commissioner of Punjab: M.L. Darling papers and correspondence, currently housed in the Punjab Provincial Secretariat in Lahore. The Punjab Archive, the Ministry of Irrigation headquarters, the Provincial Public Works Department hold additional records dating back to 1805. In Islamabad, I will visit the National Documentation Center and National Archives to peruse records on land tenure and property law. In addition to financial support, the institutional support underwritten by AIPS will be crucial for officially gaining access to research archives—a significant challenge given COVID restrictions on travel and access.

I have completed the all the requirements of M.Phil. and will defend my dissertation prospectus in March 2022. The AIPS grant will allow me to conduct initial archival research in Pakistan, which I am confident will strengthen my proposals for the 2023-24 dissertation grant cycle (e.g., the SSRC-IDRF and Carter Manny Award).

¹ In the decades following the annexation of Punjab, as the American wheat market collapsed globally, the British empire spared no effort in transforming Punjab into a veritable competitor: in one of the largest schemes of settlement in history, wheat cultivation in Punjab brought vast tracts of arid wasteland into the fold of cultivation. See Agnihotri, Indu. "Ecology, land use and colonisation: the canal colonies of Punjab." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 33, no. 1 (1996): 37-58.

² Allied with schemes of land reform, the codification of property and inheritance law. See Bhattacharya, Neeladri. *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*. SUNY Press, 2019.

³ In turn we may also ask how did settlement through villagization create cultural and religious stratification in terms of caste and gender-based hierarchies.

⁴ My initial research shows that this site is significant for the mode of financialization it enabled: credit lending practices in Punjab were codified to encourage farmers to cultivate wheat over other crops. M.L Darling's work is the primary archival source for this assertion. The expansion of credit networks in London facilitated borrowing with government backing for canal engineering and infrastructure projects. Ramesh, Aditya, and Vidhya Raveendranathan. "Infrastructure and public works in colonial India: Towards a conceptual history." *History Compass* 18, no. 6 (2020): e12614.