

Project Title: Cleaning the City of Waste: Labor and Infrastructure in Colonial and Contemporary Lahore

Abstract:

With an estimated population of over 10 million people, Lahore on a daily basis produces a vast amount of waste. Cleaning the city thus requires a sanitation system through which it can be collected, transported, and deposited elsewhere. The present sanitation system for managing this waste consists of a nexus between infrastructure and labor. Laborers, from municipal sweepers to supervisors, and infrastructure, from compactors to mapping software, attempt to remove the waste that has accumulated from the previous day. This system was setup during the colonial period when attempts were being made to transform the city and its inhabitants so as to make them both modern and developed. Currently, this system is undergoing changes as the municipal department that deals with solid waste has been reformed on a model of corporate governance and operations have been given to two private companies. Similar to the colonial regime, the reformed municipal department and private companies also aspire to modernize and develop Lahore and its inhabitants. Combining recent discussions of infrastructure with long-term interests in labor among anthropologists, the proposed project seeks to understand (1) how the sanitation system setup during the colonial period utilized infrastructure and labor jointly; (2) how that utilization of infrastructure and labor continues in contemporary Lahore but is being transformed through governance reform, privatization, and influx of technological and financial resources; and (3) how the state, in both these historical moments, aspired to modernize and develop Lahore and its inhabitants in distinct ways. This project will contribute to the field of Pakistani studies by demonstrating the intricate relationship between the colonial and post-colonial periods as well as the historical significance that subaltern groups such as Christian sanitation workers have in both periods.