

AIPS Travel Grant Final Report

Project Title: How important were madāris really in producing the best ‘ulama? A view from studies of South Asia, c. 1100-1800 AD

Name: Zahra Sabri

Conference: 51st Annual Conference on South Asia (ACSA)

Location: Madison, Wisconsin

Dates: Oct 21, 2023

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

My paper was part of a panel (that I organised for the conference) relating to the evolving history and functions of the traditional (madrasah) education in South Asia in general, and Pakistan in particular. The panel was an effort to bring together three Pakistani scholars, one Pakistani-American scholar, and one Indian-American scholar to debate and reflect over a wide variety of issues related to the study of the madrasah, such as the Pakistani government’s attempts to regulate studies in the madrasah in recent years, post-Partition ‘migration’ of madrasahs and madrasah networks from India to Pakistan, virtual education in the madrasah landscape, madrasahs for women, and historical debates about the importance of madrasahs in Islamic learning in South Asia. My own paper was related to the last issue.

Overall, we had a lively debate with the audience about how the madrasah had evolved from Mughal and pre-Mughal times to contemporary times in Pakistan, where there is concern about madrasahs and militancy and ‘modernity’ vs ‘tradition’ in public political discourse. The panel shone a light for US-based audiences on debates around madrasah in present-day Pakistan, and helped us presenters refine our own understanding about certain theoretical issues relating to Muslim religious education in particular, and religious education in general.

In own my paper, I also discussed how the work of certain US-based scholars on Islamic education writing in English, differed from work done by scholars writing in Urdu in South Asia, sparking a debate about different subjectivities and academic/cultural proclivities in scholarship.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

- My ability to travel to the Madison conference, on an AIPS grant, led to the addition to the conference of a panel which focused on the important topic of present status and history of Islamic education in Pakistan. There are few panels which adopt such a focus on Pakistan at the conference, so this was a key addition to the study of Pakistan at the conference, and attracted a large number of scholars of Pakistan looking for such academic representation at the conference.
- Through my presentation at the conference, I was able to meet a number of attendees who showed interest in the topic of my research and suggested different forums where it could be published, and even assigned as a working paper for certain US classrooms.