AIPS Fellowship Application – Bilal Malik

The Secular Modern at a Traditional Islamic Seminary – Ethnographic case-study of the Bhera madrasa

Abstract

The Bhera madrasa is both socially influential and ideologically intriguing. It impacts 20,000 religious functionaries-in-training through 100 affiliated institutions. And it confounds entrenched dichotomies in scholarship and society by insisting that traditional Islam and secular modern values, institutions, and knowledges are compatible. For example, since 1957, it's affiliates have combined a conservative theological education with advocacy for democratic politics and teaching of secular modern subjects like English and Economics. Relying on extended participant-observation (by living inside the madrasa for one year), along with follow-up semi-structured interviews, I explore three inter-related issues in my dissertation: i) madrasa students' understandings of the 'secular modern' and its compatibility with 'traditional religion'; ii) the processes through which they acquire these understandings; and iii) the personal and political effects of these understandings.

Prior work on madrasas has methodologically relied on brief visits or documentary analysis, and has been narrowly focused on curriculum, pedagogy, or links with militant Islam. By using long-term immersion, this research is methodologically innovative; and by focusing on the madrasa's holistic social world, it is also thematically broader compared to prior work. On a practical level, this dissertation will contribute to better-informed educational-reform and policy-formulation efforts in Pakistan. This work will also add to current social theory relating to modernity, secularism, and religion, especially in the context of Pakistan in two ways: i) it will map the unique modes and tensions of this institutions' social experiment of reconciling allegedly dichotomous categories (of 'traditional religion' and the 'secular modern'), and use this to interrogate existing social theory on these topics ; and ii) it will explore the ways in which people in particular socio-cultural contexts acquire, define, and deploy the categories of 'modernity' and 'secularism'.