Tariq Rahman
Abstract
2019 Annual Conference on South Asia

The Properties of Property: *Patwaris*, Digitization, and Land Records in Lahore

In 2016, the Government of Punjab (GoP) launched an effort to digitize land records in the city of Lahore. Recalling development economist Hernando de Soto's view of land in the Global South as "dead capital," at the heart of project was the belief that local empowerment hinged on establishing modern property rights in land. Traditionally functioning as inherited wealth, land in Lahore is often entangled with colonial property regimes, undocumented transfers after partition, and generations of dispute and subdivision—issues that are magnified by the city's dense residential settlements. By establishing clear ownership boundaries, the GoP project aimed to make land liquid, or an asset that could be leveraged for future profit.

The centerpiece of the GoP project was the removal of the *patwari*, the traditional land revenue official. *Patwaris* maintain manually drafted spreadsheets and maps pertaining to landownership in a given area, records dated as early as the 19th century. In the eyes of the GoP, *patwaris* played a traditional but ultimately obstructive human role. Framed in official reports as "predatory middlemen," *patwaris* were accused of reducing the liquidity of land. Under the GoP project, millions of pages of records were scanned, centuries-old maps were converted into GIS data, and new computerized land record centers were opened throughout Lahore.

However, the work of *patwaris* continues to be fundamental to the new digital database. Establishing the rightful ownership of land continues to require visiting homes, consulting with neighbors, and tracing kinship lineages, labor that depends upon the local and specialized knowledge of *patwaris*. In this paper, I follow the path of landed property from inherited wealth to liquid asset in Lahore. If the GoP's digital database continues to rely upon its analog counterparts, then how are land records produced in the interplay between digitization and sociomaterial practices?