

Final Report

AIPS Junior Research Fellowship supported my dissertation research “*Theorizing Deltas: A More-than-Human Ethnography of the Indus Delta in Pakistan.*” The project foregrounds the hybrid – land/water environment of the delta to the fore to explore how it shape and shaped by human and other-than-human practices and relations, rather than considering deltas through the backdrop of human sociocultural life only. The project broadly asks, how the deltaic processes of soil accretion and erosion shape the physicality of the delta, and in turn, shape the human and other-than-human relations in the Indus Delta of Pakistan. Beginning from a geosocial position which urges to take into consideration the corporeality of the geology that has material embodiment and consequences for the possibilities of being and nonbeing, I consider the notion that deltas are not static spaces that come-into-existence for once and all. Rather, deltas are in a continuous process of becoming so as the politics, ethics, relations, care, governance, and conservation too are never finished projects. They are in constant play in contestation and alliances with the material and multispecies world of deltas. My premise here is that the emergent yet overlooked deltaic processes and forces at geological scale mediate and complicate human and other-than-human beings’ lives and relations in unexpected ways at multiple scale.

I deployed mixed methods – ethnography, river ecology (environmental flows), and historical (archival research) to understand the ways deltaic processes of soil accretion and erosion hinge upon and shape human and other-than-human practices and relations. Due to covid-19 related interruptions, I had to adjust my fieldwork plans. In doing so, I employed “concept as method” technique to “trace” the Indus Delta in heterogenous sources such as officials, reports, newspaper articles, (v)blogs, poetry, folklore, stories, and proverbs, scholarly articles and books, and other sources. In the field, I stayed at Keti Bunder, a historical port town in the Indus Delta to conduct ethnography with the delta and Indigenous fisherfolk.

The AIPS Junior fellowship allowed me to conduct archival research at two sites – Sindh Archives in Karachi, and the British Library, London. The purpose was to understand how the British colonial and later postcolonial administration of Pakistan experience and engage with the deltaic ecology, and how deltaic material and multispecies world hold sway on their policies and practices. I explored various documents at both sites including but not limited to maps, policies documents, memorandums, official reports and debates, travelogues, and memoirs related with the Indus River and the Indus Delta. The documents related to the construction of Sukkur Barrage were very relevant and helped me to understand the “agency” of the river as the unruly nature of the river forced the colonial administration to transform their policies. These and other documents helped me to trace the historical ecology of the Indus Delta and the river before the river was dammed to present when the river water hardly reaches the delta due to one of the largest irrigation infrastructures upstream on the Indus River.

Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions to the British Library, I could only complete the archival research as the last part of my fieldwork. Currently, I am writing my dissertation. Getting access to the British library helped me to further elaborate my arguments based on other data sources. Especially, with regard to tracing how and why both the British colonial and Pakistani postcolonial administration cannot develop irrigation infrastructures in the Indus Delta. The documents provided a rare window to explore the frustration of the officials in controlling the unruly nature of the deltaic ecology. Archival research further helped me to understand the continuity and change in the policies in the Indus Delta, and how those policies have transformed the deltaic ecology, which in turn, have shaped the material and multispecies relations in the Indus Delta.