Editorial

Despite continuing difficult times, Sindhi Studies is doing well, as evidenced by the ongoing preparation of the first issue of the Journal Of Sindhi Studies (https://brill.com/view/journals/joss/joss-overview.xml), which should be published online by Brill in September. This new issue of the MIFS Newsletter (or MIFSEN) begins with an interview with a leading contributor to our field, Claude Markovits. It is followed by the usual columns. We welcome Trisha Lalchandani, a doctoral student at EHESS and affiliated to CEIAS, who has joined the editorial team. Finally, we would like to warmly thank Wahid Mendil for his help in redesigning the newsletter.

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In Conversation: Professor Claude Markovits with Trisha Lalchandani

TL: What is it about being a historian that excites you? Were you inspired by someone?

CM: I always loved history, since the time I was at school, perhaps due to the immigrant background of my family, which incited me to look for origins (my parents came from Eastern Europe and carried complicated histories with them). I later studied humanities and almost naturally chose history as my speciality. But I had no mentor.

TL: What was your training like as a historian? How did you come to research around the questions of trade, labour, and mobility?

CM: I was trained as a historian at the École Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne, but it was a very scholastic training not meant at preparing students for research, especially on non-French history. But I had decided to try my hand at Indian history and was lucky to be able to go to Cambridge for a year with a Fellowship from Trinity College. Having learnt some of the basics about doing research in Indian history, I decided to prepare, under the guidance of Dr Anil Seal, a PHD thesis on Indian business and politics in the 1930s (published as a book in 1985). This is how I had my first introduction to the Indian business class, which became one of my major themes of research throughout my career. At the time I was interested in the relationship between capitalism and nationalism, but later developed an interest in business per se.
TL: Your work has been seminal in offering a perspective on the transnational networks that the Sindhi people employed and established, participating in the circulation of capital. Could you describe how you were led to investigate the trade networks of the Sindhi people in particular?

CM: My discovery of the Sindhis was serendipitous. In the course of the research for my PhD, I had come across an Indians Abroad Directory published in the 1930s, which gave lists of traders in many countries. I had also heard gossip in India about the ubiquity and enterprise of Sindhis, and decided to start an enquiry into their history. I knew nothing then about Hyderabad and Shikarpur, and discovered the importance of these localities in the course of my inquiry. I must add that I never visited these towns.

TL: Throughout your work, you channel your research around the year 1750. Could you elaborate on why the mid-eighteenth century is so central to the Sindhi trade networks?

CM: The choice of 1750 as terminus post quem is partly due to the fact that English-language material becomes available from that time, while work on earlier periods necessitates knowledge of Persian, which I do not possess. Besides it is also the moment when Shikarpur emerged as an important locus of trade and finance, in relation to the Durrani empire, and that marks the real beginning of the global trajectory of Sindhi traders.

TL: What are the empirical sources which a historian turns to in the study of mobility, and especially with reference to the Sindhis, what were the challenges that you faced?

CM: There were enormous challenges at the level of sources in the 1990s. This was still a pre-digital age, and the archives in the India Office Library, where I did most of my research (they were subsequently moved to St Pancras at the British Library) had not been properly catalogued. One had to use the classification of documents devised by the colonial officials themselves, which meant somewhat internalizing their categories. For instance, regarding the Shikarpuris, I discovered, after some time, that the best way to trace them was by looking in the huge collection of the Bombay Proceedings at the files entitled ‘estates of British Indians having died in Russian Central Asia’, the object of an important correspondence between British and Russian authorities, that had not attracted any attention from historians. It was a rich archive, which had for me the added attraction that the Russian correspondence was entirely in French (the language exclusively used by the Czarist Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and not translated into English (which would have been an insult on the part of the clerks towards the gentlemen of the Office, as gentlemen were supposed to read French). For the Sindworkies, I was led to look into the archives of the British consular courts in Egypt, China and Morocco, in the Foreign Office Records at Kew, a source rarely used by historians of India.
TL: On the question of deficient archives, did you ever resort to alternate methods in your research, such as the anthropological? Did studying merchant mobility among the Sindhis lead you to adopt a heterodox approach from the point of view of classical history?

CM: I complemented the archives with a few interviews of Sindhi traders taken in Gibraltar, Mumbai and London. Although I did not learn much from them, given that their knowledge about the past of their community was a bit fuzzy, they were important to me, as living proof that Sindhi traders were not a figment of my imagination, but actually existed. Previously to meeting them, I could have believed I was writing a novel about a long-disappeared people. I cannot say however that I really adopted an anthropological approach, which would have meant digging deeper into certain aspects, such as kinship, marriage, etc.

TL: While there is greater impact and role that global merchant networks play in allowing the formation of a community, a people, even perhaps a nation, what role do smaller, provincial trade networks within cities play in narrating the history of a people or place?

CM: Narrating the history of a people or a place was not the primary object of my research, which was about understanding how trading networks based in a middle-sized Indian city like Hyderabad or Shikarpur could operate across immense geographical spaces. But of course I was led into looking at aspects of local history which had not been much explored previously.

TL: Religions are inherently landed or territorial, but they are also materialised through practice and performance. Would you like to comment on how religion changes shape or form when it is subjected to mobility? During your research, have you witnessed the question of religion acquire special significance in the case of Sindhis, especially since their practice of religion has not been particularly linear or orthodox?

CM: I came across religion, but was not really equipped to deal in depth with it. That is why it did not occupy a major place in my work.

TL: Finally, in this framework of mobilities, have you found any unique characteristics about the Sindhis and their history? Which groups would you say they are closest to, but what might distinguish them?

CM: Sindhi mobility is no doubt specific but not unique. There were many trading networks, Indian, Chinese, Armenian, Jewish, Lebanese, etc. that shared many traits with those of Sindh. I found the Sindworkies particularly resembled the Chinese traders from Wenzhou (a town in Chekiang which was the centre of a worldwide network specialized in the sale of leather articles), but lack of non-Chinese sources prevented me from developing a true comparative analysis of the two networks.
What I was hoping to do was to contribute to a general conversation about the topic of trading networks, by adopting a point of view critical of both the «trading diaspora» paradigm (Abner Cohen-Philip Curtin) and the “middleman minorities” paradigm (Edna Bonacich). Whether I was successful or not is a different question altogether.
The Hindu Sindhi diaspora in Hong Kong: Vignettes from fieldwork during the pandemic

Radhika Mathrani Chakraborty
National University of Singapore

My research focuses on the Hindu Sindhi diaspora in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has long been an important node in the global network of Hindu Sindhi merchants, but major social, economic and political shifts have reshaped life for Sindhis here. My research seeks to trace the growth of the community in Hong Kong, explore local and translocal linkages maintained by the community, and also focus on the gendered dimensions of the diaspora. I share here some experiences and vignettes from my ongoing fieldwork (both virtual and in-person) in Hong Kong, as well as some reflections on conducting fieldwork during the pandemic. Although the focus of my PhD research is wider, for this report I focus in particular on a few archival records I have been able to access as well as a particular temple where I have been conducting virtual as well as in-person fieldwork. What has emerged through my fieldwork is the diverse ways in which diaspora actors engage and produce community and identity, even in a context in which physical mobilities are constrained. My fieldwork has been ongoing since September 2020, with shorter field visits made in 2018 and 2019. I began in-person fieldwork in Hong Kong in February 2021.

Because of the restrictions and immobilities engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic, I have used a ‘patchwork’ of methods to engage with interlocutors. I had initially planned to conduct multi-sited ethnographic work: beginning in Hong Kong in the summer of 2020, and then tracing interlocutors’ translocal connections to Bombay and Pune. However, I began engaging with interlocutors through interviews over Zoom and telephone calls when I was unable to travel. WhatsApp became a means of staying in touch informally and checking in on how the progressing pandemic was impacting them and their families. Through shorter and more informal WhatsApp conversations, I was able to retain connective ties from earlier field visits. When I arrived in Hong Kong, connections snowballed as I met with Sindhis and was able to attend smaller community events and gatherings.

1 I am a doctoral candidate at the department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.

2 My initial field visits and conversations with interlocutors suggested close connections to these two cities. Falzon (2004) suggests strong diaspora ties to Bombay, and many interlocutors told me that a number of Sindhis from Hong Kong had retired and moved to Pune. Although interlocutors had family ties and religious ties in multiple locales in India and the world, rarely had the people I spoke with invested in property in Indian cities apart from Mumbai and Pune. This informed my initial selection of field sites.
Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) propose a patchwork ethnography for the conditions engendered by the pandemic; that engages and deploys new “recombinations of home and field” that have become a part of fieldwork. They stress that rather than advocating fly-by or armchair ethnography, patchwork ethnography develops new modalities of sustaining long-term and deep engagement, through such creative recombinations. As I waited, in Singapore for nearly a year before I could meet them in-person, and as interlocutors waited for businesses to revive and transnational flows to resume, waiting became a methodological tool as well as shared site of experience. This waiting was not blank, empty time – but was mobilized creatively by interlocutors as they congregated at ‘Zoom’ temples and parties, shared news and revived social connections digitally, organized virtual bridge games, learnt to play Mahjong, and strategized new business contingencies. Thus the community developed virtual modes of engagement, and digital spaces served to consolidate community identity; and reinforce their ties and moorings to Hong Kong as well as the global community. The ‘event’ of the pandemic thus became a unique moment within which to explore the ways in which diasporic communities experience and navigate uncertainties, and articulate identity and belonging.

The patchwork of sources I draw on thus includes the following:

Archival resources: Business directories and telephone directories from the late 1930s-onwards, Annual Reports and Newsletters of the Indian Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong dating from the 1950s-70s, diaspora magazines like The Indian and Bharat Ratna published by Sindhi business families from Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong Special Collections holdings include business directories, directories of ‘overseas Indian firms’, dating back to the 1930s, as well as publications of the Indian Chamber of Commerce dating to the 1950s. I have begun exploring these directories and records to map the arrival and growth of Sindhi businesses in Hong Kong. These directories made it possible to roughly estimate the growth of Sindhi firms over the years of their publication, as they list company names as well as the names of proprietors and managers. Yet these business directories are also cultural texts, as the ones published specifically for the Indian community give insights into social mores and everyday life for this community through advertisements, language guides, and editorial notes.

Digital spaces and public events: Through 2020, I observed and participated virtually in digital events being held on Facebook Live, YouTube, and occasionally Zoom. These events provided insights into new mobilizations around Sindhi identity that were framed by the circumstances of the pandemic. A variety of new groups and collectives have emerged, which draw on sponsorship from the global Sindhi diaspora, and are managed by Sindhis in India, or diaspora Sindhis. These groups organize digital entertainment programs like music, dance, or informative talks.

Ethnography: Since arriving in Hong Kong, I have been able to attend community events and gatherings, to observe social interactions, religious rituals, and community engagement here. This includes temples, charitable groups and volunteer activities, and social events.

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2 Interlocutors explained that they had earlier preferred to play bridge in larger groups with more tables, but due to Covid-19 restrictions on the number of people gathering, could not have their usual events. Thus during the pandemic, many Sindhi women developed a keen interest in Mahjong which could be played with a table of four, in keeping with the limits on numbers. The game became very popular amongst them during the pandemic.
In-depth interviews: I have been able to conduct in-depth interviews with 40 Sindhis, primarily from Hong Kong (with a few from Pune and Bombay). These interviews last between 1-3 hours. Due to the present circumstances, they have taken a variety of forms, stretched over a series of shorter phone calls, Zoom calls, or meetings in-person. All interlocutors’ names have been anonymized for this fieldwork report.

Tracing a history of Sindhis in Hong Kong

Historical records mark the arrival of Sindhi traders in Hong Kong in the late 1880s, with their presence growing through the early 1900s (Markovits 2004). In the years before the Second World War, traders formed the majority within Indians in Hong Kong – comprising over 1200 of the 3000-strong population (White 1994). Hong Kong had a flourishing trade in opium and cotton with India - a network with which Parsi and Bohra traders were intimately connected. Although the Indian community in Hong Kong was dominated by Parsi traders in the 1800s to the early 1900s, when the territory was ceded to the British, with shifts in and decline of the opium trade, Sindhis continued to make more inroads – this escalated significantly during the wartime years and particularly post-Partition. Markovits finds that the largest post-Partition influx of Sindhis in Asia was to Hong Kong, and suggests that the rise in the number of Sindhis in Hong Kong must be better documented historically. Records from the late 1960s and 70s demonstrate that Sindhis comprised the majority within the Indian population in Hong Kong. In 1970, Vaid describes the community in Hong Kong as ‘refugee merchants’ – ‘very much a community within themselves’. He notes that from informal estimates, approximately 10,000 ‘overseas Indians’ in Hong Kong in the 1970s, 9000 were engaged in trade and business (primarily mail order/retail stores, tailoring, and import-export) and only 300 of these traders were non-Sindhis. He notes that in this year, 83% of the total ‘overseas Indian’ firms in Hong Kong were owned by Sindhis.

Business directories tell the story of the growth of Sindhi firms in Hong Kong. The early 1900s are the period in which Sindhi presence began to gradually grow in Hong Kong, and this escalates from the mid-1900s onwards. The ‘1938 Business Directory of Hong Kong and Macao’ lists the early firms – some of which were branches of larger Sindhi import-export firms, but also a number of Silk Stores, that dealt in textiles.
Fig 1. Listings of Silk Stores owned by Sindhis in Hong Kong from the 1938 business directory of Hong Kong and Macau. We see a Mrs. M. M. Lokoornall listed as the ‘proprietress’ of Britannia Silk Store. Taj Mahal Silk Store later became Taj Mahals, a major tailoring business which then diversified into property as well as garment manufacturing. Mecca Silk stores shut shop in the 50s. The owner’s wife was the niece of the owner of Taj Mahals, and their sons went on to work for their maternal uncle at Taj Mahals – such interconnections were not uncommon for the Sindh business families who I interviewed.

The import and export business was a major one for the Sindh community in Hong Kong. Many Sindhi firms were involved in the import and export of sundries and ‘curios’. Listings in the business directories contained a vast and motley collection of smaller items that these companies dealt in.

Fig 2. An advertisement from the 1958 directory of members of the Indian Chamber of Commerce. The advertisement is by K.A.J. Chotirmall & Co, a global Sindworki firm which was primarily an Eastern firm, first established in Batavia (Markovits 2004).
By the 1950s, the directories grow lengthier, as smaller Indian businesses bloom across Hong Kong and in Kowloon as well. More tailoring businesses opening with their addresses listed in Chungking Mansions and Mirador Mansion. The wartime years were pivotal for this community. Because import-export channels from China and elsewhere were interrupted, there was briefly more promotion of items produced by local industries. In the 1960s, there was a sudden influx of many Sindhis into Hong Kong. Interlocutors shared that this was because of a change in immigration laws in the colony; with a new immigration law restricting visa free entry from the 1970s onwards. As this law was announced, the word spread, and Sindhis from India rushed to beat the deadline and enter Hong Kong before 1970 to find employment or start small businesses; even as those already based in Hong Kong sought to bring their families into Hong Kong before this date so that they could acquire residency.

Many interlocutors described how, in their memories, certain spaces and areas in Hong Kong began to acquire an Indian or Sindhi character. They described Wan Chai in the 1950s and 60s, as an area suffused with bars and entertainment for soldiers – with tents lining up as ships came in, their working hours dependent on incoming customers. They also described Wyndham Street on Hong Kong Island as the province of Indian import-export concerns. Several interlocutors compared Wyndham street to a kind of ‘Indian Chinatown’ – where the street was lined with Indian import-export shops. Haresh, an interlocutor said – “when I first came to Hong Kong in 1960, I saw that Wyndham street had old firms, and their names were all Sindhi. Chelaram, Chotirmals, Watanmal Boolchand, I thought, well, this is a Sindhi para (area)!” In the Kowloon area, Tsim Sha Tsui in particular was an area where many tailoring and mail order firms established themselves. Haresh recalled that at the time there were so many young Sindhi men in the area that several Chinese women had set up canteens specifically to cater to them, cooking Indian food, where some of these young employees had a monthly tab.

The reports of the Indian Chamber of Commerce are another useful source to trace concerns and developments for Sindhi businesses in Hong Kong. Established in 1952 by ten Indian businessmen, the annual reports and newsletters of the ICC from the 50s onwards chart the changing fortunes of the Indian community in relation to broader geopolitical shifts. In 1970, profiles of the committee members of the chamber reveal that 7 out of the 12 committee members were Sindhis born in Hyderabad. Thus Sindhi businessmen played an influential role in the Chamber, and in Indian overseas trade in the colony. The speeches from the annual general meeting each year reflect the community’s positioning within Hong Kong and the global economy. They reflect the state of trade and advocacy undertaken by the Chamber with respect to changing controls, import tariffs, and political shifts. These reports will be a valuable source for understanding the positioning of the Sindhi and Indian community within Hong Kong at the time of their writing.

The tailoring, and subsequently mail order business also emerged and thrived in context of the Vietnam War. Sindhis served as a kind of middlemen between clients and (largely Chinese) tailors; taking measurements and orders from troops who had travelled to Hong Kong for their ‘R&R’; and then in later years, flying to the USA as well as across the world to collect orders, having the suits stitched in Hong Kong, and shipping them to their clients. Businesses like ‘Taj Mahals’ and ‘Mohans’ had been established in the 1920s and 1930s, and (now perhaps the most famous of these) the Harilelas settling and establishing themselves in the 1940s and 50s (after a briefer earlier stint in Hong Kong). In 1970, the Mail Order Association of Hong Kong was incorporated by 70 Sindhis in this business. *

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4 Trade Digest, Indian Chamber of Commerce Hong Kong, December 1970.
The mail order business was a unique and lucrative line of business for many Sindhis in Hong Kong. I was able to interview Sindhi businessmen who were presently or previously involved in the mail order business to understand how the business emerged and grew, and the present state of the field. Due to shifting market conditions, the growth of online retail and sourcing, and increasing global connections, the mail order business saw decline over the years, with many moving into other avenues from this once-lucrative field. Key players like the Harilelas, Mohans and Taj Mahals diversified, and a few other tailoring businesses in Hong Kong built highly successful bespoke tailoring brands. Others retained smaller operations, with mid-range to lower-end fabrics and prices.

Mahesh and Rama’s story is typical of many Sindhis in the mail order business. Mahesh moved to Hong Kong from Bombay to work in his uncle’s mail order business in the 80s, and then he and his wife Rama broke away and began their own business in 1995 (mainly dealing in mid-low range fabrics) after an internal falling out. In his early years, Mahesh would arrive at a new city, and use the yellow pages to locate businesses which might employ prospective clients. He would then visit their offices with his suitcases of samples, and solicit business there. He would then return to Hong Kong with his order forms, which would be dispatched for stitching to the Chinese tailors. As technology progressed and when he began his own business, Rama would receive the orders by fax, and send them to the tailors to be stitched. She would also take orders herself from customers who might come to their shop. The suits would then be shipped back to the overseas clients – or in the case of Japan where he frequently travelled, he might carry the suits back himself on his next trip. Mahesh, unlike many others, is still in the mail order business today.

Fig 3. A mail order form from Mahesh’s business. Mahesh says this simple handwritten style of order form has remained unchanged since he first began working in the 1980s. The form has fabric samples stapled to it, with detailed measurements of the client and order specifications. The fabric was sourced by Mahesh, from wholesalers based in Hong Kong. This form is for a long-standing client of his, also a Sindhi businessman, living in the United States, who selected fabrics from such sample cuttings. The suits and shirts detailed will be stitched the tailors Mahesh works with – now based in China - and then shipped to the client in New York.
The business directory as cultural text

Through these directories and reports, a picture of Sindhi businesses in Hong Kong emerges; and alongside some insights into social and cultural life for the business community here. Advertisements in each of the directories reflect networks of patronage and business. In my conversations with the editor of a Sindhi diaspora magazine, she spoke of how the advertisements in these magazines were often less about marketing, and more a means of support for the publishers and community.

The Indian Overseas Directory published in 1965 by V.B. Daswani provides clues about life in Hong Kong for this community. By the mid-60’s, Sindhi businesses were well-established in Hong Kong, and in the preface, Daswani notes that in the post-War economic boom, the “Overseas Indian Community in the colony has played an important role in this achievement by contributing over 15% of Hong Kong's total trade”. This directory was addressed to new residents of Hong Kong as well as those who were visiting Hong Kong on business, and served as a guide for Indians as they settled or conducted business here and elsewhere in Asia. The directory while listing firms based in Hong Kong specifically, also lists firms in Singapore, Japanese, Accra, Lagos, Colombo, Bangkok and Manila. This speaks to the interconnectedness of the Sindhi business and merchant network in the 60s.

Another telling aspect of this directory are the brief language guides reproduced within, providing key phrases in Cantonese, Japanese, and Malay. The phrases included in these guides speak to the terms on which overseas Indian residents arrived: primarily as businessmen, and what the publishers intuited that they needed to communicate. The Cantonese guide, notably, contains no translations for typical phrases such as ‘hello’, ‘thank you’ – but instead carries (somewhat impetuous) instructions which would be used by businesspersons. The ‘list of useful words’ is also telling – beginning with the word for ‘Aeroplane’, it is a motley selection including ‘Beef’ (presumably something Hindu Sindhis and Indians would need to communicate in order to avoid eating), ‘Rickshaw’ (these were phased out in Hong Kong beginning in the 1960s), and ‘Ivory’ (in which Hong Kong did brisk trade through the 1900s).

Figure 4: ‘How to Speak in Cantonese’, Directory of Overseas Indians 1965, V.B. Daswani. University of Hong Kong, Special Collections.
The telephone directory even today continues to be a mode of consolidating community. The Sindhi Association of Hong Kong and China founded in 1993, publishes a bi-annual directory which lists Sindhis (men and women in separate sections) in Hong Kong. The current edition, with a foreword by a Sindhi spiritual leader that exhorts Sindhis to unite and help one another; and pictures of traditional Sindhi attire, Sindhi musical instruments, and cultural events where people are celebrating Cheti Chand and wearing Sindhi topi, speaks to a contemporary sense of fragmentation and desire to consolidate a particular narrative of Sindhi identity through this telephone directory.

Through my research I hope to further explore how the domains of business, culture and identity are entwined in texts and documents such as these. Further, books written and published by influential members of the community (Who's Who directories, texts on diaspora Indians, and reflections on Sindhi identity) are a valuable source of insight into how identity evolved and was consolidated. ones published specifically for the Indian community give insights into social mores and everyday life for this community through advertisements, language guides, and editorial notes.

Gendering merchant histories

In the Directory of Overseas Indians, many of the proprietors’ names have a small asterisks next to them – in a footnote, the editor notes that this asterisk denotes businessmen who were living in the colony with their wives. Thus from this document we see that by 1965, two decades after Partition, a majority of the Sindhi employees and traders in Hong Kong were not here alone, but were settled here with their wives and families. White noted in the early 90s that “a few Indian women run small businesses or do some importing of Indian goods, but more women help out in their husband’s businesses without compensation” (1992, 5). Much of the history and stories of Sindhi women and Sindworki wives in Hong Kong, like an asterisk in the 1965 directory and White’s brief mention in 1992, remains footnoted rather than foregrounded.⁶

Fig 5. A page from the Overseas Indian Directory, 1965-66, where the asterisk besides several names of Sindhis denotes proprietors who were “married with wife in colony”.

⁶ An exception to this is Thapan’s volume which engages explicitly with Sindhi women’s lives in Manila, Jakarta and Hong Kong (2002).
In the early 1900s, the Sindhi community in Hong Kong consisted primarily of male employers and employees. Sindhi women however, remained in Sindh, while often, all the male members of the families, both sons and husbands, would leave to seek employment abroad (Markovits, 2004). Women thus ran households in Sindh with remittances from their husbands. Oral narratives suggest restrictions on women’s mobility and rigid social hierarchies were followed in some Bhaiband families (Aggawal 2017). Thus in colonial Sindh, for Hindu trading families, class and wealth were entangled with the gendered mobilities and immobilities of Sindhi traders and their wives who remained in Sindh. An example of this is how four women interlocutors shared with me how the men (their fathers or grandfathers), Sindworki traders, had invested particularly in diamonds in the early 1900s, which had mobile assets which were left in the charge of women - and the ways in which these diamonds travelled, and were worn, sold, and redistributed as their families migrated, were displaced, or grew. I hope to uncover more such instances and insights about the role of women and gendered dimensions of the merchant network, through the course of my fieldwork. One interesting account of gender regimes also came from the descendent of one of the earliest disciples of Dada Lekhraj, the founder of the Brahma Kumari sect. She spoke about how her great grandmother had suffered tremendous pain and humiliation for not being able to bear sons, and had been drawn to the sect along with some other women of the family. One night, after a particular disagreement at home, these women decided they would no longer endure the taunts they received, and climbed over the compound wall of the house in Hyderabad to visit Dada Lekhraj who was a guest at a nearby house. She described, through narratives that had been circulated within her family, patriarchal society in Hyderabad - the pressures these women faced, and the displeasure of the men after this incident – although they returned the next day, her grandfather never recovered from the ‘humiliation’ of his wife spending the night at another household and is said to have passed away shortly after; while the account of this night stayed with her grandmother throughout her life and shaped how the community viewed her and her Brahma Kumari sisters. This history and accounts like these, offer us glimpses into gender regimes for Sindworki women.

Vaid (1972) notes that the number of ‘overseas Indian’ women in Hong Kong increases from 12 in 1854, to 345 in 1901, and to 750 in 1931; a significant proportion of whom might reasonably be presumed to be Sindhi, given the Indian population in Hong Kong at the time. As smaller concerns emerged, even more men began settling with families in Hong Kong, as they continued to travel for business. This number grew over the decades, and post-Partition the nature of the community here changed. Several women shared that many first-generation Sindhi women in Hong Kong had often worked in the family business by managing accounts, as well as running households – working ‘half-days’ at the business, and returning home in time for their children to be back from school. Although several women I spoke to were still involved in the family business (or had been until recently) most framed this to me as ‘helping out’ and did not draw a salary for this work. In addition to this, women also perform gendered social labour that sustains business diasporic ties. Sewa or service is an important part of many Sindhi women’s lives in Hong Kong. Diaspora Sewa has been theorized by scholars as a mode of demonstrating local civic virtue as well as cultural connection to the homeland – a mode of engagement which conceals as well as reveals devotional and nationalist ties (Zavos 2015). Through the performance of acts of sewa such as charitable donation, volunteering, food distribution, as well as religious service, sewa can be understood as a practice undertaken by diaspora Sindhi Hindus to consolidate Hindu Sindhi identity; in the form of ‘community’ service. Sewa has complex gendered dimensions which bear exploration for diasporic communities, as Sindhi women leverage sewa and service through diverse articulations in order to negotiate belonging, and reproduce diasporic community.

7 Dada Lekhraj or Lekhraj Khubchand Kirpalani (15 December 1876 – 18 January 1969) founded Om Mandli, later known as the Brahma Kumari sect, in the 1930s. Chowdhry (1996) explores the gendered dimensions of this sect and how control over female sexuality, mobile husbands and familial wealth intersect in the creation and controversy around this sect.
Consolidating diaspora in digital spaces

During 2020, interlocutors shared that they had begun participating in online events around Sindhi culture. Several new Sindhi digital groups had begun producing and broadcasting live online shows, in which Sindhis from around the world were invited as guests to share expertise from their own fields (ranging from medicine, dance, music, inspirational speaking, and cooking). Often these events would be explicitly related to aspects of ‘Sindhiyat’ or Sindhi identity. I attended and watched several of these events in-person as well as online. The boom in Sindhi cultural events was called a ‘revival’ by some interlocutors; a member of the Hindu Association of Hong Kong pointed out that in the last 30-40 years of his life, he had never seen Sindhiyat celebrated in the way that it was during the pandemic. He said, now that Sindhis are established and wealthier, they have reached a point where they want to celebrate their own culture – referencing a conference he attended 30 years ago about the decline of Sindhiyat, where he had disagreed with the premise of decline. Rather than lamenting the loss of Sindhiyat, he suggested, Sindhiyat will take new forms as each generation ages and matures.

The example of a temple in Hong Kong, and the way in which they channel new modes of digital engagement provides insight into how particular aspects of Sindhi identity in the diaspora emerged, or were reinforced, through the context of the pandemic. This temple was located on the fourth floor of a residential building in Hong Kong. The priest, Vivek Maharaj shared that he and his brother were living in Ulhasnagar – formerly a populous Sindhi refugee camp in Maharashtra - before coming to Hong Kong. Their family was originally from Sindh before the 1947 Partition, and he is the 9th in the lineage of Sindhi Brahmins in his family. An interlocutor from the Hindu Association of Hong Kong shared that this association recruits Sindhi priests, Maharajs, from India to serve at the Hindu temples in Hong Kong who enter on dedicated visas. Thus although the temples and these priests serve the wider South Asian community, the priests are often from Sindhi Brahmin lineages, as it is important to the community to recruit Sindhi Brahmins specifically. The current priests’ brother had initially been recruited by the Hindu Association, but had later set up his own independent temple - which his brother and his wife now served at.

The current priest Vivek and his wife Manisha, have been building and growing the digital presence of the mandir over the course of the pandemic. In Hong Kong where there are other older and more established temples with dedicated patronage networks, this smaller temple is engaging and building a dedicated congregation, and over the past year, have turned to digital events to connect the community. Through digital social media technologies, this small temple has been able to expand its congregation and reach a global audience, from, as they told me in November 2020, 33 countries. This list of countries was also reflected in the ardas read out at the end of the prayer (a section where viewers from across the world had requested personalized blessings) - on one occasion, the Maharaj sped through reading aloud approximately 200 names of devotees who had requested ardas, ranging from Spain, Netherlands, Singapore, Japan, Ghana, and many other countries.

Through spending time both in-person and virtually at the temple, I was able to understand how the digital temple space was constructed. Once an event begins, comments begin pouring in, and a flurry of emojis and text emerges as people join and add their (digital) voices to the prayer. For the most part, Vivek addresses the digital audience – singing and lecturing, but Manisha joins in the singing of devotional songs and keeps the beat and tempo from behind the camera. For most livestreams, she remains off camera, but we occasionally catch a glimpse of her, and often hear her singing voice. The camera primarily focuses either Vivek or the deity relevant to the day’s prayer. If it is a celebratory occasion (such as a festival, or a devotee’s anniversary or birthday), at the end of the broadcast, devotees dancing and singing will be shown on camera. In person, I observed that the devotees were seated behind lines of tape that marked the camera angle for the live broadcast. Two iPhones that broadcast the event to Instagram and Facebook are perched on tripods in the centre of the room, and the temple deities and altars are along the right side of the room.
‘Dal Pakwan day’

Manisha’s work in building a digital platform and audience for her husband, he had come dressed in a glittering Sindhi topi; which was later laughingly passed around, as devotees and then Vivek Maharaj took turns to dance while wearing it, and pose for pictures in the topi – which Manisha later uploaded to their Facebook page. The Dal Pakwan itself was served at the end of the prayer in take-away boxes for devotees to take home, in keeping with Covid-19 restrictions. The Dal Pakwan was homemade – by one of the devotees present that day, who told me she had just begun a fledgling home catering business during the pandemic and had been encouraged in this by Manisha and Vivek, who had placed orders for temple events with her. In addition to this, the abundant take-home prasad included pieces of fruit, cupcakes decorated with the first initial of their son, a piece of the birthday cakes that had been cut at the temple, fruit, and a cup of semolina halwa made by another devotee, in what Manisha described as the ‘South African Sindhi style’, cooked slowly into a rich yellow mass with ghee and nuts. Another space for creative engagement were the arti thalis made by one of the devotees. She would spend 3-4 hours preparing each thali, and today’s thali had two miniature bowls in which tiny portions of the Dal Pakwan were placed alongside the Hanuman idol and diya. I spoke to her at length about the thalis she designed – each followed unique themes; including ‘beach themed’ thalis with Ganesh surrounded by small palm trees, a ‘Thai’ themed thali with pink gemstones, and a Janmashtami thali in which baby Krishna was surrounded by miniature balloons, glass sweets, and a small birthday cake. She collected the decorative items for these thalis over the course of her and her family’s travels – the small blown glass sweets at Krishna’s birthday party were from a business trip to Venice; the Thai elements were sent by her sister who lived in Thailand.

Like these thalis, and the abundant mix of prasad, Dal Pakwan day itself was a layered and complex event - both in the digital and physical space – as a site where many different connections coalesced in a devotional space and display. Ostensibly a celebration of Sindhi food culture, as well as Hanuman sandhya, the day also became a means of celebrating individuals and fostering personal connections between devotees and the temple. These interpersonal connections, like the passing around of the Sindhi topi, and the sharing of birthday cake as well as the Dal Pakwan, became a way for individuals to engage and construct community identity as well as celebrate and share emotion and build interpersonal connections in diaspora spaces.

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8 Dal Pakwan is a traditional Sindhi snack food. Recently, some media outlets and online communities celebrate 11th April as ‘Dal Pakwan Day’ to promote Sindhi food culture. <https://www.freepressjournal.in/indore/world-dal-pakwan-day-sindhis-savour-traditional-dish-beating-lockdown-blues>

9 A plate carrying a diya (candle or oil wick), flowers, incense, and rice and a small idol, used in Hindu ceremonies.
Fig 6. Constructing and performing digital devotion: The setup at the temple from behind the scenes, during a digital broadcast. The centre of the room had two tripods set up with two iPhones attached, to stream to Facebook and Instagram Live. Behind the tripods, the priests’ wife Manisha* was seated on a chair. The alters and a row of deities was framed to the left of the room, in front of which the Maharaj was seated. We see multiple deities in the frame; Jhulelal in the corner, and the Mata idol the largest in the temple.

In this photo, a worshipper stoops slightly to perform arti before the Mata idol. However worshippers were instructed to perform the arti such that the thali was visible to the camera – thus the focal point of the arti became dual – both the idol as well as the phone camera and the digital audience it contained.
Conclusion

This small patchwork of sources provides glimpses into the lives of the members of this diaspora. Sindhi identity in the diaspora is often described as diffuse and syncretic (Thapan 2002), cosmopolitan (Falzon 2004), and malleable (Khemlani-David 1998). Through my research I also seek to explore women’s narratives and experiences in this business diaspora. Markovits’s scholarship on the Sindworki and Shikarpuri trading networks throws light on the complex nature of migratory circulation and the connections wrought through exchange of goods and information (Markovits 2004). I seek to build upon his call to include the ‘women left behind’, as well as the women who moved, as a part of the story of this merchant network and trading diaspora, and trace the contemporary forms of community and identity that have emerged for Sindhis here. As traditional modes of business are in decline, perceptions of Hong Kong as a Sindhi diasporic node are also changing along with geopolitical shifts. Also evidenced by these vignettes is a complex relationship to Sindhi identity, Sindh and India. The pandemic and digital modes of diasporic engagement throw into relief the ways in which the community adapts and renegotiates relationships with homeland and identity in times of immobility.

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Book Reviews


Michel Boivin, CNRS-CEIAS

Asma Faiz is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. She completed her PhD at Sciences Po, Paris and works on ethnicity, nationalism and party politics. She is the editor of *Making Federation Work: Federalism in Pakistan After the 18th Amendment (2015)*.

The book published by Asma Faiz, who is an assistant professor of Political Science at LUMS, is a revised version of a doctoral thesis defended at Sciences Po Paris in 2017. While her thesis focused on the Sindhi and Siraiki movements categorised as ethnic nationalisms, her book deals only with Sindhi nationalism, while the adjective ‘ethnic’ has disappeared. The main argument she puts forward to justify her research is that this issue remains understudied: she therefore aims to fill a gap. In this regard, it is regrettable that she does not mention Julien Levesque’s thesis, defended in 2016 at the EHESS, Paris, which dealt with a close subject: *To be Sindhi in Pakistan. Nationalism, identity discourse and political mobilisation (1930-2016)*. However, Asma Faiz’s book has a number of qualities. It offers a synthesis of the political history of Sindh, from the emergence of a nationalist consciousness in Sindh, which she situates at the time of British colonisation, I will come back to this, to the present day, since the author mentions events that took place in 2020. She has therefore taken the trouble to update her thesis.

The distribution of the chapters indicates that the author follows the chronological pattern: Chapter 1 is devoted to the colonial period, Chapter 2 to partition and migration, Chapter 3 to the emergence of the PPP, Chapter 4 to the Sindhi nationalists, and Chapter 5 to what the author calls “an unstable equilibrium”, in other words to the political game in which three actors are predominant: the PPP, the MQM, and the Sindhi nationalists. As far as the sources she uses are concerned, according to the
distribution of the bibliography they are mainly primary sources (archives mainly from the British National Archives), published sources, and interviews (about 40, mainly journalists and political actors from different parties). It is, of course, not possible to discuss all the issues addressed by this in-depth study. But let us start with the title, reinforced by the first sentence of the book: “Sindhi nationalism reflect the travails of a community in search of its lost glory” (p. 1).

By giving this title to her book, AF confines Sindhi nationalism in Pakistan to a kind of romantic quest full of nostalgia, but it seems to me that the root cause of the birth and development of Sindhi nationalisms, rather than Sindhi nationalism, does not lie there. In fact, the core of the problem lies in the enormous post-partition upheavals in Sindh, which the author describes very well, that have led Sindhis to see their specific identity as Sindhis as being in danger. AF herself points out that no other region of Pakistan has been so affected. Only in Karachi, the capital of colonial Sindh turned into the first capital of the new state of Pakistan, the composition of the population has changed drastically. In 1947, the Sindhis were 61. 2%, among whom 51% were Hindus: the city was thus dominated by the Hindus. After four years, in 1951, the Hindus were 2% and the Sindhis 8. 7%.

Regarding Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, it is not always possible to follow AF. Like other researchers, she tends to underestimate a key event: the secession of Bangladesh. To start with, fourteen years after the creation of Pakistan, the ideology that had prevailed was completely flouted by a nationalist movement that placed Bangladeshi identity before reference to the Muslim religion. It is Bhutto who will have to deal with this earthquake, named by some scholars the second partition. For instance, the author sometimes used unexpected terms for qualifying Bhutto's political discourse, such as “curious mixture of populism, ethnic nationalism, and charisma” (p. 9). If this mixture is curious, it is nonetheless a quite common ideology throughout the world, especially in the 1970s. Other amazing statements on the PPP can be found. For example, the author looks like denying that Bhutto and his party initiated huge changes in Pakistan: “Even if the PPP did not initiate the process of change, it became a function and symbol of this change” (75). However, she goes on to mention Bhutto's nationalisations in different sectors of the economy (83). With regard to this issue, it is not clear that the Mohajirs were the most affected. This is to ignore the Gujarati and Sindhi groups, many of whom were part of the famous '22 families', where Mohajirs were under-represented. The author claims the opposite without citing any sources to support her allegations (83-84).

Another important issue is what the author calls the cultural turn of Sindhi nationalism (66). For the author, the culture of Sindh was totally submitted to the politics. This is not to say that Sindhi political parties have not mobilised the cultural repertoire to reinforce their ideologies, but two observations are in order. The author writes that Sindhi nationalism took a cultural turn in the 1960s. But this ignores the historical context of the emergence of Sindhi cultural institutions, which were far from always linked to any rise in nationalism. And even in this regard, what nationalism are we talking about? Was the demand for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency a nationalist act, as AF seems to imply? As for the role assigned to Sufism in the construction of Sindhi culture, G.S. Syed was part of a tradition dating back to the mid-19th century. I refer to my book on the Sufi paradigm (Boivin 2020). There remains the question of the emergence of a national consciousness in Sindh. As a movement for the creation of a nation-state, it came late in Sindh, and paradoxically occurred after partition. It is therefore excessive to speak of nationalism or even proto-nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Despite these few constructive comments, AF's book is a landmark. It is a rather balanced synthesis of the various nationalist movements that erupted in post-1947 Sindh.

Kamran Kumbher, Iqra University

Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro is an anthropologist and an assistant professor at the Department of Development Studies in the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad. He completed his PhD in Asian Studies with focus on Kalhora history and architecture in Sindh from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Some of his publications include *Perspectives on the Art and Architecture of Sindh* (2014) and *Memorial Stones: Tharparkar* (2017).

The art history of Sindh is one of the least explored subjects in the history of South Asia culture. This neglected area of study has recently been explored by the Sindhi anthropologist, Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, in his book titled *Wall Paintings of Sindh from the Eighteenth to Twentieth Century* (Silk Road Center Publications, Islamabad: 2020). The book is a fine anthropological exploration of the subject of wall paintings of Sindh and makes an important contribution to Sindhi studies. It offers an overall description and commentary of the wall paintings painted in Sindh from the rule of Kalhora dynasty (1701-1783) to the rule of Talpur dynasty (1783-1843), ending with the British rule of Sindh.

The book is a collection and compilation of the pictures of wall paintings captured personally by the author from various tombs, shrine and mosques, located in different parts of Sindh. The work is an outcome of fieldwork lasting over two decades, informs the author. The chosen period to which the wall paintings belong are the last surviving wall paintings in Sindh. The author explains that today only Kalhora, Talpur and British period paintings have survived and that he couldn’t find any other wall paintings from before the 18th century.

The main focus of the study is themes of paintings like romance, battle scenes, hunting, depiction of trees, fruits, birds. The book also demonstrates the gradual rise and fall of the art of wall paintings in Sindh. One of the main propositions of the book is about the loss of the patronage of the painters in the later centuries and the rise of work of amateur wall painters in the tombs and shrines. This argument is justified by the use of painting techniques, style and lack of expertise in some of the wall paintings shared by the author in this book.

Though the book produces a large collection and compilation of pictures, there is a greater focus on the wall paintings from the Kalhora rule of Sindh, giving an impression that the Kalhora period was a time of prolificacy in wall painting. There was a steady decline in the art after the fall of the Kalhoras. He supports his argument by writing that wall decoration was taken up during this period for tombs, particularly by the nobility of the ruling dynasties of Kalhoras and Talpurs. It was nonetheless used also for the decoration of saints’ shrines. For example, the tomb of Sindhi poet-saint Shah Abdul Latif
Garhi (mode (1689-1752) was built and decorated during Kalhoro period. Around the same time, the town of Garhi (modern day Dadu) became the first workshop of skilled painters and artists, and under Kalhoro patronage, the art of wall paintings expanded in different parts of Sindh.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter discusses the major themes of wall paintings in these centuries. The common themes in the wall paintings of Kalhoras and Talpurs was romance legends, battle scenes, hunting scenes, dance and music scenes. From the second to the fifth chapter, the book focuses on the collection of wall paintings depicting Sindhi romance legends, also composed by Shah Abdul Latif such as the legends of Sasui Punhun, Suhni Mehar, Nori Jam Tamachi, Moomal Rano, Umer Marvi, Sorath Rai Dyach and Bejal, with one exception of foreign legend of Layla Majnun. In different sites, there are multiple pictures depicting these legends in wall paintings, which are shared in the book.

The sixth chapter of the book is the longest chapter. It discusses the various locations where most of the wall paintings were found by the author. In this chapter, tombs and shrines of the districts Dadu, Sanghar and Kambar-Shahdadkot are discussed with a very brief introduction on the various shrines and tombs in those parts of Sindh. The seventh and eighth chapters focus on paintings in mosques, such as the art of calligraphy or the depiction of the Kaaba or Masjid Nabvi (Mosque of the Prophet), or the tomb of Prophet Muhammad ("the Green Tomb", Qubbah al Khadra) is painted on the walls. In this chapter, various Quranic verses are also depicted inside the walls of the mosques.

The last chapter elaborates on the loss of patronage of wall painters, which was largely responsible for the decline of this art form. The writer claims that in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the wall painters lost royal patronage, which resulted in the loss of painting workshops in the urban centers. After the loss of patronage, the wall painters began their hunt for new patrons but in failing to do so, amateur wall painters took up the art of wall paintings. For this reason, many pictures collected by the author lack artistic expertise. Moreover, the change in art form eventually affected the colours used in paintings. The colours used by amateur painters did not have the same quality, though they painted the same themes which had been painted by earlier painters.

The book is composed of pictures taken from various sites of Sindh. Of all the pictures, nearly sixty percent of the pictures have been collected from the Dadu district as the mapping and collection of the wall paintings shared in the book suggests. The book is of course an impressive effort but because it is majorly based on description, it lacks in-depth data analysis. Though it is the work of two decades, the absence of data analysis makes its an exploratory study and not an intense investigation. Indeed, mapping is impressive but most of the work is focused on the few selected districts, so the book does not provide an overall picture of the state of the art of wall paintings of Sindh. As mentioned above, most of the work compiled by author comes from Dadu district, in which the once capital city of Kalhoro dynasty, named Khudabad, was located. Though the author has also collected pictures of wall paintings of the post-Kalhoro period, they remain little explored and discussed.

A noticeable issue in the book is related to the captions of the pictures of wall paintings. The paintings do not particularly inform us about the sources or the probable years of the sites event though the names of the sites are mentioned. It would have been very helpful to other researchers to find the patrons style, themes and painting of the same century in other parts of South Asia. Furthermore, the author's selection of wall paintings during two centuries is made by the selection of shrines, tombs and mosques, overlooking Hindu temples and sites, which may also have offered insight into the art of wall painting. Nevertheless, the book is an insightful exploration of a little studied subject of wall paintings of Sindh, which contributes in effect to the art history of Sindh.
Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *We are Lovers of the Qalandar: Piety, Pilgrimage, and Ritual in Pakistani Sufi Islam*, Publication and year?

Trisha Lalchandani, CEIAS-EHESS

Jürgen Wasim Frembgen is chief curator of the Oriental Department at the Museum of Ethnology in Munich as well as lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Erlangen-Nuernberg. He has also been a visiting lecturer at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad (National Institute of Pakistan Studies), the National College of Arts in Lahore, as well as Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Some of his publications include *Journey to God: Sufis and Dervishes in Islam* (2009) and *The Friends of God-Sufi Saints in Islam: Popular Poster Art from Pakistan* (2006).

*We are Lovers of the Qalandar: Piety, Pilgrimage, and Ritual in Pakistani Sufi Islam* is an ethnographic study on the figure of the much loved and widely studied Sufi saint, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Jürgen Frembgen’s study demystifies the cult of the saint through an examination of the visual and material processes that confer Lal Shahbaz a unique place in the popular imagination of Sufi devotion in Pakistan. It thus complements some of Fremgen’s own earlier work as well as work published on Sufism in South Asia by Michel Boivin (CNRS-EHESS).

Born in 1177 CE, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar settled in the small village of Sehwan in 1251 in Sindh. As a wandering dervish, the poet gathered followers across religious affiliations and class/caste background, and eventually became the pioneer of the Qalandar movement. As a consequence, his shrine in Sehwan, often called ‘Sehwan Sharif’, acquired a cult position among his followers who throng the place particularly during the occasion of Urs. This gathering is characterised by celebration comprising of both music and dance. With this as the background, the book explores the three themes identified as piety, pilgrimage, and ritual, that characterise the cult devotion of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.
Piety is explored through the religious and visual practices of the devotees, an essential aspect of whose lives’ pilgrimage to the shrine, where what is known as dhamaal, a ritual embodying ecstatic religiosity is performed by them. This work takes off from some of the earlier work that emphasised upon the ritual and oral interaction as traditional methods in the practice of Sufi devotion to incorporate newer forms of media, that focus particularly on the visual aspect of its practice. The public domain is suffused with images that take shape in the form of placards, banners, posters, calendars, and videography circulated via social media. All of these forms amalgamate the traditional images of Lal Shahbaz with images that depict him in a pose or form borrowed from other devotional practices. This corruption though constitutes a significant aspect of how the cult of the saint is produced and consumed among mass produced visual culture.

Frembgen’s work foregrounds the indispensability of images in creating, sustaining, and propagating what constitutes the sacred space while navigating the place of the sacred in the popular domain characterised by kitsch. He traces the journey of the dervish’s images from being popular to becoming iconic, who then comes to be seen as capable of healing and carrying out miracles. The evolution of an audio culture with cassettes and CDs to a largely visual culture has allowed for a more expansive interaction with the public which has, in effect, crystallised and objectified the charisma of the saint, though not impeded it from being dynamic and adaptable. The images of the saint encompass the many oral legends surrounding his existence, which include the iconic red robe, his transformation into a falcon, as well as him performing the dhamaal. All of these reinforce the sense of devotion and piety among the devotees at Sehwan. The tomb and the shrine combined with the calligraphic visual markers that ornament the place also constitute a vital part of this material arrangement. In examining the range of commodities which have come to revitalise the following of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Frembgen lays bare the ubiquity of the cult which participates in the everyday life of his devotees, while also indicating that the transformation in the practices of the devotees speaks to the adaptation of practices to more pragmatic ways of being.

Frembgen goes on to explicate the tools employed to organise and institutionalise the cult, which not only bolsters the expression of devotion among his followers, but also becomes a critical means to assert and bolden their Shia identity. These include widespread use of placards and banners that publicise the identity of the patrons of the pilgrimage as well as the followers. The life and practices of the pilgrims to Sehwan reveals the local networks that emerge through such interaction, affirming their religious and professional affiliations as well as what is known as biradari among them. However, Frembgen clarifies that these local networks exist in conjunction with other trans-regional networks, especially since pilgrims to Sehwan come from the surrounding areas of Sindhi including Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtun, as well as Rajasthan and Punjab in India.

Relying on empirical data from the field, Fremgen explicates on the nature of these pilgrim caravans, also known as sangats or qafilas. He delineates the possibilities engendered by moneymed pilgrims to make the journey and the movement itself a holistic experience such that all pilgrims in the respective network are taken care of. This study also brings to light the capaciousness and tolerance of the pilgrims as they invite and allow men from diverse ethnic and social groups to join them during the journey. These caravans are thus not always constituted by men from the same biradari. Frembgen provides examples of qafilas which evidence people from different castes coming together led by a non-moneymed leader, thus foregrounding an important observation, which is that these local networks sometimes transcend caste lines in the pursuit of materialising devotion to Sehwan Sharif.
Though the Qalandariya devotional communities described are primarily constituted of men, Frembgen offers a detailed reflection by a female respondent. This account differs from those of the men’s chiefly in the means of the expression of devotion. While the men’s journeys, both physical and spiritual, are mediated by explicit material indicators involving a wide range of mass produced objects, the women’s lies largely on oral means. In relaying this account, Fremgen has addressed the critical issue of gender vis-a-vis religion and Sufism in particular, dismissing assumptions about the relatively trivialised place that women are accorded within the said framework. Another crucial aspect of this ‘Dionysian’ celebration that is highlighted is the inclusion of liminal figures, whether they be peripatetic dervishes or those outside the normative gender binary. It is not only in identity that these figures identify as liminal, but also in their performance. They become one of the groups among the many that perform the dhamaal, dancing alongside segregated groups of entranced men and women.

Eliciting the etymological links of the word dhamaal and examining the voluminous semantic range the word encompasses, Fremgen has delineated the semiotics of the performative, aesthetic, and experiential components of the phenomenon as it is observed in the region. This extensive study of the phenomenon of dhamaal is not only profoundly insightful, but the work put forth is especially relevant in the context of Muslim politics in South Asia, which has affected the discursive realisation around social organisation, religious and cultural diversity, as well as biases that impede Sufi practices. In conclusion, it may be said that Fremgen’s work brings to light a vital element of Sufi worship in South Asia. Drawing on some existing classical literature on the nature of ritual worship and Sufi practices, hagiographic sources, as well as through an ethnographic investigation into the making of the devotional communities that venerate Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in and around Sindh (and Punjab), Frembgen has not only offered a means to understand the Qalandariya formation, but has also opened up ways to examine other Sufi orders which may function similarly in the region.
New PhDs in Sindhi Studies: 2021

Seher T Mirza,

*Threads of the Indus: The subtle forms of power in craft development in Sindh, Pakistan*,

The Royal College of Art, 2020.

**Abstract:** This research asks whether textile practice may offer empowerment strategies for critically reflective spaces, that allow for social transformation, in the context of traditional textile communities of women in rural Sindh, Pakistan where development opportunities are limited. It uses the reflective practice of its researcher, an urban designer/maker and Pakistani woman, to explore established power relations, as well as search for new dialogues that build meaningful relationships for creating new forms of power in interrelated social, development and design contexts.

This is a practice based PhD that approaches the research context with a phenomenological epistemological mindset informing my overall thinking. I use action research for investigating the relations and links to design through agencies, NGOs and government bodies. In my research with traditional makers I use participatory design research for collaborative exploration of new creative expressions with a central focus on improving power relations for the women I worked with. I reflect on my own practices in relation to creative outputs throughout the duration of the research as the central focus of my development as a design researcher.

This research study makes an original contribution by developing a combined methodology, through ‘Power Signifiers’, for a critically reflective approach for social and design practice building on the social sciences discourse of power analysis and power relations frameworks through forms of non-obvious power in developing contexts. It makes an original contribution to the field through the use of the ‘textile’ as a flexible space, both as language and a surface for stimulating dialogue and exchange that could generate new meaning and relationships of power.
Munazzah Akhtar,

*Interrogating the Dead: Re-assessing the Cultural Identities of the Samma Dynasty (r. 1351-1522) at the Necropolis of Makli, Sindh*

Art History and Visual Studies, University of Victoria (Canada), 2021.

**Abstract:** In current art historical scholarship on South Asia, there has been a tendency to classify historic sites developed by Muslim rulers as “Islamic,” and Hindu temples as “Indian.” Such classification systems, which use singular monolithic identities based on geographic or sectarian affiliations, overlook the dynamics of transcultural, transregional and transreligious encounters that played active role in shaping South Asian material cultures. The Samma dynastic architecture in the vast necropolis of Makli – a UNESCO world heritage site located in the city Thatta (in present-day Sindh province of Pakistan) – presents an opportunity to examine this key methodological issue. Modern scholars classify Samma architectural remains under the polarities such as “Sindhi,” “Islamic,” and “Indo-Islamic.” My dissertation challenges these classifications to demonstrate that the overall artistic program of Samma monuments does not reflect any single culture, religion or region.

In fact, it evinces a hybridization of style and character, and therefore, transcends the standard categorization of architectural artifacts from South Asia. By actively engaging with the design, decoration and epigraphy, this study allows for the formulation of important conclusions on the meanings attached to the Samma funerary architecture in Makli and Thatta, which was a key medium of presenting their patrons’ social, religious, cultural and political agendas. Additionally, this study determines where do the Samma monuments fit within the larger groups of artistic productions from South Asia, and also from the wider Islamic world. Hence, where this dissertation augments the overly broad and simplified classifications, it also aims to produce a more meaningful analytical framework of art historical inquiry that moves beyond visual analysis, iconography, and typology.
In Memorium,
Language, Culture and Arts: GHULAM ALI ALLANA (1930-2020) AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF SINDHI STUDIES

Michel Boivin, CNRS-CEIAS

The end of the year 2020 will have been clouded by mourning the death of one of the Pakistani pioneers of Sindhi studies: Ghulam Ali Allana (1930-2020). In addition to having had a remarkable academic career, he was a pioneer in the sense that his work opened up new fields in Sindhi studies, from linguistics to art. Moreover, having been born seventeen years before partition, he remained a leading witness of what Sindh was like in the colonial period. His many and varied works are therefore a first-hand source because he was a first-rate collector of data. He not only directed but also contributed to the creation of the most important Sindhi academic institutions, for example, the Institute of Sindhology or the Sindhi Language Authority.

Training and career

Ghulam Ali Allana, not to be confused with his namesake who died in 1980, was born into a modest family in the village of Tar Khawaja, located in the Thatta district (today Sujawal district), in the far south of Sindh. This area of the delta remains understudied and as we will see in the next section, Allana was a pioneer in devoting his doctoral thesis to the culture and literature of this region of Sindh known as Lar. Lar remains today a very rural and relatively unurbanized territory that is populated by specific populations such as the Jats, or the Khojas. It is precisely to this last group that Allana belonged, and in his early publications he added the name Khwajah (another form for Khoja) to his name. The name Khoja applies to a Muslim community that is mostly made up of followers of the Aga Khan, the manifest imam of the Ismaili Shiites, although a minority of Khojas are Twelver Shiites and Sunnis.
For a long time, the Khojas were considered a hybrid Muslim-Hindu group, as they did not recognize all the dogmas of Islam, and they continued to practice Hindu rituals after their conversion. The formation myth of the Khojas claims that they are the descendants of Lohanas, a mercantile Hindu caste from Sindh, who converted to Islam from the 14th century onwards. In fact, although the merchants probably dominated the caste, it is evident that the Khojas absorbed into their midst groups of lower status, including untouchables. In this regard, during one of the author’s visits to his home in Mubarak Colony, Hyderabad, Allana mentioned during a discussion of status issues among the Muslims of Sindh, raising the perennial question of whether there are castes within them, that when he was a child, the sayyid of his village refused to eat or drink with the Khojas because he considered them impure.

Allana's intellectual qualities were quickly recognized by his teachers and after a first master's obtained in 1955 at the Sindh University, he was awarded a scholarship to study in the UK. His master's thesis at SOAS, University of London, was devoted to the Sindhi language in relation with Arabic: he was the first Sindhi scholar to have graduated in the field of Linguistics. Back to Pakistan, he became Lecturer at Sindh University in 1958. He was the first to write and defend a thesis in Sindhi at the University of Sindh in 1971. This research was later published, in Sindhi of course, under the title Lar ji adabi 'ain sagafati tarikh (Cultural and Literary History of Lar). During his academic career, he was at the vanguard of the development of Sindholgy. In the same year 1963, he was Assistant Director of the Institute of Sindholgy, and Director up to 1983. In 1993, he became VC of Sindhi University, and chairman of the Sindhi Language Authority from 1998 to 2001. Allana is one of the very few Sindhi scholars of Pakistan to have directed the main academic institutions in the field of Sindhi studies.

A last point to be mentioned is Allana’s open mind, which the present author had the opportunity to observe. He was a devout follower of the Aga Khan, and held important posts in his community, the Ismailis of Pakistan. Most of his publications were dedicated to his spiritual leader. On the other hand, he had kept close relations with Sindhis who had migrated to India from 1947 onwards. For example, he was in touch with Doctor Parso Gidwani (1932-2004), who was Reader in Sindhi at Deccan College, in Poona, and himself a leading scholar in the field of Sindhi linguistics and literature. Parso Gidwani narrated the author Allana’s trip in India. He had visited Poona, and asked Parso to take him to the Palace the previous Aga Khan, Sultan Muhammad Shah (1877-1957), had proposed for keeping Gandhi in custody, to make his detention more “comfortable”. Gandhi’s wife Kasturba Gandhi and secretary Mahadev Desai both died in the premises of this Palace turned prison. Gandhi spent almost two years in the palace. Allana was also keen to disseminate the work of Sindhi researchers from India to Pakistan, and for this, he re-published some works of Parso Gidwani in Pakistan (http://ceias.ehess.fr/docannexe/file/3217/13_bioparso_gidwani_mb_2005.pdf).

According to the obituary published in Dawn newspaper, Allana would have published 40 books (https://www.dawn.com/news/1593263). In the 1950s, he had started writing fiction. His first novel Laash was published in 1953 and a collection of short stories Chor in the following year. To provide a summary of his enormous production is beyond the scope of this short paper. A selection of his groundbreaking publications will be found below, distributed in two main fields: language and literature, and culture and arts. This selection will show that Allana belonged to that generation of Sindhi scholars who were interested in many fields, because in the aftermath of independence, everything was to be done, and this eclectic curiosity often resulted in the creation of institutions for Sindhi studies.
Language and literature

The majority of the books published by Allana were about Sindhi language and literature. The first academic one was his M. A. he defended at SOAS in 1963. This book already contains the methodology that he would adopt for all his work on the Sindhi language. In fact, the study of Arabic elements in Sindhi allows him to characterise the specificity of Sindhi, be it in the phonetic, phonological or grammatical domain. In addition, at this time, he tackled in the third chapter a theme that would be dear to him: that of the “development of Sindhi written form” (Allana 1963: 34-69). His work in this field was marked by two points: on the one hand, the importance he gave to non-Arabic alphabets, starting with the Khojki, by the Khojas, of which he was a member, and the criticism of the work carried out by the British, but more specifically the choice of a standard alphabet which they imposed in the mid-19th century.

As far as the Khojki alphabet is concerned, however, one must be careful. Already at this time, Allana proclaims that it is the oldest vernacular alphabet in which Sindhi has ever been written. He calls it “proto-Nagari”, and claims that it was developed by the Ismaili preacher Pir Sadr al-Din “to enable the new (Ismaili Khwaja) Muslims to learn Islamic principles in their own language.” (Allana 1963: 35). However, no source corroborates this assertion, which is based solely on the oral tradition of the Khojas. The Sindhi origin of Khojki is undeniable, and the British had observed the kinship of this alphabet with other Sindhi caste alphabets, starting with the Khudavadi used by the Lohanas. Captain Stack was the first to establish this correlation in 1849. Nevertheless, Allana’s contribution in this field is not negligible since he established a correlation between the Khojki and inscriptions discovered at Bhanbore. In another book published in 1964 with the title Sindhi Surakhati (Sindhi Writing System), he provided evidence that the Khojki, with related scripts, was closely related to inscriptions on earthen pots discovered in Bhambore by archaeologist F. A. Khan in the early 1960s. For him, these inscriptions were written in a script he named Lohanki or Lari dated 5th century (Allana 1964: 32-34). This script was used by the Lohanas, hence Lohanki, who kept it when they became Ismaili Muslims, then named Khojas. This evolution, which again cannot be verified, is nevertheless likely, given the great similarity of the two alphabets, Khojki and Khudavadi (Lohanki in Allana’s words).

The origin of the Sindhi language was also a favourite subject of study. In 2002, he published a synthesis of his work on the issue in English, then in 2004, in Sindhi. He was one of the spokespersons for the theory that Sindhi is a non-Aryan language, i.e., one that does not originate in Sanskrit. For him, 70% of Sindhi vocabulary comes from Arabic (Allana 2004: 178), and he claims that Sindhi comes from “Saindhui”, which was the language spoken by the population of the Indus civilisation (Allana 2004: 203). Finally, he sees in this language a possible Dravidian origin, through considerable similarities in phonetics, morphology and syntax (Allana 2004: 245). For him, the language of the Indus Valley was a “Proto-Dravidian” language, and thus non-Aryan. This theory, which is widespread in Sindh, is far from being accepted by specialists. The majority of them consider that Sindhi is a language derived from a medieval Prakrit named Aprabhamsa.

It was only later that Allana took up literature as a subject of study, with the exception of his doctoral thesis, which focused on his native Lar and not on Sindhi literature in general. This thesis is a pioneering work in many respects. Lar ji adabi ain saqafati tarih (Literary and Cultural History of Lar) is one of the first researches devoted to the culture of a region of Sindh, in this case the part of the Indus delta situated at the extreme south of the province. With nearly 500 pages, it is a very comprehensive work, in that Allana provides a panoramic view of Lar, including different approaches such as geography (part 1), history and archaeology (part 2), fauna and flora (part 3), the Sindhi language and the Lari dialect (part 4), classical literature (part 5), popular literature (part 6), religious literature (part 7: the Sindhi title is Alîm, fazîl, awliyâ sina fuqara), this last chapter being the most important. The works ends with a copious index and bibliography.
It will be argued that the organisation of the work is reminiscent of the gazetteers produced by the British, whose aim was to have total knowledge of a place in order to better establish their control. Although it cannot be denied that the structure of the research often resembles a catalogue, the fact remains that it provides information on a region that remains understudied in the field of Sindhi studies. In addition, it is remarkably well constructed, which allows for a quick and efficient use of the multiple data it contains. For example, the entries for religious figures are particularly useful. For example, the entries for religious figures are precious because for some of them, there is no other information available so far. To give just one example, the entry on Sayyid Jamiyyal Shah Datar Girmari is very precious (Allana 1977: 334-337).

His first comprehensive work on Sindhi literature was published in 1991. It is a small book of 88 pages which is still very useful as an introduction to the subject. The plan he has adopted encompasses the thematic, the literary types, and chronological, the literary periods. The main innovation lies in the place it gives to modern literature, i.e., post-independence he called “Pakistani literature”, and the little space it leaves for classical poetry, i.e., Sufi poetry, including the work of Shah Abd al-Latif. But once again, he claims that “Pir Nooruddin (d. 1079 AD) is the first saint poet whose verses can be taken as the specimen of early Sindhi poetry which have survived in written form” (Allana 1991: 8). Pir Nur al-Din was an Ismaili preacher. This first book will be enlarged as a part of his Sindhi Language and Literature at a Glance, published in 2009 by the Sindhi Language Authority. Here, the part devoted to Sufi poetry is more developed, from the data he borrowed from Mir Ali Sher Thattai’s Tuhfat al-kiram. Accordingly, Shah Abd al-Latif is credited with many pages.

**Culture and Arts**

It is likely that Allana’s interest in the culture and art of Sindh resulted from the positions he held, starting from when he was Director of the Institute of Sindhology. As a matter of fact, he explained himself in his Art of Sind published in 1986 that he had to collect data for the museum of the Institute of Sindhology. Furthermore, in the same year another book was published on Sindhi Culture: A Preliminary Study. Interestingly, Art of Sind was published by the Lok Virsa, in Islamabad, and not by a Sindhi institution. It is one of the first books ever published on the topic. Allana intends to give a general overview of the issue, looking at all the cultural expressions it considers to be artistic. He identifies 13 categories of art, including classics such as architecture, paintings, calligraphy, embroidery, sculpture etc. Nevertheless, he added a chapter on the “Favourite Colours of the People of Sind”, and another one on the “Signs, Symbols and Motifs of the Art of Sind and their Significance” (Allana 1986a: 23-25 & 74-83).

Regarding the chapter on colours, Allana explains that since Sindh is colourless, the people were keen to incorporate many different colours in their productions. Some combinations of colours should be traced from Mohenjo Daro, such as black on a red background: “The red represented blood and life and symbolised immortality” (Allana 1986a: 24). Generally, the Sindhis are fond of the seven basic colours. which are found in textiles, but the preference for blue is said to be “based upon an ancient belief where, blue, a symbol of the sky and the gods, embodies metaphysical powers” (Allana 1986a: 25). Another interesting and innovative chapter is the one devoted to symbols. As the previous and future authors, Allana is looking for the antiquity of the motifs and their interrelation. It means that there were, and still are, basic patterns in Sindhi art, that go back to the Indus Civilization, and are to be found in all the different arts and crafts. There are also some features that were found in the Bhambore excavations, which can still be found in the textiles and on pottery. Mostly, the motifs are stylized forms borrowed either from animals such as ducks, birds, snakes, or peacocks, or vegetal motifs.
For his demonstration, Allana can use the repertoire as available in the necropolis of Makli, near Thatta. His main objective is to show the continuity of the symbols of Sindhi culture, beyond the religious belonging of those who used them. The symbols of Sindhi culture are thus immemorial and timeless, and, above all, they cannot be attributed to any religious persuasion since they are beyond religion. Allana quotes many samples in this respect, such as the lion, or the eagle. He paid a particular interest to the goose. He observed the goose is a subject of Hindi and Sindhi literature. It is to be found as the vehicle of Brahma, but also in Buddhist monuments. In Sindhi literature, the goose is mostly associated with a pious man, a Sufi or a sage (Allana 1986a: 79). Nonetheless, he is quite aware of the fact that Muslims have reused materials taken from Hindu temples, a practice that can be qualified as universal. This does not prevent people to have considered these symbols, even borrowed from another religious building, to keep a symbolic meaning that was located beyond religious persuasion.

The other work Allana published the same year titled Sindhi Culture: A Preliminary Study complements the Art of Sind. Focusing on the culture of Sindh, he looks at the varied communities, the society and its values, dwellings, dress and cuisine, professions and finally religion, and folklore such as dance and music. This work would be reprinted in a much larger version under the title of Sindhi Society and Culture, in 2010 by the Department of Culture, Government of Sindh. This was one of his last publications. This book could be seen as a kind of testament, in that Allana wishes to share his own vision of Sindh, through its society and culture. His representation of Sindh is that of a very varied society producing a rich culture, rooted in a very old civilization, and, above all, made of many different communities owning their own subculture. In this respect the picture he gives can be seen as a kaleidoscope whose unifying principle belongs to a territory, as well as draws from a number of unwritten principles.

On the other hand, he does justice to the many minorities, ethnic and religious, who are producers of society and culture of Sindh. As an example, consider Chapter 4, titled “People”. When he depicts the population of Sindh, he mainly refers to the cleavage between aboriginal and immigrant. For him, aboriginal people are the descendants of the Indus civilisation, but it is the successive migrations that have produced the present population of Sindh: “The people of Sindh are multi-ethnic stock which have migrated from different parts in the past from times immemorial, during every period of history” (Allana 2010: 115). As in all his publications, Allana pays attention to the Hindu communities in Sindh. He divides them into three groups: the Lohanas and associated merchant castes such as the Khatris, other Hindu groups, and low castes. Not surprisingly, he is especially interested in the fact that some of these groups are the “primitive inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilisation”, especially the Bhils and the Kohlis (Allana 2010: 153).

Conclusion

Ghulam Ali Allana was born before partition, and his representation of Sindhi culture is influenced by pre-independence Sindh, when society was composed of many varied communities, at a time when the Hindus were about 25% of the whole population of the province. While some would argue his vision was too dependent on the British works, he was a herald of a liberal and open-minded interpretation of what his native land, Sindh, was. Born in a very modest family, and belonging to a well unified and centralized community, the Ismaili Khojas, to whom he eventually dedicated a book (Allana 2010b), Allana never forgot where he came from, nor to whom he belonged. His very rich work gives evidence that he was a genuine pioneer in the field of Sindhi Studies, not only because of his work on Sindhi language and literature, but rather for the early insights he provided on the art and culture of Sindh.
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2010a: Sindhi Society and Culture, Karachi, Culture Department, Government of Sindh.

The two-day workshop on Sindh Studies encompassed varied themes such as regional identities, border lines, diaspora, Sufism and devotion from scholars across the globe in Pakistan, India, Africa, UK, or Hong Kong. The workshop was divided into six panels and two keynotes, from Professor Michel Boivin (CNRS-CEIAS) and Professor Sarah Ansari (Royal Holloway, University of London) each. With twenty-nine participants, the workshop invited leading experts such as Professors Michel Boivin, Sarah Ansari, Mathew Cook, Abdul Haque Chang, Manan Ahmed, Maya David, Farhana Ibrahim, Rita Kothari, Tanuja Kothiyal, Claude Markovits, Sadia Mahmood, Julien Levesque and Nimrita Rana to comment on the presentations.

Each day of the workshop was six hours long where young researchers presented their work on the focused themes of the conference such as infelicitous identities in the 2017 census of Pakistan, shifting identities of minorities, nation-state vis-a-vis the borderline minorities between Western India and Pakistan, diasporic and religious aspects of Sindhi identity. For instance, Vikram Das and Mustafa Khan raised the issue of Thari identity: who is a Thari in Sindh, and by extension who is Sindhi in Sindh and beyond? A couple of papers also included the analysis of historiography of Shah Abdul Latif and gendered ethics and aspirations in the Sindhi devotional singing traditions, while some others examined less studied subject of ‘untouchables’ of Pakistan. The panels were organised in a manner so as to facilitate discussion since many presenters brought forth work in progress. One of the goals of the workshop was to have a discussion around the work being done on Sindh and related aspects.
After the presentations and discussion, Professor Michel Boivin presented his keynote on day one. He reflected upon two elements: the content of workshop/conference and his experience and knowledge of the field. Professor Michel also introduced the Journal of Sindhi Studies published by Brill with express focus on research in the area across continents. Moreover, Professor Boivin proposed some reflections on the deconstruction of two elements which are often discussed by Sindhi Studies experts, namely, the issue of conversion in Sindh and the so-called syncretization of Sindh. He suggested that in order to understand the nature of conversion specifically after the invasion of Mohammed Bin Qasim, one needs to study the Chachnama and, for the second, he suggested looking at tolerance to observe how it demystifies the syncretic nature of Sindh which has dominated Sindhi Studies. In conclusion, Professor Michel Boivin pointed out the importance of implementing interdisciplinary collective projects, reflecting on his own experience in the Sehwan project, stating how it is vital to work with the interdisciplinary team for it helps one understand the field a lot more comprehensively. He also mentioned other blind spots in Sindhi studies regarding art history or bilingualism such as Sindhi-Siraiki. Furthermore, Professor Michel Boivin advised workshop members to create an online data centre to gather the scattered sources which are difficult to access for researchers working in Sindhi Studies.

The conference ended with the keynote by Professor Sarah Ansari. She reflected on the notions of belonging and nostalgia as many of the papers dealt with the issue of migration of Sindhi Hindus from Sindh and their sense of loss of homes, their identities and belonging. Professor Sarah Ansari ruminated on the use of nostalgia, postulating that the past was controlled and shaped in the present and was often contained within nostalgia as it shaped the minds. She stated that particular social imagery and symbols of particular imaginations, events, happenings passed on to generations are often created out of the loss of that past which sometimes does not offer a realistic picture. She listed that those imaginaries needed to be explored and contested by not becoming nostalgic. She likened the case of Sindh to the whole world enclosed in a small grain which helps to see past traditions and how these traditions are constructed in contiguous societies in South Asia. Professor Sarah Ansari concluded her keynote speech with the changing meaning of nostalgia and its use in present period of pandemic where memories are bitter-sweet, pointing out that it helped people to stay home and cope with these difficult times by remembering that things will become normal again as they were in the past.

**Book of Conquest (Discussion on the Politics of Chachnama)**

On Thursday, 25th March 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted a discussion on the book titled The Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Origins in South Asia written by Professor Manan Ahmed, Associate Professor at Columbia University. The book challenges the main tenets regarding the existent interpretations of Chachnama, which emphasise that it is a translation of an Arabic text and the history of conquest of Sindh. Debunking both the ideas, the book demonstrates that Chachnama was originally written in Persian and, far from advancing a narrative of imperial aggression, is a subtle and sophisticated work of political theory, one embedded in both Indic and Islamic ethos.

The event, conducted in the Urdu language, started with introductory remarks by the author of the book, followed by remarks from each of the panelists named Asghar Soomro, Sadia Mahmood, Saeed Ahmed and Jami Chandio.
The second panelist, Professor Sadia Mahmood, pointed out the ironic title of the book: while the title of the book mentioned the word conquest though the main argument of the book was to challenge the same idea. In her comments, she brought up a few questions for Professor Manan Ahmed, such as what the book tells us about historical, technological questions of that period and what it reveals about the Persianate age? She also brought up the importance of Mohammed Bin Qasim’s invasion of Sindh and how it changed global history after invasion of Sindh.
The third panelist, Dr Saeed Ahmed Rid, associate professor at National Institute of Pakistan Studies (NIPS), talked about the authenticity of the book and reiterated how the Sindhi nationalists believe in the logic of the origin that the book offers and consider Raja Dahar as a national Sindhi hero. Dr. Saeed brought up the two distinct narratives which pit Raja Dahar as a hero and Mohammed bin Qasim as a Muslim hero to counter Raja Dahar. Dr. Saeed also pointed out how *The Book of Conquest* could encourage studies to also examine the narrative of Sindhi nationalists built by Sindhi intelligentsia like G. M. Syed and K. R. Malikani.

The fourth panelist, Jami Chandio, a Sindhi writer, expressed his doubts on the hypothesis of the book about the idea of origin and purposed his own hypothesis that if *Chachnama* was written in the 13th century, then why it is that Ali Qoofi (translator of the book in Persian) had not mentioned anything about the said period. Jami Chandio proposed that the silence of Ali Qoofi suggests that the *Chachnama* could be an 8th century Arab period book, translated in Persian in the 13th century, as history suggests as well. Furthermore, he foregrounded the difference between political theory and political narrative, emphasising that the *Chachnama* was political discourse of the time rather than political theory.

After the panelists’ comments, Professor Manan Ahmed comprehensively responded to their questions. He proposed some sources to answer Dr. Sadia Mahmood’s questions and responded to Asghar Soomro by foregrounding the need to unlearn and reexamine history. He said that there was an urgent need to unlearn history written under the colonial veil, and to restudy history from scratch to rescue Sindh's from the existing normative accounts. About the question of political theory as expressed by Jami Chandio, Professor Manan Ahmed clarified that the claims of Chachnama being political theory comes from the meticulously planned and structured narrative of the stories and political practices of the period in the book.

After Professor Manan’s responses, the floor was opened to the audience who largely talked about reexamining the colonial episteme and abstracting the truth of the originality and authenticity of the *Chachnama*. 
About us

Editor of the MIFSEN
Michel Boivin (mboivin@ehess.fr)

Contributors
Claude Markovits, Michel Boivin, Radhika Mathrani Chakraborty, Kamran Kumbher, Trisha Lalchandani, Seher T Mirza, Munazzah Akhtar, Saba Sindhri, Wahid Mendil

Compilation and layout
Saba Sindhri, Trisha Lalchandani

Copyediting
Trisha Lalchandani

Photos
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Sindhi Studies Group
https://sindh.hypotheses.org/

Centre for South Asian Studies (CEIAS), Paris
http://ceias.ehess.fr/