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AIPS Short Term Fellowship

Grant Period: December 2012-February 2013

Sites of research: various sites in Lahore and Islamabad

Title of Research Proposal: **Khwaja Sira Activism, Transgender Identities & Transnationality in Pakistan**

This project explores the influence of transnational forces on khwaja sira (i.e., transgender) identity politics and activism in Pakistan, and it also served as a follow-up visit to my prior 12-month dissertation fieldwork. My earlier study revealed the significance of identity politics in khwaja sira activism, particularly the ways in which their politics of difference and sameness and their strategies of representation serve as cultural constraints and assets in activism. With the arrival of new transnational entities in the development sector, my interest shifted to the impacts of NGOs on transgender culture and activism. What new forms of alliances are forged across class, identity and ideology, and what new conflicts and changes are born out of the social interactions between indigenous khwaja sira and elite NGO activists? My study focused specifically on the intervention of transnational NGOs on khwaja sira organizing, identities, collective action strategies and activist agendas.

During the period of my fellowship, I spent the majority of my two-month stay in Lahore with a short weeklong visit to Islamabad. I visited several new NGOs and community based organizations (CBOs) in both cities, interviewed their staff and participated in group activities (e.g., meetings, field visits, advocacy events). In addition, I conducted follow up interviews with activist and non-activist transgender people, many of whom are employed by these NGOs. I also attended khwaja sira cultural events, such as, rituals, dance functions and social gatherings.

My research shed light on the changes that have and have not taken place since my previous field visit. The most significant impact of these NGOs is the sense of purpose and empowerment they have provided their khwaja sira staff members through extensive work training and stable, high paying salaries. Such lucrative opportunities would be unimaginable to most working-class Pakistanis let alone to illiterate khwaja siras. These organizations have created new options for transgender people beyond the typical sources of khwaja sira livelihood (i.e., begging, dancing, sex-work). Those working in these professional environments have become role models for other transgender people. However, many employed khwaja siras are currently struggling to operate under institutionalized constraints since most of them have received little formal education and have previously never worked in structured office environments. Moreover, the professional relationship of distinct identity groups working in close quarters within these organizations has not only helped to eliminate misunderstandings but also deepened rifts between khwaja siras and other sexual minorities. These conflicts stem from differences in class, sexual identity and behavior.

I discovered that NGO intervention has not as yet brought about a significant transformation in khwaja sira identity politics and representational strategies, the two themes that are central to my dissertation on transgender activism. Currently, transnational NGOs are focused specifically on the sexual health of khwaja siras, and have not as yet commenced work on the social development of transgender people even though these issues are central to their long-term

objectives. However, my interviews and casual conversations with NGO staff shed light on possible future directions for khwaja sira activism resulting from NGO mediation. For instance, a couple of days prior my departure, one NGO secured a generous grant through a foreign donor for the education of khwaja siras. This project is promising not only for its potential impact on khwaja siras, but also for the new avenue it opens for research on the social transformation of transgender Pakistanis.

I will disseminate the knowledge obtained through this research to a diverse audience both in the US and in Pakistan including organizations working with transgender populations, through articles in scholarly journals, and by lecturing and presenting at conferences. The insights gained through this project will be valuable to an interdisciplinary academic audience, which includes not only anthropologists but also scholars of social movements, gender and sexuality, and Pakistan studies. The absence of in-depth ethnographic research on the myriad ways in which sexuality and gender are constructed and practiced both in everyday life and in activist domains in Pakistan makes this project timely and necessary. My research contributes to our understanding of the diversity of experience in Pakistan by delving into the lives of a socially marginalized group that is only now beginning to receive public recognition.

During the fellowship, I had the opportunity to present my research through lectures at universities in Lahore and Islamabad. The talks were well attended and both students and faculty showed great interest in the topics covered, which was evident from the rich discussions that followed the lectures. Over the course of the fellowship, I also had the opportunity to meet with numerous Pakistan Studies scholars at the AIPS centers, at educational institutions in Lahore and Islamabad, and at the AIPS conference held at LUMS. AIPS was instrumental in facilitating my research, especially in arranging meetings and lectures. My research visit to Pakistan, made possible through the AIPS grant, was fruitful in that I managed to accomplish all my research goals and acquired both new and follow-up data. The rich information with which I have returned will assist me in bridging the gaps in my dissertation project.