

University of Michigan Pakistan Conference 2016

### Infrastructure and its Discontents in Pakistan

The 6<sup>th</sup> annual Pakistan Conference, organized by the Organization of Pakistani Students and the Center for South Asian Studies, was held on April 8, 2016. The panelists, academics and artists from both Pakistan and the United States, focused on the theme of infrastructure and development. From the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to the jungle of flyovers and underpasses in Lahore, the development of infrastructure in Pakistan has rapidly transformed the country's landscape. This process has been accompanied by both critique and approval within Pakistani society. They addressed issues around both the desire for and rejection of infrastructure. Through a conversation between artists and academics, they engaged infrastructural development not as predetermined or inevitable, but as a process entangled with social and political implications. They addressed the questions: what is the relationship between infrastructure and development? What kinds of politics does infrastructure enable or obstruct? By exploring the particularities of infrastructural production and experience in Pakistan, the conference participants including both panelists and audience members grappled with the complex and multi-faceted aspects of infrastructure in Pakistan today. Presenters from outside the University of Michigan attending were the following: Professor Nausheen Anwar ( Institute of Business Administration in Karachi, Pakistan); Majed Akhter (Department of Geography, Indiana University); Hafeez Jamali (School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Habib University, Karachi); David Gilmartin (North Carolina State University); Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani, artists of the Tentative Collective based in Pakistan.

The conference began with an introduction titled "Situating Infrastructure" by Professor Nausheen Anwar. Professor Anwar framed the key concerns with industrial development in urban Pakistan in her talk "Rethinking Infrastructure & Development in the 21st Century in Industrializing Pakistan". Her talk focused on the relationship between infrastructure and industrial development in the 21st century, through the prism of Pakistan's post-independence history, industrialization, and the present discourse of an 'infrastructure crisis' in the context of a globalizing Pakistan.

The introduction was followed by a panel on "Infrastructure, Identity, and Place: The Politics of Mega Development Projects in Pakistan" with presentations by Majed Akhter and Hafeez Jamali. Akhter's paper examined the series of development projects collectively labeled the China-Pak-Economic Corridor. He drew on debates in political geography, Marxist political economy, world systems theory, and Asian studies to situate the controversy within the longer history of contradictory infrastructural intervention in the Indus region. His talk was followed by Jamali's, which explored the struggles over land and practices of place emerging from ethnic Baloch fishermen's entanglements with the Pakistani government's plans and practices for developing a large commercial seaport in the coastal town of Gwadar. Collectively, they presented a nuanced and well rounded picture of the stakes and effects of infrastructural projects in Pakistan.

The second panel at the conference titled "Detritus and Development: Seeing Infrastructure in Ruined Landscapes" consisted of two artists, Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani, members of the Tentative Collective based in Pakistan. Aside from their art practice, they are teachers at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and co-founders of the Karachi Art Anti-University. Using artistic and interdisciplinary research methods, they focus on the relationship of infrastructure to the landscape and ecology of cities. Reframing the controlled and constructed image of infrastructure as modern and technological progress, they highlighted the ruination of landscapes and degraded

ecologies. Their first site was the Ravi river in Lahore and the state system of dysfunctional water sanitation plants – locally referred to as *gandi* (dirty) engines – that collect and pump the city's toxic sewage into the river. Their second site is the mega-development project of Bahria Town at the peripheries of Karachi, a rapidly transforming landscape, where a vast network of private infrastructure is displacing indigenous communities to develop land for a world-class city. By documenting the impact of infrastructural ruination at these two sites, the two artists powerfully portrayed the ruins created across a rapidly transforming landscape alongside 'development'.

David Gilmartin, Professor of History at North Carolina State University, provided comments as discussant for all three panels. He put the presentations in conversation with one another, drawing them together within a longer history of state power, and regimes of property and law in South Asia.

The conference ended with a roundtable discussion on engaged scholarship, which included short presentations by graduate students working in various parts of the globe including India, South Africa and the United States. The roundtable was motivated by the discontent around development, which often manifests in contentious political action by communities, individuals, and social formations that are directly impacted by development projects. The participants were asked to reflect on what could be learned from *within* these social and political movements about the nature of state, politics, and citizenship in the context of development? The conversation following the presentations engaged the issue of what engaged research would entail, the ethics and modalities of actions and the ways in which they would intersect with the norms, demands and goals of academic research.