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Abstract:

Privatizing the Developmental State: Housing, Development, and Power in the Pakistani State's Margins

While the district of Bhakkar belongs to Pakistan's most politically and economically powerful province, it is located on the wrong end of Punjab's north-south development divide, the latter side of which has long advocated for its own province due to such disparities. Bhakkar also lies in the Thal desert, a particularly harsh environment for agriculture, and along with several neighboring districts is considered a "backward area." In 2004, five local men formed a partnership to develop a housing scheme in Bhakkar City, the district's capital. Their effort was intended to mirror the real estate boom in Pakistan's larger cities: such housing schemes are master planned and feature modern construction and amenities, and like those that have been appearing since the country's independence, synonymous with modernization. In this paper, I argue that privatization reconfigures the Pakistani state's power in its margins. Conditions of possibility, such as roads, passports, the Internet, etc., facilitate development in spaces where the state is considered absent. But rather than understanding the power of the postcolonial developmental state as sovereign, and thus lacking in this instance, I claim that privatization enables a discursive form of power in which the ambitions of citizens are conflated with those of the state. Integral to this process in Bhakkar has been not only a general mistrust of the state, but the reputations, relationships, and in general, trust between the five partners as well as the broader networks they belong to.