



BRILL

Sindh: Towards the Philology of a Place

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If we examine the history of Sindh, in the southeast of Pakistan, as a discursive subject, three moments stand out: the 1830s–40s, when the British East India Company began and executed its colonial project of conquering Sindh (then romanized ‘Sind’ or ‘Scinde’) from its Talpur rulers; the 1920s–30s, when colonial archeology “discovered” Harappa, Moenjodaro and the Indus Valley civilization, giving birth to “Ancient Sind”; and the 1960s–70s, when the task of making central the history of Sindh to the history of Pakistan was undertaken as a nationalist project in Pakistan. In this short introduction to the special issue that follows, I want to sketch a few important themes that connect not only the research articles collected in this issue but their avatars and echoes in previous instances. An implicit aim of this issue is to illuminate new perspectives outside of colonial and postcolonial historiographies, myth-making and memory projects.

In 1929, Henry Cousens (1854–1933), once Superintendent in the Archeological Survey of India, compiled a voluminous record of the various excavations and surveys for the Imperial Series of ASI as *The Antiquities of Sind with Historical Outline*. “Sind,” he writes in his introduction,¹

is a land of sepulchres and dust, of “holy” shams and “holy” humbugs. When the good old times under Hindu rule gave way to Muhammadan domination, the principal concern of its rulers seems to have been for the selfish pleasures of the living and glorification of their dead. It has been a country very fruitful in the production of *pīrs* or holy men; and though some of these have, no doubt, been earnest disciples of the Prophet, many more have made it a cover for base and selfish motives. It notoriously swarms with sanctified beggars and imposters, and contains, according to the current saying, no less than 100,000 tombs of saints and martyrs.

1 Henry Cousens, *The Antiquities of Sind with Historical Outline* (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1929), 1.

This colonial “reading” of Sindh, espoused and succinctly expressed by Cousens, dated back to 1830s or so—just as the East India Company began to mobilize towards conquering Sindh. Sindh was read as a land of graves, of holy men, of duplicity, of despotic political rule. There was a political strategy behind such a reading, for it made illegitimate the Talpur rulers while also creating a landscape worthy of a civilizational rescue operation. The colonial reading rested on a variety of source-materials: on historical texts (such as the Persian history from the thirteenth-century *Chachnama*), on the engravings and carvings on mausoleums and grand mosques, on ‘ethnographic’ observations of “tribals” conducted by British colonial political agents, and on the understanding of political rulers of Sindh in Hyderabad. Sindh was thus read discursively across mediums, authors, peoples, and landscapes into a coherent whole, best summed up by British Political Agent and noted philologist Richard F. Burton as the “Unhappy Valley.”² Undoubtedly, the colonial reading was one fueled by animus, prejudice, and exploitative capitalism. Colonial Orientalists, philologists, and archeologists imagined Sindh’s history, even its geography, from outside Sindh. In this paradigm, Sindh comes into historical or cultural view as a space only when agentive history interacts with it in the form of Alexander the Great or Jalaluddin Akbar or the Portuguese or the British colonial forces.

The Partition of 1947 prompted a mass migration (spread over the first decade after Partition) of Hindu Sindhis to various parts of India (largely to Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka states). The partitioning border ran through Tharparkar and Nagarparkar and fractured much of the cultural memory, the patterns of pilgrimage and worship, the specific histories of families and communities in almost as brutal a fashion as the physical drawing of borders across Punjab and Bengal did in 1947. The colonial port-city of Karachi emerged in 1948 as a new haven for the displaced and the migrated across the borders (a large segment came from U.P. India and were called *Muhajir* or migrants afterwards). Karachi was the first capital city of Pakistan and would go on to become the most populated metropolis of post-Independence Pakistan (though it would never rival the cultural centrality which its twin port-city Bombay would have for independent India). A new dynamic would emerge in Sindh’s history as Karachi, now booming with migrants and industry, becomes awkwardly set against “rural” Sindh, prefiguring other fractures: Sindhi versus Urdu, Hindu versus Muslim, Moenjodaro versus Metropolis.

2 Richard F. Burton, *Scinde, or, The Unhappy Valley*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1851). He also published *Sindh, and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (1851), and *Falconry in the Valley of the Indus* (1852).

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 from erstwhile East Pakistan forced a reconfiguration of much of Pakistan's national story. The idea that Pakistan was a safe harbor for Muslims of the subcontinent could scarcely survive a nation's own (Muslim) army destroying its own (Muslim) cities and killing and raping its own (Muslim) civilians. Over the course of 1970s, as Sindhi history developed against a nascent independence movement for "Sindhu Desh", so did the urgency for assimilating Sindhi history into Pakistan. By 1979, under the dictatorship of Zia ul Haq, Pakistan's own history would dovetail with the history of Sindh as a "first" point of entry for Islam—in the political as well as proselytizing sense. The pivot towards a "new" history for Pakistan, thus, relied upon Sindh and the coming of Muslim polities to this territory in the early eighth century CE. Muhammad bin Qasim, the conquering general of Sindh in 712 CE, would become the "First Citizen of Pakistan," and the idea of a martial, Arab-centred history of Pakistan would take reign supreme for many decades to follow.

From March 2 to 7, 1975 an international conference was convened in Karachi, which assembled over thirty historians, archeologists, linguists, literary scholars, and more from across the UK, US, Germany, France, Italy and elsewhere and was sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs for the Government of Sindh. The conference publication *Sind Through the Centuries: An Introduction to Sind (A Progressive Province of Pakistan)* opened with a blurb on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then Prime Minister, that concluded: "Under his leadership, a new Pakistan has arisen from the debris of war. He has reshaped the destiny of the nation and has become the symbol of renaissance, rejuvenation, democracy and enlightened progress for the people of Pakistan."³ The war, whose debris Pakistan was sorting through, had happened in 1971 as a result of a military coup against the first ever elections held in Pakistan in 1970. The war resulted in East Pakistan ceding to become Bangladesh.

The conference publication itself featured six essays—"Sind: a historical perspective," "Some aspects of Sindhi culture," "Introduction to Sindhi language and literature," "Sindhi Folk Arts and Crafts," "Music of Sind through the centuries," and "Modern Sind"—written by pre-eminent historians, philologists, folklorists such as Nabi Baksh Khan Baloch (1917–2011), Ghulam Ali Allana (1930–2020), M.A. Siddiqui (1938–2013). These essays are commendable for they capture a specific attempt to reconcile the history and culture of Sindh to Islam firstly and to modernity secondly.

3 Hamida Khuhro, ed., *Sind Through the Centuries: An Introduction to Sind, a Progressive Province of Pakistan* (Karachi: Publicity and Publication Commission Sind), 1975, blurb.

Those same impulses drove the organizing vision behind the conference. The proceedings of the conference were published in 1980, edited by Hamida Khuhro. Khuhro in her introduction noted that Sindh was “the oldest Muslim region within the subcontinent, the land of Sufis and saints and of the ancient Sindhi language.”⁴ She goes on to highlight Sindh as “ancient civilization, one of the oldest in the world,” for it contained the archeological site of Moenjodaro, and of Indus Valley civilization, in upper Sindh. Khuhro highlighted Sindhi participation in Alexander’s army, in the Mahabharata epic, as the arrival site of Islam to the subcontinent in the early eighth century, in the Mughal ruler Akbar’s polity and finally for being a lynchpin in the colonial empire of Britain as a port city open to Indian Ocean and a hinterland connected to Afghanistan. The British conquest was necessary for Khuhro as it “dragged the subcontinent willy-nilly into the modern post-industrial revolutionary age” and banished the “declining mediaevalism of the eighteenth century.”⁵ In her analysis Khuhro combines the two forces, Islam and modernity, and gives them a spatial dimension: Sindh, a place where Islam and modernity have become one in Pakistan.

A brief glance at the thirty contributions in the published volume (I have not been able to ascertain if everyone in the published volume also attended the conference) provides a clear view of the historiography of Sindh in the 1970s. There are only five papers addressing “antiquities” or pre-Muslim-era Sindh and only one on the colonial period (1843–1947) by Hamida Khuhro, though Russian Orientalist Yuri V. Gankovsky’s paper is related. There are no papers that cover any non-Muslim community, practice, ritual or history. The Sindh that lies across the borders remains invisible as do left-behind stories and histories of Sindhis who migrated out of Sindh. There are four papers on Sindhi music and poetry, including a brilliant paper by Annemarie Schimmel on Sur Sarang. Yet on the whole, the majority of the volume is dedicated to political history between the tenth and the sixteenth century, pertaining to Muslim rulers within or outside Sindh. Finally, there is only one paper on contemporary Sindh (and on economics). Thus, a narrow Sindh “through the centuries” comes into view with Muslim political rule and the medieval period as the main foci.

This special issue reads Sindh across bordered spaces, through temporal divisions. It takes paper and stone as equal mediums for recording stories. The Sindh here is not the Sindh imagined as a “gateway to Islam” for the subcontinent nor is it an “ancient” Sindh with an on-going political project. Nor is it an erstwhile “region” of South Asian historiography that emerged in the 1990s as

4 Khuhro, *Sind Through the Centuries*, ix.

5 Khuhro, *Sind Through the Centuries*, xii.

a response to the nationalist paradigms at sway. That is to say, these papers do not make any universal claim about studying Sindh in an exclusionary analytical framework. The nationalist interpretation would see in Sindh a fragment or section of the total story of Pakistan. The story of Sindh has mainly existed as a story of origins. In contrast, this special issue imagines itself as a project of a philological hermeneutics that rejects origins as well as statist claims. The scholars in this special issue—of architecture, archeology, music, Persian narratives, colonial histories—represent a new turn in the story of writing Sindh: they are keen to think of Sindh as connected, polyvalent, multi-sacral, and unfolding.

Munazzah Akhtar's *Fit to be King!* reads a set of funerary monuments from late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Sindh, belonging to Samma rulers. Akhtar blends together the material, the monumental, and the textual to prompt us into thinking seriously about 'heterogeneity': something that modernity's mass production of sameness (in political ideology or religious orthodoxy) has made to appear almost magical when encountered. In Maklī, the site of these funerary monuments, ornamental and architectural stylings range from Rajasthan to Gujarat to Persian Central Asia. Akhtar performs a close reading of ornamental style, stones, built structures, epigraphs and texts to remind us that meaning-making is both active and passive: the creator's agency in determining the availability of pre-existing signs for re-imagining or re-purposing and the viewer, the reader, the dweller, the walker, the supplicant, the pilgrim who move through the space guided by their own interpretative impulses.

We move from monuments to a motif with Fatima Quraishi's study, *Luminescent Lotuses*, where the micro-architectural meets the micro-historical. Akin to tracing a topos in a text, Quraishi reads the architectural decoration of the lotus across many monuments built between the late fourteenth to mid-seventeenth century. It was, in effect, the most 'popular' decoration in Maklī over three centuries. What did it mean, and for whom, and how did that meaning shift or develop? We turn again to basic questions of philological enquiry: the meaning-making of inscriptions in this essay as the lotus is carved into headstones, doorways, windowsills or roofbeams. The lotus as a micro-architectural motif enabled a co-joining of light across various Vedic and Qur'anic cosmographies. A key finding for thinking about Sindh is the conversation across time and space that is happening *through built environment* in Maklī. The citational practices of architecture allow for a density of thinking about Sindh's continuous lived experience in a fundamentally enriching way.

From the micro-studies of Akhtar and Quraishi in the early modern, we turn to Uttara Shahani's essay, *Following Richard Burton*, on that infamous East India Company soldier-scribe. Shahani pinpoints the role played by Burton

in the making of colonial Sindh as a colonized space and as a rhetorical and discursive object of study. Shahani's essay delves deeply into how the categories of "Hindu" and "Muslim" were constructed as "Sindhi" by Burton as well as universally and what these categories help enact as a political project for the colonial state. The question of Sindhi 'nationalism' emerges from the colonial articulation of Sindhi-ness to the understanding of Sindh as a space for a particular religion (Hindu). Shahani does a masterful reading across British colonial and Sindhi literary texts to help us think about the role of "difference" as an organizing principle for the colonial creation of 'region.'

This allows us turn to the programmatic overview of "Sindh" by Shayan Rajani in *Before Ethnicity*. Rajani shows that the colonial articulation of Sindh as a racialized space was taken up by the postcolonial national state for its own project of forming a national identity in the early twentieth century. Rajani traces the changes in the political understanding of space and places across the colonial, anti-colonial and national periods. A striking result of this study of political (and racial, ethnic) discourse is the awareness of the centrality of Sindhi language to Pakistani nationalist arguments. Sindhi emerges as a site for a self-evident linguistic nationalism and an arguable part of an ethno-nationalism. The focus on contestation, rather than sedimentation, of meaning allows Rajani to open up ways into thinking about nationalisms in the subcontinent as a project of people-making (following Partha Chatterjee).⁶

Finally, the themes of heterogeneity and difference come to a crescendo in Pei-ling Huang's *A Meshwork of Melodies*. Following the eighteenth-century Sufi Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and his poetic corpus, Huang focuses on Sindhi, Sindh, public space, public performance, and music. This is a philological project—the creation of a critical edition of Bhittai's corpus—and a lived performative project—the lives and practices of musical maestros and their students devoted to the songs of Bhittai. Huang provides a new methodological space for 'region' by highlighting *desh* as it emerges in Bhittai's poetics and in the performances. Huang does a close reading of musical notes and verses to see how the place and people of Sindh are reflected in the verses and vice versa. A devotional space (not only to Bhittai but to Sindh) emerges through the recitation and collation of verses of Bhittai across Sindh and constitutes Sindhi-ness. Huang's focus also envelops how folk-romances enfold across Sindh and Punjab in an affective (and perhaps allegorical) register.

With Huang's essay in conclusion, this special issue provides a dynamic overview of how scholarship can and should disinvest itself from colonial and

6 Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

nationalist paradigms and recenter critical de-colonial perspectives. It is important to note that all of the authors in this special issue are early career researchers and their dynamic contributions portend a horizon of new works. The analytic of *Zukunftsphilologie* organizes these readings of material remains, colonial discourses, and musical notations. The essays are carefully studied and aware of the wider projects of sectarian, racial and national animosities that organize our contemporary moment.

It is this last point that I would raise in my own conclusion as an editor of this special issue. In my own work on Sindh, *A Book of Conquest*, I have drawn attention to a deconstructive approach to foundational stories for Muslims in the subcontinent.⁷ In unreading the history of Muhammad bin Qasim from the eighth century or Charles Napier from the nineteenth century, I was focused on a certain critical argument against origins. The political realities of the contemporary subcontinent remain invested in origins, whether of Hindutva or of Islamist varieties, and continue to harvest colonial texts to propagate themselves. The political and social hate that is generated against the Other, be they Hindus of Sindh or Shi'a of Sindh or Muhajir of Sindh, is not only ahistorical but pernicious for its stereotypical and phobic assertions. The work of careful scholarship as evidenced here is vital resistance to such demagoguery.

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⁷ Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 2016).