

Ontic Flows: Rivers in the Making of Modern Punjab

Abdul Aijaz

Departments of Geography and English Literature

Indiana University, Bloomington

Abstract:

This project seeks to understand the material and aesthetic transformations of nature-culture articulations in Punjab after its encounter with colonial modernity. Focusing on the processes of capture, transformation, control, and management of the Indus basin rivers, the project seeks to trace the co-constitutive relations between the rivers and the communities therein following the introduction and implementation of ‘modern’ irrigation infrastructure in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Combining archival and ethnographic research with literary and textual analyses, the project seeks to demonstrate that nature and the native are simultaneously captured and collected in colonial discourses and practices both materially and aesthetically. While I map aesthetic transformations via an aestheticization of the nature-culture binary through critical readings of the literature produced by the New Poetry Movement under colonial patronage, I also trace the material transformations of rivers and the materialization of a Cartesian idea of space in canal colony villages and towns through analysis of colonial documents and ethnographic research. Focusing simultaneously on the aesthetic and material transformations of people and place, the project synthesizes debates at the intersection of political ecology, ecocriticism, and environmental history of place.