

AIPS Final Report: Significance to Pakistan Studies

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For my research I was funded to travel to Lahore and Islamabad to do preliminary ethnographic research and collect oral histories regarding the life of Dada Amir Haider Khan from 1947 to 1989. During the fellowship period I was able to travel to Pakistan over the summer and collect several significant oral histories of contemporaries of Amir Haider. This research directly fulfills the goals of the mission of Pakistan Studies to understand the people and history of Pakistan. In specific, this project details the life of Amir Haider after partition until his death in 1989. The first half of his life, from 1900 to partition, is recorded in his memoirs and I have conducted research separately on this period through archival research in the British Library in London. Amir Haider was an important political figure who through his travels as a sailor came into contact with a number of important social and political movements in the early twentieth century including the anti-colonials of the Ghadar Party of North America and the Garveyite movement. His time in Pakistan after partition details his connections to the political movements that grew and developed in this period. The oral histories that I collected provide a broader picture of history of Pakistan and the life worlds of those who were close to Amir Haider. In the tradition of ethnographic oral history, the research I conducted draws on history told from the ground in which I collected personal reminiscences and memories of the impact of Amir Haider Khan on those who knew him. In particular these histories address how social life, kinship, and politics are reimagined in alternative frameworks.

For the field of Pakistan Studies, Amir Haider Khan's story is a significant part of how the experiment of the nation-state of Pakistan is connected to a third world political lineage. Because of Amir Haider's extensive travels and contacts this created a type of sensibility to his relationship to Pakistan. While his ancestral village was near Rawalpindi, and hence his claim to Pakistan, he also had roots in Kashmir and often traveled to Lahore to visit close friends. In my research, I ask how his travels abroad and his interactions with third world radicals impacted his networks and commitments in Pakistan. Secondly, applying a close reading of Amir Haider's life provides a different understanding of politics and political life by detailing the close kinship and filial relationships of someone who was orphaned early in his life and then sought a broad range of social and political relationships. Centering on what anthropologists call fictive kin this research details many of the close friends and comrades of Amir Haider's that are part of an alternative notion of kinship and, more simply, his self-defined family.

Many of those I interviewed are elderly (70 to 80 plus years of age) so this research has a time-sensitive element in terms of capturing the memories and experiences of an older generation of Pakistanis. My preliminary research yielded further questions that I intend to pursue through subsequent research trips and further oral history collection. In addition, I have been in contact with archivists in Islamabad who knew Amir Haider Khan and are in the process of procuring further research materials. It is also important to note that the original manuscript of Amir Haider Khan's memoirs is kept at the Pakistan Studies Centre at the University of Karachi. These documents are of particular interest to this project. The PSC has also published these memoirs in Pakistan.