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Disaster governance at the urban-rural interface: the 2010 floods in Pakistan's smaller cities

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Introduction¹

The 2010 floods in Pakistan triggered concerns about the potentially grave impact of global warming in countries with limited capacity to administer effective disaster governance. International data reveal that »the number of disasters occurring due to hydrological and meteorological hazards has increased nearly five times in the last 40 years« (Asthana 2014: 17), an era in which human beings' impact on the environment has come under increasing scrutiny. Climate change is a particularly sobering prospect in Asia, a region that combines dense populations and ambitious hydrology with lamentable governance (Pommeranz 2009). South Asia, by all accounts, is likely to be hit harder than anywhere due to its high levels of poverty and institutional weakness (AFP 2010; Khan 2011; Bhatiya 2014). Pakistan has been highlighted in *Climate Asia*, the largest Asian study on perceptions of climate change to date, as having a particularly precarious future. Having surveyed 4,000 people from that country, researchers found that it

stood out from the other countries included in the study – India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam and China – because of [a] strong sense of despair. It was the only country of all seven in which more people thought life had become worse in the past five years, both in rural areas and big cities... In more than any other country surveyed in the region, people in Pakistan thought these changes in weather and in availability of water, food, electricity and fuel, were currently having a high impact on their lives, their lifestyles and health... (Colom 2014).

The phrase »both rural areas and big cities« is indicative of a certain binary thinking with respect to urban/rural settings that tends to underpin much research on Pakistan – a binary this paper seeks to problematize (see next section). Nonetheless, the survey is revealing of the acute practical issues and problems that face flood affected populations in the aftermath of disasters such as the Indus deluge of 2010; problems that centre around access to basic resources. Policymaking circles are increasingly cognizant of the role that cities play in addressing these difficulties. To a large extent, local bureaucracy and municipal authority constitute the primary interface between flood-affected populations and humanitarian aid at the national and international level. Their importance in responding and adapting to disasters is crucial; they will play a considerable part in deciding the fates of many millions of flood affectees in the coming decades, a fact policymakers have begun to recognize. »Climate change will place an even higher premium on municipal capacity and management structures«, according to a report published by the World Bank, which points out that »cities are first responders in a crisis; they are the first to

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at *The Quotidian Anthropocene: Reconfiguring Environments in Urbanizing Asia*, National University of Singapore, Asia Research Institute, October 15-18, 2014; the author would like to thank the organizers and participants for their comments. I am also grateful to Asad Farooq (LUMS) and friends at Hirraq Foundation in Kotadu whose support networks, video archives and wisdom based on years of activism in the Saraiki belt of southern Punjab was generously shared at important points during the research process. The shocking murder of Zaffar Lund days before this paper's publication is indicative of the difficult circumstances under which they work. Thanks also to research assistant Faheem Ameen and LUMS students who helped with translation of the Saraiki interviews; and to colleagues at ZMO (especially Katharina Lange and Katrin Bromber) whose feedback on an earlier draft of this paper has been extremely useful. (Errors of fact or opinion are my own).

experience trends« and constitute »the key agency to implement national government directives.« »National governments may set the rules of the game«, it analogizes, »but it is cities that are the athletes« (World Bank 2010: 10, 14). Another study published by the Brookings Institution comparing the 2010 floods in Pakistan and Haiti earthquake is unequivocal: »Disasters will become an increasingly urban phenomena« (Ferris 2010: 7).

This paper explores the role of cities in disaster-response, focussing on the short and medium term experience of displaced peasants who migrate to urban areas at times of environmental crisis and their impact upon the city itself. Beginning with a thematic sketch of two separate bodies of academic literature relating to disasters and cities respectively, the following section highlights underresearched points of intersection deemed significant to the evolving challenges presented by climate change and urbanization. The paper concludes by exploring lines of inquiry that go beyond the urban-rural dualisms and hierarchies that once dominated social theory and academic research. These, I argue, must address the new geographies of urbanization if scholarly inquiry is to inform disaster governance in the Anthropocene – an era in which disaster will be anything but exceptional.

Disaster and urban Pakistan: a review of the literature

Literary accounts of death, injury and destruction caused by abrupt environmental change date back to the Babylonian flood myth; as such, they are as old as civilization itself. Rousseau is said to have offered the first social scientific insights into disaster when he identified human factors such as population density and slow emergency response as having compounded the impact of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Modern academic study of disaster – that is, systematic analysis of causes and impacts – is a relatively recent discipline established with the Disaster Research Centre at the Ohio State University in the early 1960s.

Mainstream research on disasters defines them as events, concentrated in space and time, which cause societies to undergo severe physical harm and/or social disruption (distinguishable from, say, car accidents, which kill many thousands of people over longer periods across the world). Its purpose is generally to inform policies that seek to prevent, mitigate and manage the realities of floods, earthquakes and various other sorts of catastrophic events states must contend with; key areas of study include risk assessment, preparedness, hazard exposure, vulnerability, response and recovery (for a discussion see Lindell 2011).

Scholars of a more critical bent tend to focus on the ways in which state policies that seek to remedy disasters can themselves cause harm or be implicated in perpetuating unequal relations

of power, exploitation and environmental destruction. This is true even where interventions are ostensibly humanitarian or geared towards aiding affected populations. For instance, geographer Ken Hewitt's (1997) analysis of the technocratic tendency of states to quarantine sites affected by disaster shows how institutionalized attempts to rescue and rehabilitate can alienate victim communities through subjection to the cold, insensitive gaze of official expertise.² A more radical strand of critique considers the exploitation of disastrous circumstances by elites and corporations to establish or consolidate agendas unrelated to recovery. On the economy, Naomi Klein's notion of »disaster capitalism« has been invoked to draw parallels between the aftermath of war and occurrences such as earthquakes and floods – moments at which the destruction of already neglected public infrastructure create a sort of blank slate, the perfect conditions for »shock therapy«. Disaster capitalism is a »fast-forward version ... of what »free market« forces are doing to our societies even in the absence« of such circumstances (Klein 2007: 48; on Hurricane Katrina, see Adams et al. 2009).

In similar vein, scholars inspired by radical political philosophy have begun to study disasters as occasions to deepen and extend the statist biopolitical project of regulating life and death. Drawing on Foucault (1990 [1978]) and Agamben's (1998, 2005) development of Carl Schmitt's conceptualization of sovereignty as the ability to decide whose life matters coupled with the power to declare »states of exception« in which law can be suspended, Makley (2014), for instance, interprets China's response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and riots in Tibet as a part of a singular, militarized drive to establish sovereignty by reinforcing nationalist narratives based on unequal valuations of the right to life. Reid (2010) argues humanitarianism is an implicit form of evolutionary social engineering, with emergencies viewed as opportunities to make populations governable and fit for liberal rule through »adaption«.³

² For an anthropological take, see Kim Fortun's (2001) complex study of environmental activism after the Bhopal gas leak.

³ This is all in line with Agamben's (1998: 12, 78) view that ostensibly apolitical humanitarian internationalism for selected, »worthy« bodies at specific moments is complicit with, and legitimizes the nation-state's claims to bio-power. Mbembe (2003) has characterized such power as the basis of an order in which entire regions once subjected to a »permanent state of exception« under colonialism now encompass populations forced into »death worlds«: »new and unique forms of social existence [...] and conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead« (40). Though he refers primarily to warfare and has not written of humanitarian relief extensively, »necropolitics« and »necrocapitalism« (Banerjee 2008) are emerging as fashionable frames with which to consider the plight of populations in the global

The propositions of these various classical, critical and radical approaches to disaster governance (or, in Foucauldian parlance, »governmentality«) are examined in the empirical context of the 2010 floods below. What they share is a firm belief that disasters are neither natural, nor isolated incidents. If the events that trigger them are concentrated in space and time, their political, economic, social and environmental causes and reverberations extend well beyond the immediacy of their occurrence. To this extent, a paradox lies at the heart of academic disaster studies: insistence on locating catastrophic events within longer durées of *time* whilst insisting on their specificity and distinguishability from the everyday. In practice this means environmental disaster must be studied longitudinally since its causes and consequences have much to do with »ongoing societal conditions«, »pre-existing risks and vulnerabilities« (Hewitt 1997: 141-2); floods, for example, are not discrete happenings but moments at which extant social realities, power relations and resource struggles become particularly visible and acute. The first empirical section of this paper will explore the immediate aftermath of the 2010 floods as one such moment, exploring the resonance of the theories discussed above in making sense of the social and political scenarios that developed.

A second line of discussion goes beyond the immediate days and weeks of population displacement following the 2010 floods, extending the span of discussion to encompass wider contexts of *space* as well as time. Although the »whereabouts and distributions« or »geographicalness« of disaster have to some extent been studied by disaster specialists (e.g. Hewitt 1997, 40-54), I venture beyond this tradition to consider how recent developments in the »spatial turn« might shape the study of climate change-induced flooding: how can studying the geo-spatial consequences of disaster through larger trajectories of population displacement contribute to debates about space in the global South?

Studies of Asia's »urban transition« have already implicitly revealed much about the plight of populations dispersed by environmental change, without isolating their experiences from wider migratory flows. This body of work has shown unplanned urbanization is the outcome of agrarian »distress migration« (Roy 2002), rural »expulsions« (Sassen 2014) and proletarianization caused by the Green Revolution of the 1960s (Davis 2006). Much of what has been established about slum living in these works applies equally to the sorts of eco-migrants discussed in this paper. Nonetheless, studying the lives of rural-urban migrants affected by specific, environmentally disastrous events has the poten-

South that bear the brunt of disaster. (»Let them drown« is the title of a recent essay by Naomi Klein, 2016).

tial to nuance what has arguably become an overly generalized portrait of relocation to the metropolis in overviews such as *Planet of the Slums* (Davis 2006).

For one thing, it is rarely noted that most of those uprooted from rural settings do not necessarily migrate to »megacities« such as Karachi or Mumbai, which have arguably received disproportionate attention. In their introduction to a recently published collection of essays on South Asian cities, the editors (Anjaria and MacFarlane 2011: 9) note that most of the submissions they received were on Mumbai, Delhi and handful of other (predominantly Indian) large urban centres. Yet over half of all urban dwellers in the world live in cities with populations of less than 500,000 and 40-45 percent in cities and towns of less than 100,000; in developing countries two thirds of urban residents live in places of less than 1 million people (Bell and Jayne 2009: 689, 691). These populations often slip through the cracks of social science research because they are rarely involved in documented economic activity and thus remain unknown in World Bank data and assessments (2003, 2010). Neglect also stems from the obvious practical fact that smaller cities are difficult to access from metropolitan research centres. Kot Adu, where most of the research presented in this paper was conducted, takes eight hours to reach by car from Lahore, a case in point. (Getting to London by air from the same starting point is quicker).

Whatever the reasons, the result is a bias against the study of medium and smaller cities in urban studies and geography. This mimics the exclusionary nature of policy in both India and Pakistan, where government investment benefits a handful of large cities at the expense of each country's urban majority. Academic research is thus failing to draw attention to the overall picture of South Asian urbanization - one in which a few large cities with strong economic bases are able to raise resources for development, leaving out small and medium towns in which the currently pitiful state of basic amenities and public or private investment is likely to worsen.

What exactly are these? For heuristic purposes, the latter are taken in this paper to be urban settlements with populations of between 100,000 and 500,000 people, though as some commentators have pointed, such numerical definitions are not universally valid since relative sizes vary considerably across regions (Bell and Jayne 2009: 691). It should go without saying, moreover, that a more holistic definition would weigh cities by their economic and political influence as well as their population size.

Perhaps more important than the physical size of small cities is their intermediary role: the ways in which they articulate new configurations of urban/rural and multi-scalar (i.e. local, national,

regional, global) tension and interconnection. As will be seen in the paragraphs that follow, rescue and rehabilitation following disasters are defined by weeks and months of contact between rural populations and nearby urban settlements where the existence of municipal institutions creates an interface between local actors (police and bureaucracy), provincial and national government (politicians), the army (state) and international donor funding and humanitarian organizations. In the medium and longer-term aftermath of disasters, these urban agglomerations promise the enticing hope of urban living, evolving into sites of formal and informal re-settlement. As ever greater numbers migrate to small towns in search of access to resources and the pull of city life, experiences of urban »marginality« become more prevalent (Sommers et al. 1999). This last term, with connotations of residing at the socio-economic and spatial edges of a society, is a useful way of capturing the condition of itinerant rural-urban dwellers worst affected by climate change (hence its appearance in the title of this paper).

Indeed, my principal concern in the second empirical section of this paper is to understand how such groups are denied and seek to »access« resources in the aftermath of a disaster – above all compensation, land and labour opportunities.⁴ Discussion will simultaneously explore the ways in which they assert their urban presence, impacting small city life in unpredictable ways that occasionally confound authority. Here, contemporary rural migration to cities of the global South can build usefully upon older discussions about the agency of marginal populations in urban contexts. The wageless millions of the semi-rural global South can be likened to Marx’s own admittedly scant references to the »lumpen proletariat« during the French revolutionary period, famously developed by Fanon (2004 [1961]) in *The Wretched of the Earth* (for a discussion see Denning 2010). Like Marx and other observers of the un- and under-employed, Fanon was struck by the »superfluousness« in colonial shantytowns of these »jobless sub-humans«. Though aware they would likely be recruited by colonialism if not absorbed into resistance, he was alive to their unruly potential, noting their potentially volatile presence and comparing them to a »pack of rats« gnawing at the edifice of colonial rule. Asef Bayat’s (2012) writings on the Arab world echo those of Fanon, and are

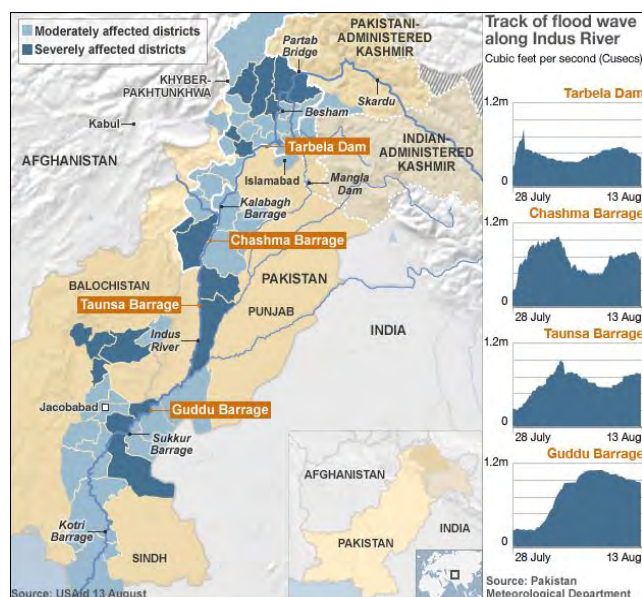
⁴ »Access«, in political ecology, is defined usefully by Ribot and Peluso (2003: 158) in political and economic terms, not just legal ones, as »the ability to derive benefits from things« not mere »right« (as implied by classical definitions of property. It is thus »akin to a bundle of powers«, evident as much in the power to mediate and/or deny others’ access). As will be seen, it is embedded in »structural and relational access mechanisms« – political and economic and cultural frames (164) that define the Pakistani post-colonial state.

especially useful in making sense of the everyday tussles between structure and agency that define the condition of urban inhabitants in Pakistan’s smaller cities, above all, his canny concept of the »inside-out city« predicated upon the observation that so many of the urban poor spend so much time outdoors. Compelled to earn livelihoods, subsist and sometimes sleep outdoors in public spaces, many lead »pavement lives«, an existence that creates potential for frequent confrontations with municipal authority and public power. Such confrontations stem less from organized protest and more from spontaneous outrage at denial of access to amenities, resources and urban space. (Hence Bayat’s term, »social non-movements«, which captures the dispersed and unorganized features of collective action in the Third World).

The 2010 floods in Muzaffargarh district

In mid-to-late July of 2010, intense monsoon rainfall upland resulted in catastrophic flooding along the Indus, displacing 20 million people, devastating crops, causing extensive damage to infrastructure and resulting in the deaths of at least 2,000 over a period of several months. In line with many local and national news reports on breaches, I have elsewhere problematized accounts of the floods as having been caused by heavy rainfall alone. Downstream in southern Punjab and Sindh in particular, the geography of inundation was shaped by local engineers, influential landlords, political powerbrokers and state functionaries whose decision-making about where to breach embankments was guided by complex combinations of personal interest, questionable wisdom and ideological biases that arguably prioritized infrastructure over people (see Figure 1). This working paper – the first in a series based on the data set used here – is concerned with the impact of, and governmental responses to the floods rather than the question of causality. It must be borne in mind, however, that in southern Punjab’s Muzaffargarh district, flood relief and response was administered by local bureaucracies and landed elites considered largely responsible for the destruction that had been wrought. Villages, hamlets and small towns affected were home to vast populations who believe with some justification that their livelihoods and dwellings were sacrificed to protect illegally grown cash crops and engineering failures at Taunsa Barrage. The very fact of the flood striking their areas was in and of itself evidence of the state, landed and political elite’s callousness towards them (Ahmad 2015a, 2015b).

Figure 1. Areas affected by the 2010 floods in Pakistan (source: BBC <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-10986220> accessed 9 July 2016)



Prior to the floods, southern Punjab was known as a region in which patterns of land distribution are marked by the existence of inordinately large holdings and vastly unequal relations of power – a system of labour control and social relations often referred to (hyperbolically) as »feudalism«. More akin to neighboring Sindh than the much more modernized and equally distributed agricultural plains of northern and central Punjab, southern Punjab is populated predominantly by a peasantry that identifies in large part as being ethnically Saraiki – a language distinct from the Punjabi spoken by generations of military officers and the Urdu spoken by *mohajirs* [migrants] from India around the time of Partition who have settled in their midst. Districts such as Muzaffargarh and other parts of the Saraiki belt are part of what might be described as an internal frontier filled by generations of colonial and post-colonial settler migrants from the North. These processes of settlement have marginalized Saraiki »sons of the soil«, reinforcing patterns of unequal landownership created by the allotment of grants during the British era. The consequences of floods – from the question of who got hit, to the administration of humanitarian aid to the dynamics of urban marginality following migration to small towns – were structured by these historic inequalities between large landowners with ties to the state (itself dominated by Punjabi speakers) on the one hand, and on the other, the majority of the district’s landless and small holding Saraiki peasantry population, which has minimal connections to the central state and political elite (Ahmad 2015a).

They were also shaped by the political and administrative context. Civilian rule had relatively recently been restored following a lengthy dictatorship by the Pakistani military under Gen-

eral Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), with important implications for the initially sluggish pace of response. Rehabilitation was coordinated by the quasi-civilian National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), whose core response was the »Watan [country] Card« scheme, by which affected households were to be issued a sum of 20,000 Pakistani rupees [300 US dollars]. Unveiled as an innovative use of technology to lower transaction costs and enable the poor to spend aid as they saw fit, the Watan Card scheme was the principle means of distributing foreign (predominantly US) aid to flood affectees. Despite worsening relations with Pakistan following the Raymond Davis episode and Abbottabad raid involving Osama Bin Laden’s targeted assassination in 2011, the United States was still the largest donor, having doled out nearly a billion dollars that year (White 2011). As such, the Watan Card can be seen as the means through which international humanitarian aid reached Pakistan’s remotest peasants. Other highly visible donors included Turkey, which has played an increasingly prominent role in the economic development of Punjab under Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League-Noon provincial government at the time – now additionally the national government of Pakistan, led by Sharif as the nation’s incumbent Prime Minister. At the micro-level, little is known about the impact of such aid, less still the manner in which it has shaped and reconfigured the sociological context of flood-affected regions such as Muzaffargarh. What follows is an account of the aftermath of the floods which show how the administration of aid was experienced by selected recipients over a period of several years based on qualitative interviews and ethnography. Far from exhaustive, this initial stab makes sense of a narrow section of data generated during field visits between 2010 and 2016.

Urban encounters: aid and rehabilitation as governmentality

In the early hours of August 3, 2010, several days after heavy monsoon rains caused the severest flooding in North West Pakistan for 80 years, the river Indus burst through an embankment on its left side in southern Punjab. Upstream of Taunsa Barrage, floodwaters surged eastwards across densely populated areas, engulfing villages but also the city of Kot Adu, where I arrived to conduct research and investigative news reporting some weeks after the floodwaters had receded. Around 400,000 acres of Muzaffargarh district was inundated; 1.5 million were displaced. Official estimates claimed around 50 people died. (My own inquiries suggest the number who perished by drowning was in fact likely to be much higher since the bodies of many of those washed away were never found and likely never reported).

As it ravaged the district with biblical force, sweeping away bridges, homes and livelihoods in its wake, »nature« discriminated. The inhabitants of Muzaffargarh City (located in the southern centre of the area mapped in Figure 2) were warned by announcements from the District Commissioner's Office about waters that never actually reached them. Ordered to evacuate, most fled in panic despite the fact that the floods stopped short of their homes, underlining a key marker of differentiation between urban dwellers and rural folk: many villagers I spoke with reported receiving no such government warnings about the impending arrival of floodwaters prior to their hurried escapes from locations west of Muzaffargarh City, much closer to site of the breached embankment. Such *bastis* [settlements] were situated near the village Dera Din Punah, North of Kot Adu city (at the North Western corner of the area mapped in Figure 2, below).

Figure 2. Muzaffargarh district: villages and small towns/cities west of Muzaffargarh City inundated during the 2010 floods (source: google maps)



Frequent reference to accidents, deaths by drowning and corpse sightings among villagers from these areas undermined official estimates for the number of villagers killed by the flood. In some cases, individuals who fell prey to the floodwaters had opted to stay behind in order to protect land or property from being appropriated or stolen. In others, lack of information and failure to evacuate rural populations directly resulted in fatalities. NGO worker Zulfiqar Lund painted a terrifying portrait of a ten-foot wall of water crashing into dwellings still occupied by families caught unawares near the river. The absence of any state or governmental presence in the narratives of displaced persons is a striking feature of all the testimonies garnered from non-urban settings. In the rural exodus that preceded the arrival of flood waters, no one

reported any help in being evacuated; tens of thousands piled into vehicles, donkey carts and even traipsed on foot along roads with their livestock towards cities; many sold livestock to pay for their transport, doing so in desperation at inordinately low rates. Consequently, despite local government having had advanced warning that the floodwaters were on their way, the initial experience of the 2010 floods for much of Muzaffargarh District's peasantry was one of complete abandonment.

In the resulting vacuum of official responsibility, the rural masses were left to make their own way eastwards towards Muzaffargarh's small towns and cities, some of which, such as Kot Adu were themselves partially or largely flooded; many found themselves subsequently displaced two or even three times as the flood waters continued to inundate an ever larger area of the district. Patterns of movement were segmented along class and social lines: villagers with kinship ties in small towns were able to move into their relatives' homes or adjacent premises and lands; those without either settled on sand dunes at the margins of cities or along roads leading up to them, where they found relative safety and access to trucks or city administrations distributing aid and information. Urban dwellers in small towns such as Muzaffargarh City, evacuated but mostly spared from flooding, made their way to Multan if they had enough funds and/or connections there, it being the nearest metropolitan area. A minority stayed behind, including a courageous skeletal core of health care professionals who volunteered to help with the rescue and relief effort, despite being told to evacuate following the breach of Abbas embankment.

After three weeks or so, the displaced started returning to their homes, or what was left of them. By the time I reached the city of Kot Adu in early September with a small group of academics and journalists wanting to understand what had happened whilst distributing cash collected from concerned friends and relatives, a state of relative calm had returned in the city, flood waters having receded from there. Tents lined the main roads, however, and many former village dwellers were still living in desperate conditions. With local economies devastated and livelihoods on hold, their dependency on national and international aid continued for the next two months. On the outskirts of urban settlements, a constellation of medical camps and food aid centres served as nodal points within a broader network of distribution points linked to the international aid effort through convoys of trucks from the North. Flood affectees were finger printed and required to show ID documents, but appeared to be accessing basic rations and medicines without gross impediment or indignity.

It did not take long before the process of apportioning aid became politicized by local political powerbrokers. As the sense of apocalyptic emergency in the immediate aftermath of the floods subsided, MNAs (Members of the National Assembly), MPAs (Members of the Provincial Assembly) and their oppositions began to assert control, ensuring wherever possible that aid should reach their constituencies as reward for loyalty. (And equally, that those who had voted for political rivals should not be helped). At least one of the food distribution centres I visited was located on the private lands of a former local politician who was effectively mediating international aid flows to shore up his own personal and local influence. According to flood affectees, NGO workers and local journalists, local »feudal« politician-landlords did not hesitate to employ coercive measures to obstruct aid reaching the needy if they saw it benefiting non-voters or even non-aligned groups, blocking the mobility and access of aid trucks to all but their own vote banks, installing touts amidst aid workers to identify the »deserving« and employing the muscle of private goons (including some police constables) where this was deemed necessary for enforcement.

After the government announced it would be awarding affectees Watan Cards, a new phase of more direct contact between rural populations and small city bureaucratic offices was initiated. Bringing thousands of flood affectees out of camps into urban areas where they interfaced directly with the Pakistani state, this phase of rehabilitation was largely unmediated by landlords and local politicians. The mode of identifying those in »genuine« need required that »flood victims«, as they came to be classified, present biometric national identity cards to prove their being from an affected *mauza* [village community], giving a new lease of electronic life to units of colonial administration established under British rule. The imperative to get registered and prove one's identity as an authentic »flood victim« impelled significant numbers of the rural poor and a minority of urban dwellers who had either lost their ID cards in the chaos of the floods or had never previously made them to get registered. Rehabilitation thus expanded the panoptical reach of Pakistan's official gaze over swathes of its population that might otherwise have remained unknown. The fact that this model of humanitarian aid was rolled out in parallel with expanding military operations in the North West, which resulted in forced displacement from zones of conflict such as Swat, is not irrelevant. After the initial phase of lethargy and minimalist involvement, disaster governance had arguably begun to take on a biopolitical dimension of the kind envisaged by Agamben's critique of humanitarianism.

At the national and indeed international level, the Watan Card system was presented as success-

ful on the basis of the high numbers of cards dispensed – hundreds of thousands in Muzaffargarh alone (White 2011; Kamal et al. 2012). At ground level, however, shortfalls in capacity were highly apparent, the pressure of numbers creating an administrative nightmare for both affectees and the local National Database Registration Authority (NADRA) offices expected to register applicants. In the sheer chaos that ensued when the sms text messaging system of notification to successful applicants broke down (causing larger numbers to arrive at Watan Card centres than could possibly be processed), there was little to suggest clear-sighted implementation of an all-powerful state's biopolitical agenda to control its citizenry. To any reasonable observer, this was a bureaucracy with limited scope to know its citizenry let alone control the entire population within its territorial remit. Crude application of Agamben's ideas to such a context threatens to accord more coherence, coordination and power than states such as Pakistan can actually muster at the local level, particularly at moments of crisis. If these are now held to be ideal opportunities for implementing prior cynical agendas and driving through capitalist reform by Klein and other radical critics, it is important to bear in mind that states themselves are peopled at the lower levels by bureaucrats caught off guard by the same circumstances of rupture that have displaced communities.

Nor do the central cores of states assert anything like complete control over these lower levels of the bureaucracy and police, their primary interface with the public. As with any kind of service delivery or dispensation of entitlements within a state connected to society through valves of patronage and clientelism, the Watan Card (and the chaos surrounding its distribution) created opportunities for graft among the bureaucracy and its agents, both accused of *sifarish* [nepotism] and taking bribes for fast-tracking claims to compensation without reference to realities of urgent need that ought to have been deciding whose Watan Cards should be processed first. Entire segments of those in dire circumstances were meanwhile prevented or delayed from receiving their rightful entitlements. My own inquiries confirm what news reports (Bari 2011a, 2011b; Kalhor 2010; Express Tribune 2010) were suggesting: a combination of administrative incapacity, political meddling and profiteering were severely hampering and distorting the process of rehabilitation and compensation. This was not disaster capitalism, but opportunistic petty pilfering and enactment of class, caste and clan privilege – the sort that in any case defines everyday social struggles in Muzaffargarh.

The experiential impact of all this in the city was patent in the frustration and anger of flood affectees desperately demanding their entitlements. The cumulative pressure of queueing for

hours, days and nights outside administrative offices in the pounding sun and sapping late summer humidity to prove their identities was clearly taking its toll, not least because this was just the first stage of the process (see Figure 3, below). To have a Watan Card made entailed waiting in-line again at an even larger series of queues at a local technical college in which processing by local administrators was policed by riot police with *lathis* [batons], and then, *if* successful, completing the last phase of the mission by joining the back of yet another snaking line at an ATM. Banks in small cities are few and far between, partly due to the limited savings of their customers and the considerable extent of the informal rural-urban economy that surrounds them. Consequently, cash machines I visited as far as the town of Laya to the North in October-November were constantly surrounded by crowds and long messy lines of deflated workers and peasants waiting in line for their first installment of 20,000 rupees (a figure that was reduced to 19,500 after some bank workers and bureaucrats took 500 rupee commissions for speeding up dispensation). For the elderly, this system seemed particularly cruel. For young men it led to anger that occasionally boiled over. (I witnessed the car windows of a bureaucrat being smashed by a man whose right to flood aid had just been denied). For women, especially widows and estranged wives, the process was complicated by a patriarchal system that attached any entitlements to their late husbands and male relatives, underlining the ways in which the consequences of disaster are sharply gendered. In this respect, Pakistan replicates general patterns, in which variegated entitlement relations mean that even within families, the ability to cope is differentiated (Hewitt 1997: 148, 155-6).

Figure 3. Queue outside NADRA office around two months after the floods



Struggling to stay afloat amidst this unmanageably large ocean of demand, the bureaucracy closed itself off from the public in air-conditioned rooms behind police barricades. It was accused (with some justification) of being unaccountable to local people and in thrall to powers of distant political centres in Multan, Lahore and Islamabad.

Visits from ministers, members of the national and provincial assemblies and foreign dignitaries were carefully stage-managed photo opportunities – performance sites of the »obscene« and »grotesque« inequality that so often defines the unwritten contract of rule between leaders and their subjects in former colonial societies (Mbembe 1992). There is arguably a »banality« about the bureaucratic violence involved in herding around, humiliating and finger printing vast, immiserated and destitute constellations of unshaven, dehydrated men in tattered rags, clutching bits of paper upon which their lives and deaths depend. (Even if, occasionally, an unlucky individual is crushed in a stampede or beaten to death by a policeman's truncheon). Largely invisible and undramatic, we might call its enactment »structural« (Farmer, 2004).

In the aftermath of the floods, the ways in which public and private power were contested were at least as numerous as its forms. It would be churlish to describe the self-immolation of Mohammed Akram, who torched himself outside Gilani's home in protest at his plight as evidence of empowered resistance among the subaltern populations of southern Punjab (Associated Press 2010; Daily Telegraph 2010). Nonetheless, as a form of protest, it challenges Farmer's somewhat pessimistic assumption that anthropologies of the living necessarily elide the question of what happens to those who die without telling their stories (2004: 307). Akram's suicide was reported around the world through a syndicated news article, evidence of the sort of attention even the tiniest of individual trajectories can command in an age of global news media. The mushrooming of satellite television channels in Pakistan during recent years has reinforced the trend of crowds raising placards and chanting slogans, making public appeals to the nation and beyond from the unlikeliest of places, turning remote backwaters into points of multi-scalar dialogue.

The congregation of an otherwise disparate peasantry in congested urban settings turned bottlenecked nodal points along the aid network into sites of urban-rural friction. Filled with large numbers of displaced rural compensation-claimants, towns like Kot Adu and Muzaffargarh City became sites of potential and actual confrontation between the peasantry and municipal authorities. Spontaneous protests were common among those denied or made to wait inordinately long for their Watan Cards. Outside Kot Adu technical college, I saw a hundred or so men complaining to a local journalist that their *mauza* was not being awarded Watan Cards despite having been severely affected. They grew animated when they saw my camera and began chanting slogans about the injustice of their plight. One man sent a message to the provincial government: »We request the Chief Minister Punjab to include our names on the Watan Card list. If

our cards don't issued us we will destroy the government's property and the government will be responsible for the damages.« A separate protest resulted in the death of a man from Kot Adu, whose brother I interviewed. Shortly before he was taken ill and died in hospital, according to Allah Yaar, he had been beaten by riot police in Muzaffargarh City where he had gone, with other demonstrators, to implore visiting Prime Minister Gilani for support in having their Watan Cards issued. Following his brother's death (quite possibly from injuries sustained from their batons), Allah Yaar laid his brother's corpse down and caused a road block outside the police station, a common mode of protest among the poor in Pakistan when police refuse, as they often do, to file an FIR (First Information Report) containing accusations against them. The power of this sort of unplanned collective action, which one sees frequently in Pakistan, is hard to measure, not least because much of the time protestors know their actions may not alter fundamental equations, but pursue them as a means of asserting the morality of their causes. One thing was beyond doubt: the biopolitical project of administering aid to the peasantry through government offices in Kot Adu and Muzaffargarh City created a volatile, »inside-out« situation of the sort Bayat (2012) alludes to in his work on social non-movements.

Disaster and urbanisation

As might be expected, the pressure on medical and other services and facilities in (or co-ordinated from) urban areas was considerable in the days and weeks immediately after the floods. In Muzaffargarh City, for instance, a government school and technical college of around 8 acres was used to house some 80,000 displaced persons; medical professionals dealt with a crisis of infectious diseases unprecedented in scale. Equally significant was the impact on businesses and shops which underlined the extent to which rural-urban economic exchange is based on mutual dependency. Small city bazaars which normally provide services and goods ranging from car rentals to agro-chemical fertilizers, to cloth, textiles and foodstuffs to residents of surrounding villages were hit hard when demand from these sources was abruptly drowned by the floods. Mobility within the district's internal markets was severely disrupted by damage to roads. As the pressures of perilous scarcity receded, the distortions of a bizarre new aid economy of dependency took shape which, in the exaggerated terms of one interviewee, created a »taste for mineral water among the livestock of people who had themselves never dreamed of drinking Nestlé's products.« »How« he asked, »is a shopkeeper supposed to sell flour to people made accustomed to receiving it for free?«

Compounding the negative impact of this economic slowdown for urban dwellers was the enormous pressure on housing, which resulted in a sharp drop in availability of cheap rented accom-

modation. Over time, this problem has remained, suggesting, as one Nazim Baloch, an NGO worker based in the city said: »The floods increased awareness of the city among villagers,« who, having spent periods of time with friends and relatives in cities they had otherwise rarely visited, acquired a taste for the benefits of urban living. Even among those who resided in camps near roads and the outskirts of urban areas, proximity to nearby factories (i.e. employment opportunities), amenities and hospital services instilled an aspiration to build a life in the city, regardless of their survival needs. The legacy for Muzaffargarh, says Baloch, is that a sudden proliferation of *katchi* [informal] settlements have now spouted up in areas like Karimabad in its Northern outskirts - formerly government-owned land that has grown into a belt of semi-urban sprawl which connects the city to Muzaffargarh bypass (see Figures 4 and 5, below). This is reflective of urban settlement during »normal« (as opposed to post-disaster) situations across the global South, much of which appears as »ribbons of development« or »belts« along highways (Ali 2013: 61), often indicating desire for access to industrial sites (i.e. employment opportunities) and other benefits associated with urban life (see also Baviskar 2002; Roy 2002).

However, the earliest settlers in Karimabad were families displaced by severe flooding in the 1970s, a fact which suggests ecological changes might well shape urban geography in particular ways that invite further research. The elevated height of this particular stretch of government land, I was told by two interviewees, has always lent itself to settlement during floods. As has occurred across urban Pakistan and indeed the global South, over time such unplanned transformations of urban space have become largely irreversible, with informal occupancy eventually formalized through processes of regularization.

Figure 4. Map of Muzaffargarh City, bypass road to the North (source: google maps)

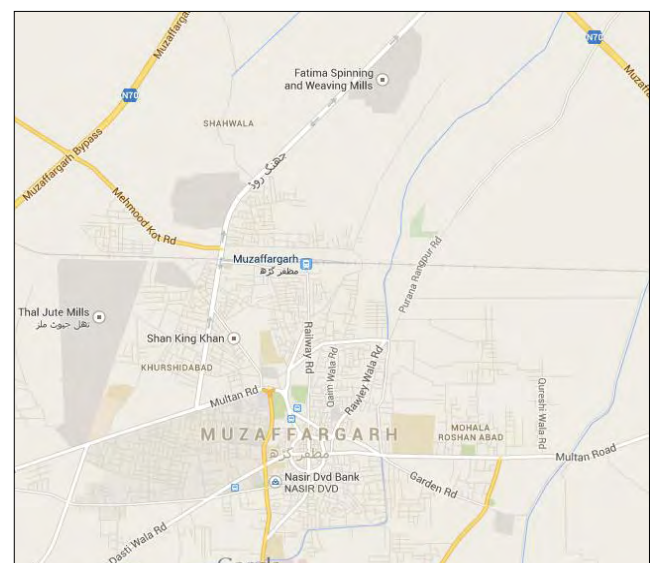


Figure 5. View of Karimabad from bypass road



The implications of this migration and permanent settlement for the city's original inhabitants have been ambiguous; as new powerbrokers move in and establish voting constituencies in these areas through facilitating regularization, talk of new *kabza* [land mafia] groups suggests small and medium cities like Muzaffargarh emulate the well-documented patterns in larger metropolitan equivalents, Karachi in Pakistan (like India's Mumbai) being the dystopian archetype. An obvious status distinction remains between settlements such as Karimabad on the peripheral outskirts of cities near factories and motorways, where livestock wander past newly built homes on the one hand, and on the other, longer settled core urban areas where businesses, shops, offices, bazaars and motor traffic suggest different sorts of economic activity. It is no coincidence, of course, that flood affectees tend to reside at the spatial and social edges of small cities like Muzaffargarh; their aspirations to city life are constrained by certain realities of marginality. The very process of spontaneous urbanization in small cities and towns thus reflects and reproduces ongoing relations of domination between town and country. In Karimabad, as in informal settlements studied elsewhere, amenities such as water and electricity are accessed through complicated informal dependent relationships predicated on political and patronage-based connections to private service providers.

However, property ownership appeared relatively secure compared to metropolitan contexts such as Islamabad and Karachi, where the threat of eviction and/or demolition is higher due to the desirability and high capital value of big city land. Migration and informal settlement to nearby small cities have thus produced relatively favourable outcomes for some of those displaced by the 2010 floods, transforming their spatial geography in the process. Such transformations have the potential to create anxiety among local urban elites unaccustomed to living in close proximity with classes,

castes and clans that have historically dwelled in the surrounding countryside.

If this was not always obvious in Karimabad, where the presence of officialdom was limited, it was clearly evident in a housing colony for flood victims built with Turkish aid, run by the municipal administration in Muzaffargarh City. Located at the western outskirts of the city near Basira village, flooded in 2010, the Turkish colony represents a curious example of at rehabilitation of a rural area – perhaps the clearest attempt at social engineering I encountered. Built by one of the Punjab government's favourite regional partners but opened once again by Yousuf Raza Gilani amidst much fanfare and publicity after long delays, the colony has effectively transformed a previously agricultural setting outside Muzaffargarh City into a concrete housing society of 1,200 homes. Enclosed by walls with its own schools and medical facilities, Ilama Iqbal colony is considered a privilege to live in for those lucky enough to have been awarded homes as compensation for their losses in the 2010 floods (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6. Turkish housing colony



The wait for keys has been long: individuals in the focus group I interviewed had received theirs in March 2014. They explained bitterly that the city administration has threatened any family that leaves the colony with eviction. (»They have a bag full of padlocks ready for anyone who leaves, they keep telling us«). This policy is supposedly intended to curb attempts by families and individuals from renting out their homes or attempting to divide their lives between the city and country, where many of them earn their bread through agricultural labour. Most lack employment, and wish to continue rearing livestock and farming in their villages, but the housing regime they have been forced to accept prevents them pursuing such livelihoods. Job opportunities in nearby factories, meanwhile, have reduced sharply following recent power crises that led to closures, so those who work do so mostly as day labourers for 200 rupees per day. The *adda* [pick-up point] from where they are recruited (8 km from their homes) is now so oversubscribed with surplus labour

they don't know when they set off in the morning in search of work whether they will be able to afford transport fare home. This bizarre existence at the margins of the city – neither urban nor rural – is maintained not by police but teachers, revenue officials, electrical power workers and other government employees tasked with spying on them to make sure they do not leave their homes in search of work. Listening to their complaints, it was hard not to wonder whether the barbed wire and security gates surrounding their homes were not in fact »protecting« outsiders from the dwellers within rather than the other way around (see Figure 7).

The reality of life in the Turkish housing colony has little to do with the abstract and ambitious project of social engineering envisaged by its planners, itself a curious utopia that somehow neglected to consider that its residents might need employment in addition to shelter. As with the earlier discussed biopolitical aspects of humanitarian aid trumped by local bureaucratic inertia and petty patronage, Turkey's grand vision of modernizing peasant life through concrete and bricks has been subordinated to a pre-existing social structure based on longer term patterns of urban-rural inequality. The city – represented by a professional class of teachers and doctors employed by the state in government schools and hospitals etc – is doing all it can to ensure the continued oppression of surrounding peasantries.

Figure 7. Barbed wire surrounding Turkish housing colony



Communication across scales, between the local and international, has been effectively prevented. Days before I had arrived at the camp-like complex, seven workers installing gas pipes had been electrocuted to death by a high voltage power transmission line. The men, whose bodies had been fished out of a ditch they were digging outside the colony by the residents I interviewed, were reported to have been »working round the clock« at the behest of a subcontractor before a visit by Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Mehmood 2014). Yet another example, it seems, of govern-

ance driven by central governmental concerns for photo opportunities related to foreign investment trumping any sense of responsibility to local poor people in smaller cities. Residents of Ilama Iqbal were anxious about the city administration's repeated insistence on installing electricity metres they cannot afford (see Figure 8, below). Taken together with bills they say are inordinately high, it isn't hard to imagine residents of *katchi* settlements like *Karimabad*, where electricity is not necessarily metred, regarding themselves as better off than these »beneficiaries« of rehabilitation.

Figure 8. Residents of Turkish housing colony complaining about cost of installing electricity metres



Conclusion: a right to the (small) city?

It is possible to argue that with the Watan Card scheme, the floods of 2010 were exploited to incorporate bodies and lives previously unknown to the state within data banks of knowledge about Muzaffargarh's population. However, at the local level, the central state's designs were often undermined by local powerbrokers and a lower bureaucracy that directly interacts with its rural population of largely landless and smallholding peasants. The employment of biotechnology is a notable development but ought not to be taken as conclusive evidence of a successful biopolitical project. There were few signs of a homogenous and coherent centralized state agenda to control life at the level of local governance. Lethargy, administrative incapacity and old-fashioned graft limited preparedness and distorted rehabilitation in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 floods, hardly evidence of a grand plan. This is not to suggest state »failure« to help the poor was innocent. Official indifference and governmental incapacity were experienced as forms of structural violence against populations that were not even warned the floodwaters were on their way, then forced to undergo humiliation and hardships for compensation. Moreover, there is ample evidence to suggest national and provisional governments were more concerned with foreign investment and donor funding than

addressing the concerns of flood affected populations. Since its rise to power in the 2013 elections, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N has pushed an aggressive neo-liberal growth strategy in Muzaffargarh. Further research might explore the question of what kinds of rebuilding contracts were issued in the aftermath of the floods, to whom and for what purpose? The question of disaster capitalism might thus be addressed more fully.

By triggering migration to small cities in the aftermath of the 2010 disaster, flooding has altered Muzaffargarh's human and spatial geography, upsetting rural-urban social and economic relations of power. The continued maintenance of social boundaries and hierarchies between populations classifiable as rural and urban is reflective in the marginality of peri-urban settlements like Karimabad. Moreover, these divisions are consciously upheld by the bureaucracy charged with the task of administering rehabilitation projects. Municipal authority preserves urban privilege even whilst ostensibly incorporating chunks of the peasantry into the city. As the oppressive reality of life in the government's Turkish housing colony makes clear, ostensibly humanitarian exercises in post-colonial governmentality that might appear to have used disaster to advance social engineering tend to be used by local elites for their own purposes. Ambiguous at best, the granting of a home in a manner that simultaneously denies its occupants *access* to employment opportunities can be seen as domination through control over resources: households were offered ownership in a manner carefully calculated and policed to limit the bundle of powers that might otherwise accrue to them as propertied urban dwellers (Ribot and Peluso 2003).

None of this should blind us to the ways in which Muzaffargarh's downtrodden rural protagonists seize opportunities of their own when disaster strikes. In the weeks and months after the disaster, they asserted themselves noisily, banging on the doors of municipal administrations in cities turned »inside out« by their presence. When »nature« strikes, they – the rural poor – are worst affected, an injustice they comprehend; they have no qualms demanding various entitlements to resources and spaces, and do so with vigour when the outside world is observing. So called »flood victims« – a term now firmly embedded in the public discourse in Pakistan – are a potentially unruly presence in smaller cities following disasters.

They have also altered the geography of Muzaffargarh through migration. If this was initially forced, strategic re-location to contexts such as Karimabad followed; claims were thus staked on the city and its resources by the displaced. The resultant condition of urban marginality is not a state of permanent damnation. Despite the socio-spatial relationship of domination it reflects, it is also indicative of the fact that the peasantry is

doggedly changing its circumstances through diversification of economic activities.

Such slow, quiet forms of migratory agency have gone largely unnoticed since the 2010 floods. Critical theory has tended to describe rural-urban migrants to cities in references to the Third World unemployed using pessimistic and morbid terms – »surplus humanity«, »refuse« and »rats« condemned to survive in death worlds (Mbembe 2003). Whatever truth in such portraits of their suffering, their rebelliousness points to insistence on rights to the dignities they are denied within the current political framework of post-colonial governance in Pakistan. Initiated by moments of disaster that will become increasingly frequent in the Anthropocene, such assertions of entitlement are likely to force their way into the national and international political foreground as climate change intensifies. If Pakistan's experience of the 2010 floods is any indication, the struggle of the rural masses for a right to the (small) city will count among the most important of the 21st millennium.

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