

Pakistan.

The site chosen is Tehsil¹ Fateh Jang, Attock District, northern Punjab, Pakistan. Pakistan has retained many of the administrative boundaries inherited from previous regimes; while the boundary lines for the northernmost Punjabi District, Attock, have shifted in places and the District has been situated within both the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa) and Punjab, it is largely recognizable as the British District known as Campbellpur. It is perhaps not best described as a politically important District for the grand politics of Pakistan or South Asia, but it has seen waves of important armies and migrants for thousands of years.²

Attock District is in the Potohari dialect speaking part of Punjab. The linguistic variation across Punjab is testament to the fragmentation of this diverse province. In the sub district of Attock District in which the data for this chapter were produced, Fateh Jang, the linguistic variation can be considerable even between villages within 10 kilometres of one another. This reflects the historical level of competition that has existed in ensuring subsistence. The sub District has very little reliable surface water and the villages surrounding the one that was the base for this research have no year round surface water available. In the past, this has restricted agriculture to only two principle crops: wheat and maize. Farmers have relied on animal husbandry and the precarious annual harvests to maintain basic livelihoods. As a buffer region between the areas controlled more directly by the British Raj (followed by the Pakistan state) and the so called tribal areas loosely regulated through tenuous agreements, Attock District has never been the target of large scale infrastructural investment that might have offered local people viable commercial or manufacturing alternatives to subsistence farming.

Fateh Jang remains a majority rural sub District. The absence of diverse economic opportunities has resulted in particularly strong patron-client networks in the past. While this has changed somewhat in the past decade, reliance on an economic elite for access to the few existing wage opportunities remains high. Coupled with an absence of naturally occurring reliable surface water, the economic precarity creates an environment in which competition between farmers, and especially landowners, can be intense. There are few circumstances in which the rewards for cooperation are compelling enough to persuade individual farmers to willingly cede control over their resources for collective enterprises. Landowners even seek to “poach” good peasant farm workers from others.

The challenges of delivering adequate irrigation for the range of crops that local farmers have invested in are considerable. Farmers are visibly preoccupied with rainfall throughout much of the year, but particularly at the critical moments in the agricultural cycle in which crops require irrigation or, conversely, need to dry out prior to harvesting.

¹ Tehsil refers to the Pakistani sub-district administrative units. These have little authority and few resources, but they serve as important venues for managing local disputes and to a lesser extent as a source of geographical social identity in their regions.

² See Lyon 2004 for a concise history of the region from the stories of Alexander the Great’s (Sikandar-i-Azam) famous peaceful stay in nearby Taxila to the greatness of the Buddhist Gandharan civilization to the more recent waves of successive Central Asian invaders and occupation by Ranjit Singh’s Sikh armies.

The erratic nature of rainfall, by apparent consensus said to be worse now than in the past, leaves local people vulnerable to serious economic hardship unless they have the resources to invest in costly groundwater pumping irrigation.