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Ruinous Records: The Horizon of E-governance in Urban Pakistan

Lahore is an ancient city. Lahore is a megacity. Though I can think of nothing more

cliché to say about an Asian city than describing it as a "land of contrasts," I do find the tension

between Lahore's history and present to be a productive one to think with when it comes to the

city's land records. In this essay, I consider a state-led, World Bank-inspired effort to digitize

Lahore's land revenue system. During ethnographic fieldwork conducted in what is generally

called "old city" Lahore, I had the chance to speak with local *patwaris* (land revenue officials),

real estate brokers, and residents. What I learned was that despite tens of millions of dollars,

years of effort, and an assortment of global experts, land in the old city had stubbornly refused its

invitation to the twenty-first century, instead clinging to Lahore's tumultuous, convoluted, and

still very present past. Why has the state's project failed? How does the ancient city continue to

haunt the megacity? What might all of this have to do with the particular qualities of land itself?

Central to digitization efforts in the old city is the desire to replace *patwaris* with a

rational, orderly, and technical system. *Patwaris* were originally introduced to the broader

Punjab region during the pre-colonial Mughal state, in which they served as village accountants

for the purposes of revenue collection on agricultural land. As land in South Asia transitioned

from state to privately owned property under British rule, *patwaris* were accorded a more central

place in land revenue administration. Aiming to establish a greater degree of hierarchy and

efficiency, British officials tasked *patwaris* with recording the ownership, location,

measurement, and sale of land, a role that also extended to urban settings. Since independence,

however, *patwaris* have acquired a reputation for corruption in Pakistan. Increasingly, they are

framed by state officials as an outdated artifact of British rule, petty tyrants who use their

colonial-era authority to extract bribes in exchange for services. For more than a decade, a

campaign has been underway in Punjab to replace *patwaris* with a digital database capable of

removing the human element from the land revenue system.

Throughout the different institutions and projects that digitization has entailed, the

discourse of financial empowerment has been a common thread. From the view of key

stakeholders, replacing *patwaris* with a digital database would remove a longstanding barrier to

economic mobility. The idea of a land records database was first introduced in rural Punjab by

the World Bank, who claimed that "the low mobility of land markets contributed to preserving

the highly unequal distribution of land and, therefore, opportunities to improve people's

livelihoods." When the Government of Punjab decided to expand digitization to Lahore, officials

aimed to improve access to urban land and housing markets, a change they believed would boost

economic activity throughout the broader region. In each of these narratives, the welfare of

Punjab's rural and urban poor rests on their ability to buy and sell land, the improvement of

which can only be achieved through the digitization of land records.

However, in Lahore, e-governance is a far cry from the purifying force that it claims to

be. Though land records have been scanned and made accessible to the public at computerized

service hubs, *patwaris* remain central to the city's land revenue system. Unable to fill the gaps

between documents and local knowledge, the database relies on the expertise of *patwaris* to

complete land transactions. As objects that hold together entangled histories and longstanding

social networks, plots of land defy comprehension by digital interfaces alone. Shifting analysis

away from paper, bureaucrats, and databases and toward land itself, this essay shows that

governing the old city remains a social and material practice.

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What is an Old City?

Lahore's origin story remains an unsettled one. Oral traditions trace the city to its founding by Prince Lava, the son of Hindu deity Rama and Rama's consort, Sita. Some historians date Lahore to its first appearance in archival records between the first and second centuries, while others view Lahore's history as beginning once the city began to gain political importance under the Caliphate in the mid-seventh century. In either case, most scholars agree that Lahore's formative years occurred during the height of Mughal rule, at which time the city was designated as the capital of the sprawling South Asian empire. Indeed, it was toward the end of the sixteenth century under Mughal emperor Akbar that Lahore's famed walls and 13 extravagant gates were originally constructed, forming a boundary between the city and its agricultural surroundings.

During the time of the Mughals, Lahore proper was considered to be the extensive network of *bazaars*, *havelis*, and *mohallas* that existed within the city walls. Beyond the walls, however, long *bazaars* and thickly populated *mohallas* developed and gradually extended the city's perimeter. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Lahore's physical expansion continued under colonial rule. The city's boundary wall and gates were destroyed by the British following the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Finding themselves unable to penetrate the density of the inner-city, colonial town planners opted instead to construct administrative, commercial, and residential centers in Lahore's outlying areas, further drawing the city toward its periphery.

Following Pakistani independence in 1947, the trend of horizontal growth has only intensified. Urban planning powers have been transferred to the Lahore Development Authority (LDA), an outgrowth of the colonial-era Lahore Improvement Trust. Reflective of a broader national commitment to modernist urban planning, the LDA has prioritized the development of

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low-density, master planned residential settlements in the city's peri-urban areas. In step with

postcolonial cities elsewhere that have viewed development as synonymous with modernism, the

LDA frames traditional forms of socio-spatial organization as belonging Lahore's "backward"

past, which the organization seeks to overcome through a rigid commitment to modern planning

principles.Since independence, the LDA has enacted a series of bylaws restricting new

construction largely to housing schemes, or residential communities beholden to specific

regulations with respect to plot size, building height, street width, and a number of other areas.

Over 300 such schemes had been established by the time Lahore's population surpassed 11

million in 2017, and the city's built area has expanded by nearly 20 percent within the past two

decades alone. Today, the area once known as Lahore proper and the center of the Mughal

Empire has come to be called simply the "old city."

Land Records, Digitization, and the World Bank

Old city Lahore is home to many of the booming metropolis's working-class residents. In

contrast to the housing schemes ballooning the city's ever-expanding perimeter, the old city is

characterized by substandard construction materials, narrow and crumbling roads, and decaying

infrastructure. One particularly important way the distinction between the old city and the rest of

Lahore has borne out is the management of land records. While newer settlements produce clean

titles overseen by the LDA or individual developers, the old city remains tethered to the land

revenue system established by the Mughals, specifically the *patwar* system. As land revenue

officials, *patwaris* are responsible for documenting land ownership in a given area. In order for

land to be bought and sold, *patwaris* have to issue sellers a *fard*, or an official land record copy

reflecting the rights of ownership of land. Much of a *patwari's* labor consists of establishing

property rights for a given plot of land, which includes poring over centuries-old documents,

tracing kinship lineages, and consulting with family, friends, and neighbors. In the old city,

patwaris are equally known for their unparalleled local knowledge and their very human

susceptibility to error, corruption, and bribes.

It was the double-edged reputation of *patwaris* that led the World Bank to launch the

Land Records Management and Information Systems (LRMIS) project in 2007. LRMIS was a

10-year, $115 million effort to digitize rural land records across Pakistan's Punjab province.

While land records in rural Punjab primarily pertain to agricultural plots, like old city Lahore

they are controlled by *patwaris*. LRMIS discourse reflected economist Hernando de Soto's

description of land in the Global South as "dead capital" whose awakening depended upon the

establishment of modern property rights, and thus the aim was to bring reason, transparency and

order to a system considered opaque and, ultimately, subjective. At the heart of LRMIS was the

belief that empowerment in rural Punjab hinged upon making land liquid, or an asset that could

be quickly bought and sold. For the World Bank, whatever historical, social, or spiritual

relationships to land that existed were worse than unimportant—they were hinderances. Land

was an asset to be leveraged for future profit. Rural Punjabis were natural born stockbrokers who

simply hadn't yet been given access to the market.

The LRMIS project focused first and foremost on the elimination of *patwaris*. For World

Bank officials, *patwaris* played a traditional, but ultimately obstructive human role. World Bank

reports are openly hostile toward *patwaris*, describing them as "predatory middlemen" and, most

damningly, accusing them of "reducing the liquidity of family assets composed mostly or wholly

of land." In the eyes of the World Bank, liquidity would naturally follow from the replacement of

the *patwari* with a digital system, as the value of long-held but inaccessible local assets would

finally be unlocked.

Under the decade-long LRMIS project, 10 million pages of records were scanned and 144

computerized service hubs called Arazi Record Centers were opened throughout Punjab. The

World Bank hails LRMIS as a resounding success. Its website champions the project as an

example to developing countries in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and

in 2017 the organization held an international conference in Bangkok, Thailand where

government officials and development experts gathered to learn from the LRMIS model.

And yet, the World Bank clarifies that it was unable to completely eliminate the role of

patwaris. As one article explains:

> The software and the IT system, however, were unable to resolve the land records
> conundrum on their own unless a sustained and a clear social strategy to include and
> promote the participation of the ancestral Patwari system within the new and
> sophisticated computerized system was set in place. The incentives to foster the
> involvement and participation of the Patwaris to clean and update the records was and
> remains crucial. They continue to play a key role within the overall governance of the
> land records system, but in a regularized form with checks and balances. (Gonzalez 2016)

In this stunning admission, World Bank officials reveal that even with the establish of a new

digital database, patwaris continue to play a fundamental role in the land revenue process. In

other words, the institution's sweeping efforts to modernize Punjab's land records system

remained dependent upon the very source of local knowledge that they were intended to replace.

New Technologies, Old Habits

Though the World Bank project concluded at the end of 2016, the Government of Punjab

formed the Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA) the following year with the intention of

extending the digitization process to old city Lahore. Similar to LRMIS, digitization in the old

city was inseparable from liquidity. A central figure in LRMIS, chairman of the Punjab

Information and Technology Board Umar Saif linked the digitization of urban land to the

modernization of Pakistan's economy. Comparing Pakistan's housing market to that of the

United States, Saif argued that: "The American economy moves by basically changing half a

percent of the mortgage rate, up or down, since land being the basic asset is liquid. You can do

business on it, you can borrow against it, you can lease a car, you can mortgage your house and

so forth. However, in Pakistan, the basic land asset is illiquid." However, also like LRMIS, the

process of implementing PLRA was not as straight-forward as it seemed. Through conversations

with *patwaris* in the old city, I learned more about the so-called "land records conundrum" that

plagued digitization efforts in Punjab.

As with LRMIS, under PLRA land documents in the old city had been scanned and made

available at newly built Arazi Record Centers. However, the system was encumbered by the

countless number of discrepancies that exist in *patwari* records. To be sure, *patwaris* are

meticulous record keepers. *Patwari* offices are nothing if not well-organized, their walls lined

with shelves displaying neatly arranged record books that often date to the eighteenth century.

Moreover, contrary to the World Bank's description of *patwaris* as rogue bureaucrats peddling a

private collection of land records, the *patwar* system functions through a rigorous network of

checks and balances. *Patwaris* are only the inner-most sphere of a multi-tiered bureaucratic

structure. *Patwaris* are supervised by *qanoongos*, which report to *tehsildars*, who themselves

bridge cities with district and provincial levels of governance. In the instance of property

transfer, *patwari* records are checked against the district land registry and the transaction must be

approved by the *qanoongo*. According to *patwaris*, the multiple layers of bureaucratic oversight

characteristic of the *patwar* system make individual manipulation of records difficult if not

impossible.

Nevertheless, history has not been kind to land records in the old city. First, though the

patwari profession is an age-old one, landownership has changed dramatically from the Mughal

through the colonial and postcolonial eras. Under British rule, rights in land transformed from a

share in the agricultural produce of state-owned land to individual ownership of landed plots.

Proprietorship brought land into the realm of inheritance law, which itself has changed according

to customary, colonial, and religious interpretations. Thus, establishing the rightful ownership of

land involves not just studying kinship lineages and documents but also contextualizing them

within Lahore's intricate legal landscape. Second, the old city was particularly impacted by

Pakistan's partition from India, which witnessed the displacement of 13 million people across the

subcontinent. As a major city located just beyond the newly created border, Lahore alone

received approximately one million refugees, nearly doubling the city's population. Many

refugees were resettled in abandoned homes in the old city on the basis of property previously

owned in India. In order to receive a land title, however, refugees had to authenticate their stated

assets, which a significant number failed to do. Even so, these properties continued to be

inherited, subdivided, and sold over multiple generations, processes that remained undocumented

in *patwari* records. When residents seek to legally transfer such properties, it can be an arduous

task for *patwaris*, requiring days or even weeks of research.

In this context, the idea that *patwaris* could be replaced by a computer sounds all but

absurd. Indeed, *patwaris* in the old city understood perfectly well why they still had jobs. In

order to transition to a digital database, PLRA had to establish a blank slate for land records in

the old city, or what the organization referred to as "zero zero." Achieving zero zero meant

scanning only the most recent records and not the archives of earlier ownership and transfer,

much less the other sources *patwaris* typically rely on such as kinship charts, field maps, and

logs of previous errors. When Arazi Record Centers emerged in and around the area, it quickly

became apparent that the database was critically flawed. Residents seeking a digital copy of their

fard were not recognized by the system and told to go to the *patwari* to verify their ownership

rights. For their part, *patwaris* continued to do the work that they have always done, sifting

through records and cross-checking information with other residents. I asked one *patwari* why

PLRA could not simply scan the remaining documents and fill the gaps in the records

themselves. He replied:

> Brother! This system won't work until a *patwari* sits with the computer. I have been here
> doing this work for 25 years. The revenue system is full of complexities and even we still
> have to get help from our seniors. How will these new people do this work? It's very
> difficult. It's all practical work. And those kids who have a degree in computer science
> and work there, in my opinion, they won't be able to figure it out. They won't be able to
> understand the problems. They don't have the experience.

As a result of their initial failure to establish zero zero, PLRA has ordered *patwaris* to

resolve all existing discrepancies in the current records, a process that they insist can be

completed within months but that *patwaris* claim will take a minimum of four to five years.

Meanwhile, *patwaris* continue to play a fundamental role in the old city's land revenue system

with the new digital database almost entirely dependent upon their labor. For now at least, land

in the old city appears to be as tethered as ever to the manual work of bureaucracy. In

considering the social and material qualities of land itself, perhaps this should come as no

surprise. As objects that are both immovable and imbued with an immense amount of cultural

value, intergenerational plots of land in the area are deeply imbricated with local knowledge.

That is to say, land in old city Lahore is both physically and socially embedded in relations that

exceed digital representation.

Toward an Ethnography of E-governance

Though digitization was intended to increase the liquidity of land, at present the process appears to have had the opposite effect. Rather than replacing *patwaris*, digitization has added yet another layer to the already tortuous process of buying and selling land in old city Lahore. When I asked a local real estate broker what had changed since the transition to the digital database, he responded that whereas previously he only had to pay a bribe to the *patwari*, now he has to also pay one to the *computer wallah* (computer guy). The broker's comment was consistent with broader complaints about Arazi Record Centers. A number of newspaper editorials have criticized the PLRA for long lines, rampant bribery, and the continued involvement of *patwaris*. Similarly, on the World Bank's own blog post celebrating LRMIS, one commenter writes: "This is to notify you that the new system is again under the shadow of bribery in all aspects. From hiring to service delivery. You can judge for yourself while visiting the service centers."

Many blame the failure of PLRA and LRMIS on their surrender to colonial-era bureaucracy. In this view, the *patwari* system is simply too deeply entrenched and influential to ever be replaced. Criticizing the Government of Punjab's efforts, one journalist insists that "the patwaris and bosses are so powerful that they have practically defeated the PLRA system." But there is another explanation for why the state has been unable to remove lower-level bureaucrats who, after all, are government employees. *Patwaris* have managed land records in old city Lahore for more than a century. Though documents are crucial to *patwari* praxis, their knowledge cannot be reduced to paper. This has less to do with *patwaris* than the nature of land in the old city. Old city Lahore is composed of plots of land that are crisscrossed by Pakistan's tumultuous past. Meanwhile, the same parcels hold together relations between family members,

neighbors, and residents and the state. A *patwari's* job consists not only of recording land sales

but also mediating their historical and cultural vicissitudes. The failure to produce an orderly

technical system for land records lies not so much with government corruption but rather

digitization's inability to capture the social and material qualities of land. In an era where

neoliberal discourses of transparency are ubiquitous, the horizon of e-governance has been

exposed.

With digital solutions becoming a normative policy prescription for governments in the

Global South, anthropologists have observed that e-governance and its promise of purity

increasingly forms the boundary of political action. Nevertheless, projects such as LRMIS and

PLRA cast doubt on the all-powerful reach of digital bureaucratic infrastructures. Not attending

to such slippages risks reproducing digitization's narrative of itself as the wedge between a

formal computational world and the informality of everyday life. If old city Lahore reveals

nothing else, it is that digital space is flush with extra-digital relations. The fate of digitization in

the old city resonates with scholarship at the intersection of computer science and social science

that has long problematized the idea of autonomous databases, including Brian Cantwell Smith's

claim that digitality is a thoroughly human achievement and Paul Dourish's important

observation that the materialities of databases themselves constrain, enable, limit, and shape

digital representations. What these authors make clear is that digital interfaces reconfigure rather

than expunge social and material worlds. In any study of e-governance, therefore, it is necessary

to approach digitization less like a clean slate and more like a bureaucratic palimpsest. Moving

forward, the task for anthropologists should not be one of identifying the practices that

digitization is replacing, but rather following what becomes of states, citizens, and records when

such projects inevitably fail.