

:Asim Rafiqui, a social anthropologist and PhD candidate at the Delft University of Technology, was invited by CPPG to speak on “Reflections on Gwadar: Troubled Fieldwork” on October 26, 2023.



Rafiqui began by delving into the intrinsic importance of fieldwork and the transformative impact it holds in shaping policies. He pointed out the need to experience a place firsthand to be able to bring forward meaningful policy changes, as a researcher needs to go beyond the limited lens of formed theories and methodologies. Sharing his own experience, he contended that his research work was based in the vibrant landscape near Mula Band, Durya, and Mohalaband in Gwadar, where the *mahigeer* (fisherfolks) community resides. In this close-knit community, there is mutual familiarity and a profound sense of interconnectedness based a geographical backdrop of “invisible mapping.” This intricate mapping, unseen at first glance, hints at layers of societal connections and dynamics that operate beneath the surface.

He further elaborated the importance of the ethnography of law, arguing that it was important to see how laws circulated down to the grassroots level as this exploration helped in understanding the experience of people regarding the application of laws. Talking about the politics of visibility, Rafiqui questioned whether showcasing certain aspects of a community enhances its power and accountability. He questioned the assumption that there was a relationship between visibility and the political empowerment of historically marginalized communities. He remarked that visibility is a trap which is evident in the ways electronic and social media data has been used to

recreate crimes through forensic investigations. Rather than politically empowering communities, visibility inadvertently feeds into building state-controlled narratives as the state is much more informed about the happenings, and can manage and circulate different types of narratives. For example, states use narratives of human rights to control social media. He thus argued that if one intends to carry out research, immersion in the field is critical to underscore real-life happenings and stories.

Discussing the next step of choosing a research topic, Rafiqui argued that he had found an overwhelming amount of research on Gwadar pertaining to infrastructure, development, poverty, marginalization, geopolitics, and resources but not a single study on the *mahigeer* community. Usually, port cities are studied through the lens of over-determined themes involving infrastructure and logistics, referred to as the creation of an “idealized research subject”. However, this idealization of research soon broke for him when he encountered the reality surrounding the *mahigeer* community, communicating a story unidentified by these formulated and over-determined themes. Therefore, it is important to move from generalized perceptions and focus on listening to a story rather than starting out from an already conceived story.

Further drawing attention to the oxymoronic relationship between researcher expectations before fieldwork and what actually happens when one undergoes field experience, he shared multifaceted challenges including logistics, deadlines, data collection and community reluctance to share information, particularly emphasizing the community’s intense refusal at various levels. He initially felt a sense of rejection from the *mahigeer* community on his selection of themes, frameworks, and questionnaires, highlighted by the existence of strange silences in their mutual interactions. Neither his questions were comprehensible for them nor their answers for him. These epistemic confusions seemed to create an unbridgeable disconnect between him and the community. Amidst such rejection, Rafiqui was able to find his silver lining when he started adopting alternative methods such as writing blogs and essays to capture nuanced details. Moreover, it gradually became clear to him that using

drifters and galvanometers, devices used for studying ocean currents and waves, was not considered effective by the community. The community instead relied on studying weather patterns through reading stars and ocean waves. It became apparent to him that the community's resistance took a distinct form in his lack of comprehending their environment and conditions on their terms. This involved a lesson for him that the world does not bend for the researcher but rather the researcher has to bend him/herself to understand things at a deeper level.

As Rafiqui moved with a more nuanced understanding, he was able to gather support from his students in Gwadar, to whom he had taught photography. As his students ventured through the streets of the neighborhood for their own projects, he was able to tag along and gain information by listening to their conversations, obtaining valuable knowledge and insights about the community. With the help of his students whom he regarded as 'the gift', he was able to understand the stories of the *mahigeer* community which revealed its sense of identity not as individuals but rather through the community's relationship with land, sea, fish or even djinns.

Elaborating on the construction of knowledge, he used Heidegger's point of view in *The Age of the World Picture*, stating that, "this objectifying is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing, that aims to bring each particular being before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain of that being". Rafiqui argued that there was a large gap between what we considered as knowledge and what constituted knowledge for the indigenous people. For his particular case, he highlighted the need for including semiotics (study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation) as there was a disparity between the post Enlightenment modern scientific knowledge with its pre-existing forms centered on modeling that confine knowledge to the certainty of representation. Here, representation not only serves as a model of the real but reinforces the belief in its undeniable reality, thus becoming a mechanism of control by fostering domination over the comprehension of nature and humanity.

These epistemological (theory of knowledge) questions helped Rafiqui to eventually surrender preconceived frameworks when engaging with the *mahigeer* community. Through his research, he was able to understand that there is never a single form of literacy but rather there are multiple literacies indicating that no one form of knowledge is superior to another. Hence, researchers need to move beyond the "I" and willingly become the "instructed third". This transformative process involves leaving preconceived notions and engaging with others on a common ground. Thus, rather than necessitating data and surveys, it is instead an openness for new experiences, and a willingness to travel and be transformed.