

AIBS Fellowship Activities Summary

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From February through May 2017, I was honored to be the recipient of a Junior Research Fellowship from the AIBS. The research conducted during the spring of 2017 is part of my dissertation research on urban flooding and climate change adaptation in Dhaka city. Dhaka is situated in a highly dynamic and flood prone river delta landscape and has a long history of struggling to reconcile the demands of urban expansion with the need to defend against the periodic high water that is inherent to its geographic setting. Recent proposals have sought to address the problems of previous heavy-handed, flood control embankment projects. In this research, I place contemporary climate adaptation and urban flooding infrastructure proposals in the context of Dhaka's previous efforts to address these problems.

The support of the AIBS fellowship has been absolutely essential to the success of my research thus far, allowing me to access people and archives with critical information necessary to reconstruct this important story. While my dissertation research includes analysis of colonial and pre-colonial flood control and drainage efforts, the primary focus is the evolution of infrastructure and planning from the mid-20th century height of so-called "gray infrastructure" (e.g., embankments and pumps) to today's proposals for "green and blue infrastructure," with their promises of greater flexibility and resilience to climate change related threats.

To understand the evolutions in the politics of urban flood control in Dhaka requires synthesizing information from a wide range of sources. The research brings together analysis of historical and contemporary planning and design documents; interviews with planners, designers, advocates, experts, and decision makers involved in flood infrastructure planning; and field observation and interviews in infrastructure impacted areas. The AIBS Fellowship enabled me to build upon my previous fieldwork in Dhaka by collecting documents and interview data in Kolkata, the Netherlands, and the UK.

While I am still in the midst of analyzing the interview and archival data that I gathered during the fellowship period, the value of the research support is already quite clear. Key insights from the fellowship-supported research in archives in Kolkata, the Netherlands, and London, include several illuminating documents that shed new light on the history of water management in Dhaka and Bangladesh more widely. New insights from the archives include evidence of protracted struggles by municipal officials to control Dhaka's riverfront embankments. These documents highlight the role of the embankments as central venues of spatial struggle among multiple interests and constituencies including those focused on water management, aesthetics and civic space, the survival of the city's poor, and the demands of riverfront commerce. Other archival documents outline correspondence detailing controversies related to the construction and management of embankments in the Bengal delta under the colonial regime. Documents from the mid 19th century suggest that highly ranked colonial engineers held critical views of flood control embankments, anticipating the criticisms that have gained strength over the last 30 years. In addition to new insights gleaned from archival research, interviews with dozens of Netherlands-based planners, designers, and water management specialists, also yielded valuable insights related to flood infrastructure planning projects in Dhaka and the broader delta region.

Though I am still in the midst of analyzing the data gathered during my fellowship, it is quite clear already that the support of the AIBS has been vital to the success of my research and my dissertation.