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Price

Maira Hayat

I eye his, Amjad Sahib's, five farm dogs warily. This is a strange conversation. It proceeds in ten minute bursts of hurried questioning followed by a few minutes of negotiating with — coaxing and threatening — the dogs.

"I was asking if you would say the monsoon rains have become more uncertain — have there been changes in rainfall patterns?"

Amjad Sahib, "Obviously, rain is the work of nature. It rains when it wants to." [uncertain laughter, both his and mine]

"Of course... yes it has always varied in timing and intensity as you say, but in terms of trends? I mean longer term *rujhanat* (patterns)... would you say, for instance, instead of heavy rains beginning in August, they now begin in June?"

Amjad Sahib, "Maybe. Sometimes early, sometimes late. Sometimes there's no rain, sometimes lots of rain. It's the potato prices that worry me. They keep me up at night!"

I then try several iterations of climate change translated into Urdu: *mawsami taghayur* (weather changes), *mawsamyati tab-deeli* (*tabdeeli* means change), *mawsami taghayuraat* (*taghayur* means change)."

We both start laughing. Amjad Sahib, "I haven't used such difficult Urdu since I was a school child!"

Amjad Sahib goes back to potatoes. He narrates a poem about potatoes and their fickleness. The poem goes like this:

aloo awlya, lag javay tte awlya
na laggey tte hojavey maliakholia

Translation: if the potato crop takes off then it makes you a king (*awlya* is saintly), but if it fails it will drive you mad (some of the meanings *maliakholia* denotes: a mental disease; the Punjabi version of the English melancholia; schizophrenia, hysteria; a depressive state).

Amjad Sahib invoked a double sense of crop failure: blight, but also low prices. This turn to price presents several possibilities, and I pursue one here: that price fills in for a blockage in translation. It is to understand the inflection of the new, the oncoming, and the unfamiliar by what exists, and is easier to recognize and hence negotiate that I have proposed prices. Price can bring the rumbling of a problem closer to differently located peoples' lived realities — in other words, prices can translate climate change into something louder and closer. Anthropogenic climate change is the cumulative effect of human acts — big and small, everyday and sporadic, new and old. When we talk about the Anthropocene, we have already jumped scale. Price is a more immediate way to understand how the Anthropocene is being produced — furthered as well as reversed (Mazzarella 2004). To track the contours of the Anthropocene, then, we could track prices. Price will contour, and is contouring the Anthropocene. Consider, for instance, the cultivation of water-intensive rice in a “water-stressed” country such as Pakistan. Concerns and interests of farmers, mill owners, wholesalers, exporters, and environmentalists (to take just one set of concerned actors) are not likely to become intelligible to each other. One way to try to reconfigure this situation, however, is to work with prices — raising the *abianna* (irrigation water charges levied by the government) can make it less profitable to grow rice. Price can provoke an adjustment in peoples' projects and decisions.

A focus on price can alert us to our evaluations that are producing the Anthropocene — it is not some juggernaut coming toward us but the effect of countless evaluations. And so prices alert us to our responsibility, albeit in varying degrees, as government, business, consumer, small or big farmer, industrialist, et cetera. We can hold capitalism responsible, or the more affluent societies — as we should, for certainly the climate crisis is not of everyone's (equal) making. But prices can go further and provide an ethnographic handle, and enable fine-grained analyses tracking exactly how, through what mechanisms, policy decisions, political calculations — as manifested in price composites — contemporary systems of production, circulation, and consumption are held in place and will unravel (Guyer 2009).

Climate change is about the phreatophytes that can no longer live because groundwater levels in the Indus basin are dipping, as the hydrologist at a seminar on the climate change challenge in Lahore said, and about the changing patterns and intensities of rainfall, but it will be made real, *inter alia*, through prices. Climate change is as much about bureaucracy, political economy, time constraints, and calculi of donor organizations, and elected governments that know they face re-election every three to four years and want to harness climate change funds to begin projects with fanfare before (re)election time (see Guyer 2007). Ethnography can show how it will articulate with existing compulsions, parochialisms, and framings; and will be lived through familiar mediations of class, power, climatic zone, and geographical location for instance. Will these mediations be smooth? Likely not, just as translations in conditions of inequality tend not to be (see Asad 1988). While the worsening of the climate crisis is usually, and rightly, portrayed in dystopian terms, the Anthropocene will also throw connections at us. Prices can become the basis for new connections, say between “enemy countries” agreeing to trade in certain commodities. In a rather discordant contemporary world where many don't seem interested in talking to, let alone translating, the other, price can be one of the sites where connection becomes possible. This could direct anthropological focus toward not just the erasures and elisions

but also the possibilities and promises of price. In other words, price in the Anthropocene can be a proxy for consensus, lack of consensus, conserving resources, profit making — which will it be? Ethnography can tell.

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