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WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 44, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2016, pp. 95-110 (Article)

Published by The Feminist Press

DOI: 10.1353/wsqr.2016.0015



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## Who Is Chandni bibi?: Survival as Embodiment in Disaster Disrupted Northern Pakistan

Omer Aijazi

In our academic contemplations, we mistakenly take for granted the qualities that make us human.<sup>1</sup> These include the very ability to form meaningful relationships, negotiate care, and experience a moral life despite adversity (Finnström 2008; Kleinman 2006). We are, however, inclined to describe the human experience in adversity far more precisely, clinically, and intellectually, allowing our scientific impulses to separate, categorize, and label. This includes the modalities of testimony, evidence, and reparation, which establish trauma as a valid moral category pushing for the political and cultural recognition of its victims and survivors (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). While it is somewhat useful to set apart our protagonists in calculated ways—to highlight the extraordinariness of their lived experiences—we may be unknowingly contributing to their dehumanization as somebody entirely else (McGown 2003; Swartz 2006). These faulty new personas we create are at risk of being noncomplex, quite ready for co-option by problematic machineries of humanitarianism, development, and social policy (Kleinman et al. 1996; Malkki 1996).

Admittedly we have come full circle, first by investing thought in establishing the very vocabularies of victim and survivor (Agamben 1998; Bouris 2007) and then allowing their absorption back into everyday sensibilities, fearing that we may have overlooked the ordinariness of the spaces where much of the work of survival is enacted (Baines and Gauvin 2014; Das 2007). Curiously, as academics we are engaged in an inherently fraught intellectual project that disembowels and defragments humans and then painstakingly pieces them back together.

To elaborate these concerns, I explore the life of Chandni bibi,<sup>2</sup> a resi-

dent of the remote Siran Valley in Northern Pakistan, and her navigation of the 2005 Kashmir and Northern Areas Earthquake. The earthquake killed 73,000, severely injured over 128,304, and affected some 5.1 million people throughout the Himalayan region.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the claims of her family and community that she had struggled with her vision since childhood, Chandni bibi insists that the earthquake made her completely blind. She describes this experience as a “taking away of light, brightness and illumination.” In order to complicate the victim/survivor binary routinely presented in academic, humanitarian, and other interventionist discourses on disaster survivors, I juxtapose the seemingly mundane details of Chandni bibi’s daily life with the calm, incremental, accretive violence of natural disasters (Nixon 2011). In this way, I reveal the “ordinariness” of survival—which is rarely achieved through some grand transcendent gesture (Das 2007). Rather, Chandni bibi’s story is an achingly human one, mired in quotidian details. By revealing how she understands her encounter with the earthquake, I provide an alternative to interpreting her experiences in purely clinical and reductive terms.

This paper is based on a series of interviews and ethnographic research conducted with Chandni bibi at her home in Siran Valley.<sup>4</sup> Siran is one of Northern Pakistan’s several forgotten valleys, hidden among the cracks and crevices of the lesser known Himalayan region. It rarely appears on any map and is rather unceremoniously absorbed into the boundaries of the larger Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Siran is dispersed into numerous sparsely populated, smaller villages. Modest houses with mud and corrugated iron sheet roofs dot its mountainscapes.<sup>5</sup> To an outsider these houses appear out of place, but they are rather strategically placed based on local understandings of acceptable topography, flat enough to construct a homestead. The terrain is rugged and homes are connected via narrow, makeshift mountain pathways. Residents overcome this apparent lack of connectivity with considerable ease, and do not let the trivialities of topography interfere with everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

Admittedly, I arrive in the valley with at least some disciplinary baggage, troubled by an unresolved past as a humanitarian worker in similar spaces (Aijazi 2014). I am here to understand social repair and remaking after natural disasters (Aijazi 2015). I have identified Chandni bibi using conventional markers of vulnerability such as “disability,” “extreme poverty,” and “old age,” arbitrary categories commonly used to demarcate and sift through target populations after humanitarian emergencies. Coincidentally, Chandni bibi is also considered “highly vulnerable” by



**FIG. 1.** Pictured on the immediate right, Chandni bibi's home in Siran Valley. Photographs are included after obtaining her consent.

her community because she is blind, single, and “beyond marriageable age.” She also lived through the earthquake. After obtaining permission from her and from her family, I enter their home. She is not entirely comfortable with my presence. I ask her name. She hesitates. “My name is Chandni, the earthquake extinguished the light of my eyes” (Chandni bibi, unpublished data).

### **Who Is Chandni bibi?**

Quiet laughter and an introspective silence—which should not be mistaken for a failure in communication—steadily punctuate our interviews. Chandni bibi’s quietness can be understood as a deliberate reflection on the astonishment and incredulity of being interviewed and the peculiar insistence of our questions.

### **Centrality of Home**

Home is a necessary constant for Chandni bibi (fig. 1). It reflects the materiality of a familiar space and actively structures her social relations and ev-

eryday life. Home and its implied constancy allow Chandni bibi to remain anchored in the very same house and village where she was born.

Once managed by her parents, Chandni bibi's younger brother now heads the household, which includes his wife and their children. Chandni bibi explains: "We have been living here since the beginning with our parents; we have no other place to call home." Their home is at a distance from other members of their caste and extended family:

We are the only ones here. Our relatives used to live close to us before the earthquake but moved away after it. Now they rarely come to visit us. When they do visit us, we enjoy their company. They tell us about their lives and we share with them some of our stories. I have not been to their house in over two years. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

The limited degree to which Chandni bibi and her household are embedded in their caste and extended family signals the fragile nature of their village social networks. It also highlights the extent of the disruption that followed the 2005 earthquake, which in addition to causing material destruction and loss of life, also reorganized social relationships. This is a particularly important consequence for Chandni bibi, who due to her visual impairment is unable to visit her now dispersed social relations. Chandni bibi's home, however, continues to serve as a nucleus for her relatives and also for other village women operating outside the micropolitics of caste configurations: "There are no places as such in the village which are easily accessible by women [without intense public scrutiny] or where I can go. The women and girls come here to our house and sit with us" (Chandni bibi, unpublished data).

### Relationships of Care

Chandni bibi's attachment to her home is partially cemented by memories of her parents. Her mother died when she was very young and Chandni bibi only offers a limited conscious recollection of her *ammi* (mother):

I was very young, I wasn't very old [when my mother died]. I could not even walk; I could not get from one point to the other [pointing at two opposite corners of the room]. Maybe I could have walked just a little bit. When *ammi* died, I was perhaps three years old [gesturing with her hand how tall she must have been]. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

Chandni bibi describes the transitions in the household with the loss of her parents: “My mother used to look after me, then she died. After her death, *abbu* [my father] took care of me. When he also died, *bhai* [my brother] took over the responsibility of looking after me. *Abbu* died of old age.” Chandni bibi describes her relationships via the functionality of care, defining both her parents and brother in terms of their responsibilities in looking after her. She does not explicitly elaborate on any emotional attachments with her parents, but her love for them is apparent throughout our interviews: “After the death of my parents, my life became very constricted.” Chandni bibi also speaks about her brother and his wife in a similar fashion:

After *abbu*’s death, *bhai* took care of me. I live with him, I have no place else to go, he is my only brother. Who else will take care of me, if not him? He feeds me and buys me clothes. During the day, he works on daily wages [as an unskilled laborer], and in the night he comes home with tea and sugar; this is how he does it. When I need something such as clothes, shoes etc., I ask him. He then gets them for me. I was very happy when he got married. I was glad that now a *bhabhi* [sister-in-law] would enter the family who will also look after me. *Abbu* arranged for his marriage and found him a bride; *ammi* was already dead. *Bhai* takes care of me; otherwise, I will just die. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

Chandni bibi is very concerned about her self-preservation. This is accentuated by fears of her visual impairment, being unmarried, the death of her parents, and the isolation of living far from any other relatives. From her life experiences and perhaps from the general nature of a patriarchal society, Chandni bibi has internalized that she must always be taken care of. She has calibrated her relationships, including with her sister-in-law, in similar approximations.

Chandni bibi uses the collective of the family to speak about her self. Her notion of family is inextricably tied to home both as a place of uninterrupted residence and also as a space of familial continuity. When initially asked who lives in the house, she replied: “Myself, *bhai*, *ammi*, and *abbu*.” Throughout our interviews, Chandni bibi often speaks in plural pronouns, referring to the collective of the family (*ammi*, *abbu*, and *bhai*), which forms an important component of her identity.

Unfortunately, after the earthquake familial ties beyond the immediate household did not translate into any form of assistance or comfort, further reinforcing Chandni bibi’s reliance on her brother. She shared with us her

disappointment: “The Rabb [Allah, the Sustainer of life] is a witness! My brother is the only one who looks after me, no *chacha* [father’s brother] or *mamoo* [mother’s brother], not even the neighbors, nobody” (Chandni bibi, unpublished data).

### Everyday Life

Chandni bibi’s daily life closely revolves around her home. She spends her time reading *namaz* (Islamic prayers offered five times a day), warming herself by the fireplace (which doubles as a stove), and resting on the *char-poy* (traditional bed). She explains, “This is my routine; it is not much. This is how my life passes. I also pick up the children. I can’t really do any real work, just remain sitting all day long.” She expands on her relationship with her brother’s children, “Their mother leaves them at home so I look after them. I like them. They don’t bother me as such, they are sometimes naughty, but my time passes. I guess there is little pleasure in my life.”

Chandni bibi looks after her brother’s children and is therefore a care-giver as well as a care receiver. This awards her a place of responsibility within the household, allowing her to partake tangibly in homemaking. Chandni bibi, therefore, occupies a relational position of accountability, necessary for remaining embedded within the household.

Being quite aware of her limited mobility, Chandni bibi shares some spaces accessible to her outside the house: “I sit here [pointing toward a tree], I come outside and sit under this tree to enjoy the sunshine and think, to comfort my heart” (fig. 2).

Occasionally, Chandni bibi also visits her sister-in-law’s mother. These visits placate her heart, she explains:

There is no other place that I can get to. Sometimes my heart feels constricted [I feel unsettled]. To feel better and more grounded I go to her house. She is my *chachi* [my father’s sister in addition to being my sister-in-law’s mother]. She is a good person. I don’t give or take anything from her. We just sit together and talk, then I come back home. Visiting her makes my heart feels better. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

Chandni bibi inhabits the surrounding geography as best as she can. She frequents spaces outside of her home, even though they may be in the immediate vicinity. She also invests in relationships—such as with her aunt and her brother’s children—as a means of keeping herself grounded and



**FIG. 2.** Chandni bibi's space for deep contemplation.

anchored within the familiarity and continuity of the family unit. Since she is unable to visit other relatives, Chandni bibi places great importance on being able to visit her *chachi*. These visits provide her with the possibility of forming meaningful connections with others at her own volition. More importantly, Chandni bibi is deeply invested in the project of taking care of her heart. This involves praying, forming meaningful and codependent relationships, and finding spaces near or around her home where she can be outdoors and engage in reflective contemplation.

### **Revelations of Snow and Rain**

Winters are a complex phenomenon for the residents of Siran Valley, including Chandni bibi. The challenging season reveals important insights into her life, such as her spirituality, complex relationships with her brother and home, and the material and existential experiences of the extreme season. According to Chandni bibi, winters are the most difficult time of the year. Winters restrict her mobility, already constrained by her visual impairment and the difficult topography, cementing Chandni bibi to her home in a rather ambivalent relationship:



When there is heavy rain and snow, life becomes very difficult. Other people can get out of their homes and move around while I remain stuck in this room. I feel very unsettled but I keep my heart strong and do *sabar*. The sunshine feels good, in the winters. It is not that I can go places in any case, but when it rains my heart sinks. I feel worried. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

*Sabar* is Arabic for patience, and is the Islamic spiritual practice of remaining steadfast and not relinquishing hope in the face of adversity. It is the working of the heart and spirit (as opposed to the body and mind). Islamic traditions repeatedly instruct believers to practice *sabar*, and narrate numerous stories of overwhelming oppression and structural constraints through which prophets and pious people emerged stronger by remaining steadfast in their beliefs, both political and spiritual. Chandni bibi describes her life during winters as a concrete embodiment of *sabar*.<sup>7</sup> Chandni bibi contends that the cold interferes with both her vision and mobility:

My eyes don't open in the winters, even right now I have difficulties keeping my eyes open. In the summers when it is warm, one can at least step outside; go here and there. But in winters my eyes remain sealed shut, even right now my head hurts. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

Chandni bibi quickly grounds herself back into the concreteness of her experiences indicating that the winter months pose a combination of material and existential threats: "If during winters one wears warm clothes and warm socks then one can get by and it is not so bad, but if these all are not available then how can one survive the winters?"

Even though Chandni bibi is grateful to her brother for providing her with the basic necessities of life, including allowing her to stay in his home and remain established within the family unit, the tensions that punctuate their relationship are also evident. When asked why she never sought treatment for her blindness, from either a medical doctor or traditional/spiritual healer, Chandni bibi responded:

Ever since my eyes lost their light, I have not sought any treatment. Well, *ammi* and *abbu* have died, so who is there to ask otherwise? My brother is good to me, but he also has his own children, which he must take care of. He brings his wage home, feeds himself and also feeds me as well as his children. Perhaps there is a cure for my blindness, but I do not have the means [to afford it]. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

## The Earthquake

The 2005 earthquake was an event of unprecedented magnitude, rupturing common beliefs about the physical and social worlds. Survivors were forced to confront displacement and large numbers of deaths; loss of property, livestock, and food reserves; and the destruction of livelihoods and agricultural lands. In addition, the earthquake ruptured confidence in the permanence and stability of the physical and social worlds and the protections they previously guaranteed. Chandni bibi recalls her memory of the earthquake:

We were sitting outside in the courtyard, sifting through the corn, when the mountains started to quiver. We ran down to the banks of the Siran River. We spent the next few days there by the river under the stars. We did not go back home because we were scared the roof might collapse on us in our sleep. The possibility of the mountains collapsing terrified me. What if there is a rockslide? What if the house fell? Several village houses had completely crumbled, there was dust everywhere and it turned very dark, I was very scared. Our animals died, the fodder we had collected for winters, the boxes where we store corn, our fields, our home, they were all crushed by the mountains. I don't know why the earthquake occurred, only Allah knows. It is part of His workings. I don't know of these mysteries. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

## A Changed Life

Chandni bibi insists that when she was a little girl she could see rather clearly and would play in the village just like other children: "I could make out everything, every little detail." She describes her routine before the disaster:

I used to enjoy sweeping the floors and making *roti* [flat bread]. I could easily get around, no problem! I would get meals ready for the family, remove any rocks in the field brought down by the landslide, even plough the ground getting it ready in time for planting season. I would wake up in the morning, make chai, sweep the floors, make *roti*, get the meals ready. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

The earthquake had profound consequences for Chandni bibi, as she holds the event responsible for the loss of her vision. She contends, "Yes! My eyesight escaped during the earthquake. Now I can barely keep my

eyes open. The earthquake forced the light out of my eyes. What can be more jarring than that?" Chandni bibi elaborates:

When a person closes their eyes, what is left? Absolutely nothing, just darkness, this is how my life has changed. My eyes are my biggest affliction. I am unable to feel happiness anymore. When the day of *Eid* comes [Islamic day of celebration] I feel upset, I cannot freely go out into the world and even attend a wedding. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

### Survival as Embodiment

For Chandni bibi, the most significant consequence of the earthquake was the complete loss of her vision. Other community members were fairly certain that Chandni bibi had difficulties with her vision since childhood. Her family also suggested this was the case, though they acknowledged that her vision became significantly worse after the earthquake. Throughout our conversations, however, Chandni bibi insists that the earthquake is responsible for her blindness. She delineates in detail how the earthquake and its resulting damage to her eyesight impacted her ability to contribute to the household—essential for maintaining her place in the home.

Instead of ascertaining the actual causes of Chandni bibi's blindness or validating the factual nature of her claims, I focus on her insistence that her blindness was a direct consequence of the earthquake. Paul Connerton has long argued that societies and individuals remember in multiple ways, including through the incorporation of social memory into the human body (1989). In her blindness, Chandni bibi embodies the social experience of the earthquake, where "bodily memory, biography, and social history merged" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994, 714). Drawing on Kleinman and Kleinman, it is possible to read Chandni bibi's experience of constantly carrying the burden of the earthquake with her as a way of ensuring that the event is not disremembered and therefore rendered insignificant. I understand Chandni bibi's engagement with this active process of remembering as a way of manifesting the social and personal experience of the earthquake in the loss of her vision. While other earthquake survivors may have tried to forget the disaster to facilitate a return to a life of normalcy, I argue that Chandni bibi carries the memory of the event with her at all times.

Another important way Chandni bibi navigates the uncertainties of the future and embodies her survival is through her spirituality and investment in taking care of her heart:

I like to offer my *namaz* [prayers], I read them with the full attention of my heart, I feel peace. I do not enjoy any act more than praying. I pray that Allah keeps us all in safety and under His protection. I pray that my eyes regain their vision and light. I do not ask for anything else. I am hopeful about my eyes, that my vision comes back, the light returns to my eyes. Then my life will pass smoothly. I just hope Allah gives me this much, because He is actually the only one who can give me such a gift. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

Chandni bibi hopes to regain her eyesight, so she can live life on her own terms and participate in the important task of homemaking. Through her spirituality, practices of prayer, and *sabar* she is able to maintain hopes and desires for the future, and invest in the act of living in ways that matter deeply (Kleinman 1999). Her efforts toward taking care of her heart are in line with her aspirations for the future. She elaborates:

[If I regain my vision] I will continue to live with my brother. I am longing to immerse myself in the surrounding environment, to go visit my relatives, but without any light in my eyes I cannot do any of these. I just wish Allah can return my vision. This is my heart's desire. If I can get my eyes back, that will be gold for me. (Chandni bibi, unpublished data)

## Closure

Chandni bibi is deeply spiritual and identifies as a devout Muslim woman. It is important that we don't separate her practice and embodiment of Islam from her unique cultural, social, and political context. Rather, by emphasizing her spirituality and commitment to Islam, I have attempted to demonstrate how Chandni bibi reinhabits daily life, providing us with important insights on the mundane vocation of survival.<sup>8</sup>

Speculating on Chandni bibi's loss of vision, a staff member of the World Food Programme remarked that perhaps she is deficient in some essential micronutrient, insisting on a purely physiological reason for her blindness, which may be rectified by a targeted micronutrient interven-

tion. On the other hand, those in the medical establishment insist that her blindness is most likely a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and suggest that she requires an immediate psychological assessment. This may be true, however, I am interested in presenting Chandni bibi's complex engagement with the 2005 earthquake without imposing any predefined parameters, which could limit our interpretations of her experiences. Instead of focusing on the event (the disaster) as a state of exception external to her immediate reality and lifeworld, I have focused on how the earthquake and its lingering effects continue to unfold in Chandni bibi's daily life, and more importantly, how she navigates these enduring consequences as rooted within her own vulnerabilities. In reading Chandni bibi's experiences of the earthquake against the nuanced features of her daily life (home, family, spirituality, navigation of the harsh winters), it becomes possible to conclude that she embodies the social and personal experience of the earthquake in her blindness. Carrying the burden of the experience of the earthquake in this way ensures that the event will never be forgotten and rendered insignificant. For Chandni bibi, continuation of life and survivability are not dependent on the erasure and reappropriation of her past experiences, but rather on embracing these experiences. I maintain that Chandni bibi's loss of vision is an important, necessary, and valid way for her to process the spectacular experience of the earthquake and the stabilities of the physical and social worlds it challenged.

Chandni bibi's insistence that the earthquake was responsible for the loss of her vision indicates that disasters are lived, experienced, and embodied in multiple ways. She challenges the very category of the static *disaster survivor*, a socially constructed identity dependent on limiting "human experiences of disruption to sterile, laboratory states" and disallowing "disrupted bodies from articulating their experiences in other expressions, styles and embodiments" (Aijazi 2015, 22). Interestingly, Chandni bibi's somatic response to the earthquake is reflective of similar claims made by other disaster survivors in the valley. Several survivors reported that since the earthquake, they have had difficulty recalling immediate tasks and recent conversations, indicating a rupture in short-term memory. Others complained of a marked increase in body pains, aches, and stomach ulcers. At least one other long-term resident of the valley whom I interviewed reported a rapid decline in his vision. Like Chandni bibi, he attributes his visual impairment to the 2005 earthquake.

What does such an enrichment of the disaster subject offer us? For

one, it decenters the mental health, human rights, and other emancipatory interventionist agendas—which heavily rely on the active oversimplification of the disaster subject in order to demonstrate a seamless fit between identifiable survivor needs and planned assistance. If social scientists and humanitarian practitioners assess human actions and experiences in an exclusively clinical way, they risk being denied an understanding of the many less obvious and/or idiosyncratic ways survivors react to and cope with disruption.

What can the interventionist machinery *really* offer Chandni bibi? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to locate Chandni bibi within the broader context of humanitarian assistance and disaster recovery, which constitute the principal international and national response to the catastrophe. Siran received considerable attention in the aftermath of the earthquake. As one NGO manager reported, “Donors were throwing money left, center, and right. They would come to our office and beg us to take on projects” (Anees Ahmad, unpublished data). Chandni bibi is a beneficiary. During displacement, her household received food rations and financial compensation for rebuilding their home.<sup>9</sup> Chandni bibi’s household was often selected for assistance by humanitarian agencies, since her compounded vulnerabilities, especially her blindness, made her the quintessential “helpless victim.” While the humanitarian machinery closed their file on Siran just two years after the earthquake—wrongfully signaling recovery (or the drying up of international funds)—I show that Chandni bibi continues to struggle through the lingering consequences of the earthquake. There has been no recovery for her: “My eyes didn’t have light after the earthquake, they still don’t [nothing has changed]” (Chandni bibi, unpublished data).

### Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the assistance of my research staff: Ambreen Khan, Mubashir Nawaz Khan, and our skillful driver Aurangzaib. I acknowledge Haashar Association, a grass-roots organization working in Pakistan’s extreme North, for hosting my research. Financial support for this work was received from the USAID-funded Competitive Grants Program—a joint initiative of the Planning Commission of Pakistan and the Pakistan Strategy Support Program; International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI); the International

Development Research Center (IDRC); the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); and the Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia. This research was given ethics review approval by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

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## Notes

1. I use the pronoun “we” to reflect my complicity with the academic establishment despite Pepper’s (2006) warnings of the deception of a false consensus.
2. “Bibi” is used to address women in Pakistan and is typically paired with a given name. In addition to implying respect, “bibi” also structures social interactions between opposite genders by predefining these exchanges as strictly nonsexual and distant, denying any forms of possible intimacy.
3. Natural disasters are frequent in Northern Pakistan. In 2010, monsoon floods ravaged the region again, affecting some twenty million people across the country. A large flood also devastated Siran in 1992, details of which are poorly documented. These are in addition to frequently recurring, smaller events including seasonal landslides, snowstorms, flash floods, and glacier melts.
4. Fieldwork was conducted during November and December 2014. A total of three sets of interviews were conducted with Chandni bibi. Each set lasted from sixty to one hundred twenty minutes. In accordance with local expectations of gender segregation, a female research assistant conducted these interviews in the local Hindko language. Each successive interview was based on the responses received in the previous round. I meticulously reviewed each round of interviews and depending on participant responses, drafted follow-up questions and sought clarification on previous responses where required. This allowed a feedback loop between the primary researcher (myself) and the research subject. Chandni bibi’s sister-in-law and brother were also occasionally consulted. Interviews were supplemented with elaborate ethnographic methods including participant observations and walks conducted with Chandni bibi by the primary researcher as well as the female research assistant. All research transactions took place in Chandni bibi’s home. In addition, for at least two months, I was embedded within Chandni

bibi's village in Siran, and conducted similar interviews with other residents, village elders, and humanitarian aid workers. Chandni bibi's name has been changed to protect her identity.

5. These iron sheets are remnants of the intense humanitarian action that took place in the wake of the 2005 earthquake. While this temporarily brought Siran into the national and international spotlight, the valley quickly faded into the background as a result of an equally rapid humanitarian withdrawal.
6. It is important to understand that the geography of the region intimately shapes everyday life and structures notions of community and belonging, setting residents apart from mainland Pakistan. In the absence of any central spaces, which could serve as a focal point for locals, familial units organized into immediate and extended households form the standard parameters of one's social world and relationships. Complex caste and tribal relations further exacerbate this sense of fragmentation.
7. It should be noted that the 2005 earthquake also occurred at the onset of the winter season.
8. I explore in more detail Islam and agentival capacity after natural disasters in another paper. See Aijazi and Panjwani 2015.
9. The money was spent on legal proceedings challenging the local landlords, who, being the legal owners of her family's land, demanded that the reconstruction money should be given to them. Due to a shortage of funds, Chandni bibi's house never reached completion, and unlike some of her neighbors, the roof of her home is still made of mud instead of iron sheets.

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