

Murder of a Metropolis

Smell, foul and pungent, greeted us on arrival at the airport. Stagnant rainwater, uncollected garbage and disgorging open manholes had turned the city into the world's largest sewerage network.

Outside the passenger terminal, we ran by chance into Mr. Hasan Jafri whose unfailing smile had obviously survived Karachi's atmospheric disaster. He offered us a ride which we gratefully accepted. "Oh, that, he exclaimed nonchalantly when I mentioned the pervasive smell, "one gets used to it. He mentioned other real' problems: "People are getting electrocuted on the road; four died last week..." He cited Karachi's electrocution statistics for the previous five years, and we speculated on the possibility of suing its municipal government for multiple manslaughters.

He was right about the smell. By next day, I was used to it. But the 'problems', all man-made remained. Following a rain shower earlier in the afternoon the city's culvertless roads were flooded, knee-deep in some sections where water had collected from the previous week's rain. Cars stalled, hitting potholes, manholes and piles of rubbish. It took more than one hour by car to travel less than two miles from Zainab Market to the Marriott Hotel. Remarkably, people remained calm, generally helpful to each other; some managed even to smile back at us. A relative had an explanation for the pervasive stoicism. "Life, he said, "is normally difficult here. The rains have merely accentuated the difficulties."

This was an understatement. The same relative, a young architect, recounted how he has not been able to deliver a set of designs to a foreign group. "They were ready but we could not print them out. We have waited, five hours at a time, for the power line. It goes out sometimes before a sheet is printed. We have averaged six to eight hours a sheet." "But you told them about the power failures? I queried with, concern. "Why should they care," he snapped. "They are interested in the product they have contracted for, not my problems in producing it." His wife, a designer, says that in the last three weeks not more than three days worth of work has been done in her workshop. The printers who live in Landhi have missed work often because transportation is not available; also some of them live in kachcha homes which have collapsed; then there are the power failures. "We may be better off, she speculates, "if we do away with modern things like electricity, buses, telephones. We depend on them but our government does not know how to organise these things.

I reflect on their situation after they leave. They are talented, dynamic, and hard-working young professionals, just the kind a country relies on for fast growth. They came to Karachi from Lahore. Karachi is the magnet of educated and energetic Pakistanis. More than fifty per cent of the subscribers of English language dailies live there. But there, as in the rest of the country, they waste away. Their frustrations are palpable. Some leave the country and succeed elsewhere. Others become cynical, lose integrity, and join the unproductive race for fast bucks.

In the cafeteria of Marriott Hotel, an American business executive talked of his failed mission. He works for an international conglomerate and was here to explore investment opportunities in Pakistan. "Our chairman met some Pakistani high-ups. They convinced him that this was the place to invest in. So 'Aa came down." Well, how is it? "Some fast talkers they must be, he said of the Pakistan's official salesmen. "'Aa will sink dough into the Gulf of Mexico before 'Aa invest good money over here." Like most American businessmen, this gentleman was down-to-earth in his reasoning. Sardar Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari would do well to hear him out before going off again on the hunt for another Asian Tiger.

"The elements are here; material (he represents a garment conglomerate), labour, enough skill for us to train people, and the wharf. We can bring in the machinery okay, and the designs, and train the supervisors. But this place is gonna be on vacation all the

time. One hundred and twenty-nine days of government holidays! Add to that the mandatory leave every employer got to give each year. That's two weeks minimum. Then some sick time off. Then the phones don't work too good, and there is the law and order problem. The day I arrived, armed cops were all over, guns mounted on their vehicles, checking everybody. Not me. When I came back from Islamabad, Karachi was completely messed up. It just couldn't take a bit of rain. "But you could set up elsewhere in the country; up north," I ventured. "Sure enough, he said, "But if you ain't got the port you ain't got the country. No sir, not in a businessman's book."

Listening to these and other conversations for five dismal days in Karachi I have been reminded of a childhood story about the proverbial fool who, from an excess of short-sighted avarice, killed the hen that laid the golden eggs. Karachi is Pakistan's only metropolis, commercial capital, and gateway to the world. With a contribution of around 40% of Pakistan's total revenue, it is the country's largest taxpayer. The direct taxes contributed 36.8 billion rupees to overall federal tax revenues for 1992-93. Karachi's share of this contribution was Rs. 31 billion. More than 50% of Pakistan's university graduates are resident in Karachi. The literacy rate for men in this city is the highest in Pakistan - at around 65%. It boasts of the largest urban female work-force, and the largest concentration of skilled labour - male and female. Half a million workers migrate to Karachi each year from all over Pakistan. Its population grows exponentially each year - five to seven per cent - while the infrastructure develops at less than half the pace in good years and not at all in bad ones.

This engine of economic and social advancement in Pakistan is being destroyed by systematic depredation and wilful mismanagement. It would take a volume to describe the ways in which this city is being ravaged by city politicians, provincial waderas, national leaders, bureaucrats, even the army leaders. The national and provincial governments invest in it barely a fraction of what Karachi pays them in taxes. A visitor is struck by the anomalies of government and politics in Karachi. Here I mention but one: as a rule, power is not broadly distributed in Pakistan; the provincial and federal governments here are centralised. Yet, Karachi is an irrationally decentralised city, a hodgepodge of overlapping administrative authorities of which the Karachi Municipal Corporation is but one - and moribund - part.

This decentralisation seems to me not accidental. It is easier to manipulate and rob a fragmented city. As Ardeshir Cowasjee has been documenting in this space, politicians and bureaucrats speculate in the city's land, and pillage it in other inconceivable ways; for pecuniary gains they exacerbate its ethnic tensions, and sap its will and capacity for renewal and change. There are viable social and philanthropic organisations in Karachi more than anywhere else in this country. But their efforts are overwhelmed by the excess of corruption and neglect.

You can see that all over this dynamic, vibrant city, Karachi is refusing to die. Yet its will to live seems to be marked by a tragic insouciance. It gave birth to Pakistan's first non-feudal party which could have represented urban interests in an archaic political environment. Instead, it emerged a sectarian formation of neo-fascist style and the cult of personality as its ideology. It is home to modern industrialists who know how to make money, evade taxes, and defend their vested interests as they did recently - with strikes, lock-outs et al. They are capitalists in all respects except one: they care not to defend their city and build a metropolis.

The intelligentsia here narrates without end stories of frustrations and violence, kidnappings, briberies, and extortions. Without question marks, narratives normalise an abnormal place. Karachi is a microcosm, just a little ahead of the country.

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