

The Changing Sociology of Karachi: Causes, Trends and Repercussions

By
Arif Hasan

(Final draft, 27 June 2011)

Pre-partition Karachi's culture was that of a cosmopolitan colonial port. Like all such cities, its population was a mix of many migrant ethnicities, living in their exclusive neighbourhoods, and a local proletariat. More often than not, ethnicity also determined the profession of the ethnic group. For example, the majority of the Gujrati speaking population, both Hindu and Muslim, was engaged in business and trade. The Goans, by and large, were teachers, office staff, and some of them European style entertainers. Most big businesses were run by Parsis and they were active in civic life. Foreigners worked in overseas companies that managed port related imports and exports. The Baloch population was the city's proletariat and lived in Lyari.

Like all port cities, Karachi had its bars and cabarets and places for entertainment for sailors of visiting ships. In addition, it had a thriving red light area which was visited both by the working and merchant classes. The Europeanised ethnicities arranged May-balls and dance parties in their gymkhanas, clubs and commercial hotels. Their women wore dresses and skirts in public and private life. Most bars and billiard rooms and their associated eating places were multiclass, although some in Saddar were exclusively for the elite. Religious ceremonies of the Hindus, Muslims and Christians also provided avenues for mixing and sharing.

All these communities had a strong urban culture and it dominated the culture of Karachi's rural areas and coastal villages. Landlords of the interior of Sindh enjoyed its fruits. As long as governance rested effectively with the colonial power, there were no ethnic or religious conflicts. However, the rise of nationalist movements and the weakening of colonial power in the 1920s and 30s, saw the beginnings of concerns about the future among the weaker ethnicities and groups.

After the creation of Pakistan, this cosmopolitan Karachi culture continued to flourish. The city received poets, artists, journalists, writers, painters and performers from all over India. They became a part of Karachi's culture and enriched it. This process of enrichment was supported by the Mohajir intelligencia, which had strong left wing roots, and the civil service which governed Karachi and belonged to an old and well-established colonial tradition. As a result, by 1978, Karachi's Saddar alone had 17 bars and billiard rooms, four music and dance schools, 18 bookshops, two clubs for sailors, five discotheques, 34 popular eating places, (four with Goan music bands), and the city as a whole had 119 cinemas and numerous cabarets, of which, six also had strip tease shows.¹ In addition, regular film festivals of films from different countries were arranged at local cinemas. The working classes also participated in them at the regular cinema rates which were affordable to them. Students' debates, variety programmes, meeting of professional bodies and political gatherings were held in the Saddar halls and institutional buildings and Karachi's student community participated in all these activities in a big way. Women worked as waitresses, hostesses, chamber maids and performers in the institutions mentioned above. Behind

¹. For details see Arif Hasan; *Understanding Karachi*; City Press Karachi, 2000

Radio Pakistan on Bunder Road, there was *fankar gali*, where musical instruments were made, repaired and turned. It was frequented by would be radio and stage artists and many of Pakistan's famous cinema stars and singers were picked up from here by producers and directors.² Wandering musicians and singers performed in parks and were often picked up by the rich Karachiites and home to perform for them or for their guests.

Nostalgia generally results in exaggeration and is unkind in the understanding of the processes of change. Therefore, it is important to sympathetically understand the changes that have taken place in the city's social environment, for without such an understanding the creation of a tolerant city culture for the future (let alone a liberal one), is simply not possible. In most of pre-partition Pakistan (especially in the rural areas), there was no physical, social and economic mobility. The feudal system had complete control over the personal and property law of the peasantry and dominated the cities and towns of the country as well. So, Karachi survived as an island, and so did Lahore but to a much lesser extent. The changes in the rural and urban areas of the country, first as a result of large scale migration from India, and then due to the introduction of green revolution technologies, changed rural subsistence economies to cash. This weakened the clan based governance systems and made socio-economic and physical mobility of the rural areas and smaller town populations possible. As a result, migration from the rural and other urban areas to Karachi started to take place to meet the demands for skilled and unskilled labour required for Karachi's phenomenal growth and development. In the process Karachi ceased to be an island.

Meanwhile, with industrialisation and the development of a services sector in trade and commerce, a Mohajir middle class, whose interests were actively promoted by the religious right, evolved. The absence of democracy in the 60s' deprived the city of a process of consensus building and as a result the left-right, centre-province, Urdu-Sindhi divide, increased. For the first time, during the movement against Ayub Khan in 1968, alcohol outlets, bars and music halls were attacked. These attacks were not serious. However, during the conflict between the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) in 1977, the attacks were so serious that Karachi's night life, bars and billiard rooms had to close down. The city was paralysed, and to appease the PNA, the Bhutto government declared Friday in place of Sunday as the weekly holiday, banned alcohol, closed down the discotheques, cabarets, and Karachi's thriving race course. As a result, Karachi changed overnight. The people working in these establishments became destitute and Karachi's multiclass entertainment and recreational spaces became deserted. Their premises over time have become wholesale markets, marriage halls and, more recently, shopping plazas.³

It is more than possible that if the democratic process had continued, then through a process of negotiation and pragmatic give and take, a new culture, the synthesis between the cultures of the two political opponents, could have evolved. Discussions between the operators of the banned entertainment facilities, political opponents of the Bhutto regime, and the Karachi establishment, were already taking place.⁴ However, Zia ul Haq's military coup of July 1977, made such compromises impossible.

Here, it is important to look at how the policies of the Zia government, aided by the Afghan War and backed by the West, have shaped the Karachi of today. Soon after coming to power, the Zia government began the process of consolidating the hold of the religious establishment on the Pakistan State and society. The majority of his cabinet was composed of members of the religious parties who had led the anti-*fahashi* (vulgarity) and *ayashi* (corruption) movement against the Bhutto government. These parties were organised at the

2. Muhammad Ali, the famous hero of Pakistani films of the 60s and 70s began his career here.

3. Arif Hasan; *Understanding Karachi*; City Press Karachi, 2000

4. Based on the author's conversations with employees at the banned outfits in July 1978

grass root level in many Karachi neighbourhoods and backed by important mosques and *madrassahs* in the city.

To “Islamise” society and introduce piety, *zohar* prayers were made compulsory in government institutions and space was provided for them. This was also adopted by many non-government and private organisations so as to seek favour with the government in power, and also to satisfy the demands of their newly empowered “religious” members. In addition, *zakat* and *ushr* were made compulsory. This was resisted by the Shia community in whose *fiqh zakat* is voluntary. A major Shia-Sunni disagreement took place over this issue and finally it was decided that the Shia community would not pay compulsory *zakat*. Through the *Zohar* prayers and *zakat* enactment, Pakistanis working together came to recognise each other as Shia, Sunni, Ahmedi, Christian or Hindu. This set in motion a process of discrimination and fragmentation. The Haddood Ordinance was also enacted and blasphemy laws were modified. In both cases, major loopholes were left due to which these laws have become weapons for the persecution of women and minorities.

However, the most serious repercussions of the policies of the Zia government were related to education. Extra curricula activities in public sector high schools, colleges and universities were banned and so were the student’s unions that had produced Pakistan’s most radical and democratic leadership, outstanding journalists, literary figures and sportsmen and women. As a result, music, drama, film and political and cultural events vanished completely from Karachi’s educational institutions. Debates were permitted but their subjects had to be approved by the areas’ deputy commissioner and later of the institutions administration. Overtime the subjects of the debates became increasingly related to Islamic history and theology rather than current social and political issues. The private sector institutions (except some for elite ones), under pressure from the government and its supporters, also discontinued all extra curricula activities.

School and college curriculums were revised. At the high school level, the teaching of international history and geography were discontinued. Pakistan Studies and Islamiyat courses were restructured and considered sufficient for an understanding of global issues. The restructuring also distorted the events leading to the creation of Pakistan and its subsequent history. An evaluation of the curriculum of these subjects, along with that of Urdu and English, identifies that it was insensitive to the religious diversity of Pakistan, that it incited the students to militancy and violence and encouraged bigotry and discrimination towards fellow citizens (especially women and religious minorities) and towards other nations. It also glorified war and the use of force.⁵ This curriculum is still in force. Meanwhile, *madrassah* education was encouraged and their degrees were made equivalent to normal university degrees. As such, *madrassah* graduates could be (and were) recruited as functionaries in state institutions.

Budgets for cultural activity and related institutions were drastically curtailed and important institutions like the PIA Arts Academy, NEFDEC and Lok Versa simply became paper organisations. State patronage to the *urs* of *Sufi* saints and folk heroes (in vogue since pre-British time) was withdrawn and banning music at these festivals was unsuccessfully attempted. Under the new media policy, classical music and dance was banned on radio and television and folk music was discouraged.⁶ Minimum distances between men and women on the screen were specified and the covering of the head was made compulsory for women compares and news-casters. However, debates and quiz programmes on television and

5. A.H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim; *The Subtle Subversion*: SDPI, Islamabad, 2004

6. The case of Suleman Shah: He was a famous folk singer who performed with ghonghroos tied to his wrists. During Zia’s period, he was asked to remove his ghonghroos as it was not considered appropriate for a male to wear them. He was miserable because of this and told the author “I have to bear this humiliation simply to feed my demanding stomach.

radio were permitted but the subjects had to confirm to the government's "Islamic" agenda. Meanwhile, a long list of prominent writers and thinkers was drawn up and their appearance on television and radio, along with the poetry and songs of progressive poets and musicians, was also banned.

At the neighbourhood level, a system of *Nazim-e-Salaat* was introduced. The *nazim* was an individual appointed by the local mosque. He roamed the neighbourhood at dawn informing people through a microphone, that it was time for prayer and that they should come to the mosque. People who did not come were contacted politely in the evening and requested to attend prayers. Again, as a result, the *fiqh* of different households was identified and the distances between neighbours of different religious systems, increased.

Political parties in the Zia era could not hand out patronage since politics of the era was all about the "restoration of democracy". State institutions, as is obvious from the discussion above, had come under the influence of the religious establishment. Consequently, in the absence of politics, people turned to their ethnic and clan relationships for patronage. Since power lay with the religious establishment, the clan and ethnic organisations had to seek its support. This strengthened the religious establishment further.

Due to the enactments of the Zia era, the religious establishment became the custodian of public morality. Lower and lower middle income neighbourhoods and on the city's public space and institutions, they were able to impose their will. Schools of music and dance, which were common before the Zia era, closed down except for notable exceptions, such as the Tehrik-i-Niswan. Theatre performances vanished or could only be held for the elite and upper middle classes in the cultural centres of foreign missions such as the Goethe Institute and Pak American Cultural Centre. The new culture created enormous problems for working women (since working was discouraged by the neighbourhood mosques), and they disappeared as waitresses, chamber maids in hotels and as entertainers. The *hijab*, something voluntary before in Karachi, became universal in the lower and lower middle income settlements of the city and among Goan and Parsi women, the skirt and dress gave way to the *shalwar-qameez*.

The Karachi red-light area came under attack and its performers relocated to posh neighbourhoods to serve the elite. The film industry packed up, unable to survive the new censor code and the suffocating social atmosphere. However, a great deal of freedom was permitted to cheap and vulgar films in the regional languages so as to keep the "masses happy".⁷ With the near death of the film industry, Karachi's 119 cinemas were reduced by 1989, to 22.

Pakistan's elite and upper middle classes are "westernised" but because of their enmity to Bhutto's "socialist" populism and their lack of ethics, they supported the Zia government. However, they could not approve of the changes that were taking place in the institutions where their children studied. Consequently, they stopped sending their children to public sector universities and colleges as a result of which these institutions ceased to be multi-class. They also stopped participating in public life and visiting museums, zoos and multi-class public spaces. They created their own world separate from the rest of Karachi and depoliticised themselves. The removal of the elite from the public sphere resulted in a decline in standards of education and in the maintenance and growth of public sector real estate and recreational facilities. In the process Karachi was deprived of the possibility of acquiring an aware and interested elite, which is an enormous asset for an expanding and developing metropolis.

7. Comment made by Zia Sarhady (a famous South-Asia film maker) in a conversation with the author and attributed to a member of the Film Censor Board

The Zia era coincided with the period of urban consolidation for many cities, similar in many ways to Karachi, in South and South-East Asia. These cities during the period of the Zia era developed effective state institutions that have been able to cater to the needs of a young population (living increasingly in a cosmopolitan world) as an alternative to the system of patronage by clan and religion based groups. They have been able to support the evolution of new social values and freedoms for their societies that were in the process of freeing themselves from feudal influences and retrogressive traditions. Karachi too in 1977 was in a similar position. However, due to Zia's religious populism, this did not happen in Karachi. New institutions were not created but the old ones were destroyed. Emerging social values were suppressed and monolithic and retrogressive norms were imposed on the city destroying its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, leading to its fragmentation and to suspicion and conflict between its different religious and ethnic groups. These trends were, and still are, promoted by the politics and culture of the Afghan War and its close association with the religious right in Pakistan.

By the end of the Zia era, Karachi, like the rest of Pakistan, was a cultural desert with an anti-women state culture supported, implicitly or explicitly, by the pro-status quo anti-change sections of society, irrespective of their class affiliations. The governments following Zia, and society at large, remained hostage to state culture and its support institutions that he had created. However, the pressures of city life, new global technologies, international migration, cable television, and above all, the related social upward mobility and aspirations of the lower middle classes have transformed Karachi society and created a conflict between its aspirations and the values promoted by the Zia era. It is important to pause here and take a look at the changes that have taken place, or are in the process of doing so.

The most important statistics in a population census are related to the social indicators of the age group of between 15 and 24. This is because this age group represents both the present and the future, and the invariable conflict that takes place between the two.

In the 1981 Karachi Census, 37.54 percent of women and 13.14 percent of men in this age group were married and 66.7 percent men and 62.32 percent women in this age group were literate.⁸ If we project the trends established between 1981 and the 1998 Census, then less than 20 percent women and 6 percent men in this age group are married today. In addition, literacy in this age group is over 84 percent, with women having a slight edge over men, not only in literacy but also in educational attainment trends.⁹ So, for the first time in Karachi's history, this age group, that is both Karachi's present and future, consists of an overwhelming majority of unmarried and literate adolescents and young people. Any sociologist knows that this in itself is enough to change family structures and gender relations. Statistics, observation and research, based on lower and lower middle income groups, who constitute 82 percent of Karachi households, give us some indication of this change and the reasons for it.

According to the Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020 Survey, 89 percent of families in Karachi are nuclear.¹⁰ In the 1989 Survey the figure was 54 percent. In the interviews with the older generation there is general agreement that the break-up of the extended or joint family is the most important change that has taken, or is taking place, in their society. They also feel that this break-up has played a major role in changing values and behaviour patterns. The most important reason given for the break-up of the extended family is that previously, one family member earned and the others were dependents. Today, it is no longer possible to survive on one person's earnings. Given the fact that each family now

⁸. Government of Pakistan; *Karachi Population Census Report 1981*

⁹. Projection of the Government of Pakistan Karachi Census Report 1998 to 2011

¹⁰. City District Government Karachi; *Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020*

contains a number of earning members, the patriarchal family structure cannot survive. The member who earns the most resents sharing it with the others, and so the family splits.¹¹

Working women (now an economic necessity) have also adversely affected the extended family with quarrels and disputes around family honour and traditional values. Much of these disputes are generated as a result of the conservative extended family and/or neighbourhood peer pressure.¹² Interviews also suggest that the breakup of the extended family, in most cases, provides greater freedom to working women.¹³

With the breakup of the clan and the emergence of women working outside of the home, marriage patterns have also changed. The emerging trend is that marriages take place outside of the clan and increasingly outside the neighbourhood as well. This creates enormous problems for young people wishing to marry of their own choice, and also for conservative parents wishing to find “suitable” marriage partners for their children from their own background. Sometimes, parents do not realise how times have changed. For instance, one person reported how, after much soul searching and violence, he had agreed to let his daughter marry out of his caste, and how he was terrified of what the reaction of his clan would be. However, there was no reaction except for a few “aunties” being sarcastic; his peers did not particularly care. He summed up the situation by saying “The traditions are gone but we do not know it, because we do not discuss these things out of fear.”¹⁴

Most of Karachi’s phenomenal post-independence population increase was accommodated by the creation of informal settlements and semi-serviced formal plot developments. The majority of them were established in the 1960’s and 70’s and well upto the mid-80’s they were purely working class settlements. Their leaders, for the most part, were semi-literate middle aged men who used an archaic feudal vocabulary (*janab, hazoor, sharaf hasil hona, niaz-mand*) in their conversations and in their correspondence with officialdom. At that time, there were almost no schools and health facilities in these settlements and very few working women.

Today these settlements are not exclusively working class. A sizeable number of the younger generation, both men and women, has acquired skills and education. They are teachers, bank managers, IT professionals, and white-collar employees in the formal services sector. Suzuki loads of women go to work in garment and packaging factories and a large number work as contract labour in their homes. The settlements today contain not only private schools (where over 80 percent of the teachers are women) and health services but also beauty parlours, cyber cafes and marriage halls on the pattern of the middle income areas of the city. Meanwhile, the leadership is young and educated and has shed its feudal vocabulary of *janab* and *hazoor* in favour of “uncle” and “aunty”, and that too in English.¹⁵

The alumina of universities and colleges play an important role in the structuring of society and its values. Today, 68 percent of the students of the University of Karachi, 87 percent of all medical students, and 92 percent of all architecture and planning students are women. The number of women students in engineering and business management is rapidly increasing. Critics of this process often say that many of these women will not work and so this education is a waste. This is only partially true for observation shows that this education has a profound affect on the value system of children, not only in the nuclear and extended

11. For details see Arif Hasan; *Demographic Change and its Social Repercussions: The Case of Karachi*; International Development Planning Review Volume 31, Number 03, 2009

12. An interesting on the subject is Kamran Asdar Ali; *Women, Work and Public Spaces: Conflict and Coexistence in Karachi’s Poor Neighbourhoods*; International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 2011

13. For details see Arif Hasan; *Demographic Change and its Social Repercussions: The Case of Karachi*; International Development Planning Review Volume 31, Number 03, 2009

14. Ibid

15. Author’s observations about the settlements he worked with in 1971-78 and their situation today

family, but also in the neighbourhood. If the professional mother does not work today, it is almost certain that the educated daughter will.

The changes above are expressed behaviour patterns of Karachiites in many ways. For one, women unlike before are visible today in public space. They are on the beaches, parks and “women-friendly” shopping places. Even in working class and lower middle income groups, the trend of having mixed gatherings at marriage ceremonies, is increasing. Young couples (many with *hijabs* and beards) sit close together and often lye in each others laps in parks and/or show affection to each other while travelling on motorbikes. Their number is increasing. Nobody stops them and the police does not interfere and ask them for a *nikkahnama*. All this was unimaginable, not only in the Zia era, but also in the many “liberal” eras before him. Something very fundamental has changed.

However, it has to be understood that these freedoms are available in public spaces outside the neighbourhood. There the religious right are still custodians of public morality and the family is still tied to traditional values related to the concept of family honour. The trends described earlier in the paper are weakening these traditional values, but the process is slow and painful. This is reflected in the enormous increase in application for court marriages. In 1992, only 12 to 15 applications were made per day. Today this figure varies between 200 and 250.¹⁶

Observation and research both show that the major reason for violence against women (and against men as well) in Pakistan today is the emergence of new freedoms and aspirations on the one hand and a breakup and increasing questioning of the old clan based governance systems. The old order is fighting back, and the conflict is increasing because of retrogressive laws and procedures, weak state institutions, regional conflict and the fact that the values being protected by the opponents of change are seen as having divine sanction.

New societal values are needed to bridge this gap between tradition, aspiration and reality. These societal values can be promoted by the development of suitable curriculum for educational institutions. So far, this has not consciously been done. The media can play an important role. However, so far, like many non-governmental organisations, its main focus is to identify victims of injustice, brutal traditions and state violence, and fight their causes. This is important but it does not promote new societal values. The discourse has to be related to the larger process of social change in the country but for that the actors, factors and processes of that change have to be understood sympathetically.

More recently, the pressure of the times and the emergence of young people, supported by their older mentors, have had an impact on the culture of the city and its performing arts. NAPA has been established, a music conference is now held in Karachi and so is a *Sufi* conference and a KARA film festival. However, these are not really *awami* in nature, like the film festivals of the 60s’ and 70s, though a sizeable number of persons from lower middle class areas do participate in them. Security concerns make them difficult to arrange and manage. Pop concerts, however, are *awami*. But apart from the Behria Auditorium, they have had no safe venue. That too is lost after the terrorist raid on the Pakistan Navy Mehran Base. There are more plays being performed in Karachi today than in its entire history. But then, they are performed in almost all cases at locations (Alliance Francoise, Goethe Institute, Pak-American Cultural Centre, Arts Council) not accessible to the vast majority of Karachiites. This points to a lack of public space for the performing arts. *Mushairas*, however, are an exception and draw large crowds at open public spaces. Security concerns of the last couple of years have almost finished them off.

¹⁶. Unpublished investigations made by Riaz Ahmad Khan, 2010

For a tolerant, if not a liberal Karachi, not only new societal values are needed but its immense wealth of talent has to be given space to express itself. All Karachi localities contain musicians, singers, poets, and traditional story tellers, both men and women. However, there is no public space for them to gather, dialogue or perform. Also, the presence of the custodian of morality at the local level often make such get togethers and performances difficult. In addition, there are groups that promote libraries, clubs and sports facilities. They too have space and finance related difficulties. A very rich folk culture surrounds the shrines of Karachi. However, their cultural and religious events are badly organised and the venues that host them do not have the infrastructure to cater to the needs of both events and the visitors. Also, these vents are not patronised by Karachi's "liberal" or "intelligencia". Similarly, parks do not cater to hawkers and performers who cater to and/or entertain the general public. Often, their activities are disallowed and officially persecuted. The city also does not have a city museum that can inform its citizens of the city's history and evolution.

This paper leaves us with two important questions. One, how can we develop new societal values that can reflect the changing sociology and demography of the city and make the transition to a more humane society less painful? And two, what can we do to bring about the necessary governance related changes to provide institutional and physical space required for the expression of progressive culture? Both these questions are closely related to the development of a vision for the city which can be share by the vast majority of its citizens and is protected by the political establishment. This vision, to be workable, has to be rooted in the social and physical reality of the city.