

Cities & Places
Daily 16.1.04

Recovering Kar

KARACHI, SAYS THE WORLD, HAS GONE TO THE dogs. Mention Karachi in international business circles and they take cover. Western cricket teams refuse to play there. Travel advisories on Pakistan put a red circle around the city. The anaemic successor to the bankrupt Swissair is now the only Western airline serving the first airport established in the sub-continent.

But I have a different view of Karachi. My romance with the city began when I was six years old and lived in a small town in Southern Punjab on the Lahore-Karachi railway line. My favourite spot was the pedestrian bridge overlooking platform one where the Tezgam engine panted and hissed, as though protesting against the five-minute stop, and Karachi-bound passengers scampered on the platform running errands. Just seeing the train to Karachi made the heart pump faster.

Several decades on, I still get a thrill when I visit Karachi. I like its buzz, its hidden jewels of boutiques, the restaurants, the sea breeze and the civility that comes with having the largest concentration of the Pakistani professional middle class. It is the only multi-ethnic, polyglot city we have, truly representative of all the peoples of the Indus Basin and our Western mountain expanses.

Karachi is our centre of commerce, industry, finance and the capital market. It is our only port. It is the only city that has non-Muslim minorities with a personality. The Parsis, the Hindus and the Christians have a presence in Karachi unmatched in any other city. They add to Karachi's lustre

through architectural style, food, language, dress.

Karachi is home to the people of Northern India who made Pakistan. The rest of us live off the rent generated by their commitment and perseverance. How strong that commitment was dawned on me when I read William Dalrymple's "The City of Djinns", that delightful book on the cultural history of Delhi. At one point in the book, after tracing the origins of Delhi's architecture, dress, turn of phrase and food, the author concludes that Delhi, even in the mid 1980s, was steeped in Muslim tradition. He then goes to the old walled city in search of its Muslim inhabitants. Of course they are not there any more. They are all gone, their havelies turned into storage spaces for New Delhi's shopping arcades. To meet the true Delhi-wallas, the author has to take a flight to Karachi. There he is confronted with the bitterness of betrayal. Karachi was just entering its long night of chaos and terror. And those who had left their historical splendours behind in India were gripped with fear and despondency. I get a lump in my throat every time I remember that passage.

The cold facts about Karachi challenge my romantic view of the city. Sadly they are consistent with the international perception that Karachi is a deeply troubled city. Sectarian mayhem, ethnic tensions, religious extremism and the kidnappings are too obvious to gloss over. Arif Hasan's "Understanding Karachi" masterfully relates Karachi's disturbing facts to failures in governance, but also sketches a way forward.

I will focus on two related factors that have brought

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*Let Karachi and Islamabad
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Karachi's recovery*

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■ Karachi to such a pass. One is that after the centre of policy-making shifted to Islamabad in the North, far from the commercial and industrial heart of the country, the economic underpinnings of policy design began to weaken. Islamabad bureaucrats, distanced from the country's entrepreneurs, lost touch. Geo-political ambitions came to be nurtured without regard for their adverse impact on the economic ground reality. Unable to rub shoulders with the country's economic players in sports clubs, weddings and restaurants, the bureaucrats failed to pick up and relay cautionary signals to their masters who had grand geo-political designs. Before long, Karachi's breathtaking economic growth of the first two decades after independence began to falter and in the 1990s, it came to a grinding halt.

Faltering growth translated into lack of jobs for the multitudes that throng to Karachi from the provinces. Without well paying industrial jobs, they fall back on their own resources for survival. And this is where the other national policy failure, poor investment in human capital, has taken its toll. When forced to fend for themselves, illiterate and poor migrant workers from Balochistan, FATA, NWFP, Sindh and Punjab, seek refuge with their own kind. Karachi, that should have been a melting pot, is divided up into Goths replicating the cultural milieu of the villages the migrants come from. Religion and conservative tradition help cope with the hardships of living in a city that promised so much and now delivers so little. Karachi thus has become a breeding ground for extremism of all kinds.

It is plain to see that without Karachi recovering, the

overall investment climate in the country is unlikely to improve. Lahore has come a long way, but it is unlikely ever to replace Karachi as the country's premiere growth engine. As long as Karachi is in the vicious grip of depravation and extremism, foreign and domestic investors will be nervous and hesitant and industrial job opportunities will remain thin.

As with all complex problems, there is no easy, one-step solution to transform Karachi overnight. What is needed is undivided attention, of the kind now being given to improving relations with India and Hamid Karzai's Afghanistan, and plenty of resources. This requires thinking out of the box. Let Karachi and Islamabad be the twin capitals of Pakistan. Let the federal government sit in Karachi at least half the year and give it the attention and financial resources it needs to recover. Let Karachi have an effective Master Plan that begins to improve the citizens' quality of life. Let us cost our time appropriately and bring the bureaucrat to the entrepreneur and the worker rather than the other way around. This will be an appropriate follow up to the welcome signs that recovery of economic growth is now the strategic priority of the bigwigs in Islamabad.

And this won't be the first time the land of the Indus has seen twin capitals. According to Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Moenjodaro and Harappa were twin capitals of the Indus Basin 4500 years ago. Later, the Kushans had twin capitals at Mathura (in present day UP) and Peshawar. The Arabs had theirs at Mansura and Multan. Let us have ours at Islamabad and Karachi. ■