

Life and Death in Lyari



The beaches and boardwalk at Clifton Beach

A Further partition in Pakistan's port city of Karachi

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1. **KARACHI IS MY CITY**, my home, but I was seven years old the first time I set foot on its soil. I was boarded onto a Pakistan International Airlines plane by my father from our exile home in Syria, and told I would be seated next to an old Sindhi woman who would look after me should I need anything. We never said a word to each other, the old Sindhi woman and I. She smiled at me nervously from time to time, and I grimaced back. I was anxious. It was my first time flying alone, my first time going home. Sometime after midnight the crew of PIA stewardesses, clad in deep green shalwar kameez with their pastel flowered dupattas neatly pinned across their shoulders, filed out along the aisles holding a cake and singing Happy Birthday to a Very Important Passenger. Everyone on board clapped and waited patiently for a piece of birthday cake. I didn't sleep a wink that night.

My grandmother, *Joonam* as I called her in her native Farsi, picked me up that bright December morning at Karachi's Jinnah airport. At the time, it looked like a small bus shed. Cement walls, grey and unpainted, dirty tiled floors and creaking baggage belts, badly needing to be oiled.

In the city, palm trees that bore coconuts, not the dates our palms carried in Damascus, lined the wide streets. The air was thick and smelled of the Indian Ocean, sweet with a touch of salt.

My first trip home was a whirlwind of winter days spent doing decidedly non-winter things. Joonam took me to the beach at Hawkesbay, where turtles come to lay their eggs, and where I sat on a camel for the first time and played in the dark golden sand. I counted trucks and buses, noticing their obnoxious colours - pink, orange, red, yellow. Joonam assured me they looked

like that on purpose. I wasn't sure as a seven year old whether I preferred Sindhi truck art to Syrian utilitarian bus art. We trawled old book bazaars, scouring stalls for second hand books and comics. I ate milky kulfi skewered on sticks and drank fizzy sodas until my teeth hurt.

It's been twenty years since I landed here in 1989. Karachi looks even more like a city of refugees, a condition of all modern cities. It's messy and chaotic, like a construction site. It is an ugly place. The coconut palms and banyan trees that lined the older avenues and had first caught my eye, have been cut down. Roads have been widened to make room for ever more traffic. And there was an oil spill that damaged our beaches in 2003, during my third year in college. I only recall the smell of petrol in the air that made us sick days before the government admitted the accident - the worst oil spill in Pakistan's history. It's a damaged city, my Karachi. Beaten and bullied but not bowed. I joke sometimes it's like an ugly girl with a great personality - though no one ever laughs. Yet on my first trip home, at just seven years old, I knew I had fallen in love.

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2. KARACHI IS A CITY BY THE SEA, built by Baloch tribes from deep Makran in Balochistan, and established first as a fishing village and named Mai Kolachi after a local fisherwoman. Lore says that Mai Kolachi was an old maid who travelled to the banks of the Indus River in hopes of settling down and building a new community. Mai Kolachi is a woman unburdened by dates or the tyranny of time. No one cares to note exactly when she birthed her village settlement by the port city of Karachi, but those who claim insider knowledge insist that Mai Kolachi came to us in 1728

Her name, Mai Kolachi, denotes a lady of reverence, of great respect, among the tribes of the Baloch Makran. They use it still today. Legend says Mai Kolachi built this city, named for her, out of love.

Her husband, Mr. Mai Kolachi, was a stubborn fisherman who went out to sea in the middle of a stormy night, refusing to be grounded on dry land, and was swallowed up by the angry waters. Mai Kolachi begged other fishermen to go and search the seas for her beloved but the men, more sensible than her husband, refused, and sent the old woman out to sea on her own.

The waters were rough and unyielding and Mai Kolachi found herself washed up on the shore by morning's first light. But she was not alone. Mr. Mai Kolachi lay next to her. The lovers had both been saved and reunited on the beach. Their accidentally heroic return was met by cheers and revelry and in their spontaneous joy the villagers renamed their small community after the fearless fisherman's wife.

Before the goddess of the waters, before Mai Kolachi renamed us as her home, Karachi was known to the ancient Greeks as Krokola. Legend again-for we live on myths here-places us as the rest stop for Alexander the Great's army after their legendary campaign in the Indus Valley. Karachi/Krokola was a port of tranquillity before the madness that would greet Alexander back in Babylonia. How strange that sounds now.

Calm Pakistan before stormy Iraq.

Later, Karachi became a gem among the jewels of the Talpur crown, a brief glory for the dynasty that ruled Sindh for a hundred years in the eighteenth century. It was under the Talpurs, charged with taming the unruly Sindhis, that Karachi became a port city, coveted by those who knew it near and far.

Charles Napier, whose name now lends itself to Karachi's miserably poor red light district, invaded us under the order of a very different crown and brought our city into the Bombay Presidency, a Raj-deigned province of British India that grew to cover most of the western and central subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula and what would amount to much of Pakistan. The British worked Karachi to the ground, but never to its death.

3. **TODAY'S KARACHI IS THE CAPITAL** of the southern Sindh province and Pakistan's largest port city (the Chinese are building another port in Gwadar, Balochistan but even with Chinese ingenuity and ruthless ambition, it will never surpass Karachi). It's the commercial and economic hub of the nation; the cosmopolitan, liberal face of Pakistan; one of the largest cities in the world, with a population estimated to be anywhere from 14 to 18 million. Spread out over Malir, Landhi, Saddar and 15 other towns, Karachi is a monster of a city.

But if it's the real Karachi, the *asli* Karachi, that you seek, then you must return to the town where it all started.

Karachi is a city told in fractions, in bite sizes and fragments, but Lyari is a whole story unto itself. It is one of the smallest towns that make up the metropole, but it is the oldest and most densely populated; often called 'little Pakistan.' I first set eyes on Lyari as a young girl, visiting the area with my parents who would go to offer condolences to the families of political workers who had worked with them both, to attend weddings in alleyways, and to see friends. The journeys we made to Lyari took us out of our comfortable Clifton neighbourhood where houses have large whitewashed gates and security guards to protect residents from the horrors of the outside world. Lyari sits, along the road you take from Clifton to the beach with its private huts and chalets, bypassing one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods. Driving past Lyari, it seems, the roads are no longer lined with swaying Banyan trees but with people. Nobody walks in Clifton, we drive. It's not just the crowded housing, the spoiled infrastructure, the chaos of its commerce that demarcates Lyari's boundaries, it's the presence of people everywhere.

The quarter is populated by Baloch migrants, Sindhis, Muhajirs who crossed over during Partition, Gujrati Kathiawaris and Katchi Memons. On its streets you'll hear Pushto and Seraiki speakers. It is home to religious communities of Bohris, Hindus, Ismailis and even, in the early days, of Jews-whose synagogue remains locked but nearby. Lyari is a microcosm of the country, a reason we were once envied for these shores.

It was also a hotbed of radical politics and progressive intellectuals who settled the neighbourhood in the aftermath of a bloody partition. Lyari is still where political parties are made or broken. This is where votes cast determine the outcome of elections-not in the drawing rooms of Clifton, where I live, or Defence Housing Authority, the plush residential

colony set up by the army. During the darkest days of the General Zia ul Haq's martial law in the 1980s, Lyari sustained the most liberal resistance to the dictatorship. Political activists here risked their lives to fight the oppression of a fundamentalist military regime.

As much as Lyari is known for its diversity and politics, it is also from where Pakistan's most celebrated footballers and boxers hail. Karachi United, a plucky football team, played to massive crowds in the Lyari Stadium before the rest of the city caught on to the football craze and gentrified the team - adding players from the upper-class drawing room lot and taking the games to posher football fields and stadiums where entrance was gained for hundreds, not tens, of rupees.

Alas, it's no longer sports or rebel politicians that bring Lyari to life for Karachiites. Now it's the violence; the gangsters who have terrified the area and waged bloody turf wars for the better part of the decade.

If Lyari is a microcosm of Pakistan, disgruntled and diverse, then it is also its dirty little secret. Lyari and its residents are caught in a time warp, living on the edge of a bustling city that used to consider it its heart, but no longer. Lyari is disregarded, dejected, and dumped by those in power, who, once elected, don't bother to call round any more. Lyari is living proof of the state's civic failures, a case study in the ways in which political incompetence and corruption has affected our daily lives. The deprivation of the most basic resources-water, security, education-is not unique to Lyari, but Lyari is where the total ineptitude of the state is most visible. In Karachi at least.

Lyari may be an abandoned memory for the rich of Karachi, who may barely notice it when they drive past on their way to their private huts on the exclusive French Beach shore. They fly by at breakneck speed, so afraid are Karachi's affluent of Lyari. It's not the kind of place that fits in with their imagined city, beautiful and luxuriously rebellious. But thank goodness for that.

Lyari is now the city's suffering, its shame, the face of its poverty and crime. But its sense of community thrives. The rest of us in Karachi live in bubbles; residential blocks with lines no one dares cross out of fear, maybe comfort, I don't know.

4. FOR THIS CITY BY THE SEA, for Mai Kolachi's namesake, the problems start with water. Tests done in recent years by the Pakistan Council for Scientific and Industrial Research collected water samples, both tap and filtered, from different cities around the country and found that seventy-five percent of drinking water in Karachi was "hazardous to health." It goes without saying that the twenty five percent of Karachiites who have access to potable water don't live in Lyari.

The World Bank estimates that one in five persons in South Asia lacks access to water services while some two thirds are without proper sanitation. Someone ought to invite the World Bank to Lyari where the reverse of their estimates feels more accurate - one in five has access to potable water. And that's being decidedly optimistic. According to the Urban Resource Centre, a

Karachi-based NGO, tests carried out on Lyari water have shown alarming levels of pathogenic content and industrial effluent. Shit, in other words. Effluent is a polite word for shit.

One day in May, two years ago, I was in Lyari in the middle of the hottest summer month writing about water for a local newspaper. As I stood on the road, absent-mindedly sorting through my notes, a woman came out of her house screaming at me. She saw me standing on the road with a pen and paper writing things down and assumed I was a government official of some persuasion. After berating me for being a heartless politician and ignoring my protestations to the contrary, she pulled me into her home, a threeroom ground floor flat: bedroom, bathroom, kitchen. (By this time I showed her my press card and the lady was forced to reluctantly acknowledge that I was not, in fact, a politician. Though she was no less aggressive with me considering my new journalistic status.)

She hurtled me into the kitchen, a cramped space that should have smelt of cooking, of frying onions or something, but it smelled of nothing. Empty air. No scent of garlic or mixed spices. She turned on her tap and pointed at my paper and pen. "When we open our taps," she said, "if water comes out" - it didn't - "it is the colour of filth." The woman's teenage son who was standing behind me, careful not to encroach too much on the kitchen's claustrophobic space, nudged his head towards the door and the outside road, covered in open sewage "That's the quality of our water here," he said. "If we're lucky," his mother added.

Then last January, I went back, pen and paper in hand, curious about what happened to the water in the winter. Abdul Razzak Babu Brohi, an elderly man in a woollen beanie, told me his family hadn't had water in their home for several days. Abdul Razzak said they often go for fifteen hours without.

No difference then. No surprise, either.

Situated west of the Indus River and on the shores of the expansive Arabian Sea, you would be forgiven for thinking Karachi would abound with water, but it is a notoriously dry city. Tankers trawl rich neighbourhoods selling water for showers and dishwashing, but they don't tend to frequent areas like Lyari. In Lyari one depends on the city government for water access, and when they fail, which is always, you go without.

After a riotous moment in 2007 when Lyari and Saddar locals attacked and set fire to Karachi Electrical Supply Corporation vans and offices, the city government halfheartedly agreed to look into the town's water problems. With typical fecklessness, the bureaucrats came up with the K-III Pipe project.

The problem with the K-III Pipe project is the K-III Pipe project. Beset with delays from the very beginning, engineers designed a water line that would pass under the Lyari River. The river, one of only two passing through Karachi, is so outrageously polluted it's fatal. Six people fell into the Lyari River in 2006 and all died; not because they drowned, but because the water is so dirty it's deadly.

By choosing the river as the site for the K-III Pipe project the city government is effectively (and effluently) laying a water line through sewage. And there's the small matter regarding the strength of the water lines and the repeated investigations that have shown that they are indeed

defective. In the event of rain, during Karachi's yearly monsoon season, for example, it's all but certain that the pipes may burst-mixing whatever clean water is flowing through the pipes with the human and industrial waste of the Lyari River.

In Tara Bhai Karimji Bazaar, in a vegetable market that sells ginger, eggplant, and mountains of green chillies, I am told the sewage lines had, in fact, recently burst on a cold winter morning. But I don't really need to be told, I'm standing ankle deep in the remnants. Lyari has been slowly but systematically made into a wasteland. The streets have been crowded by new buildings, leaning dangerously inwards and shadowing pavements and footpaths with a lattice of wires from electricity poles and telephone lines weaved haphazardly across their balconies and shop fronts. There is garbage everywhere, fresh and pungent and ignored. Animals, goats, dogs, even camels pick through the rot until it's set on fire by some poor fed up soul who finally turns the rubbish into harmless ash. It is by the Bengal Vegetable Industry building on Mauripur Road that I see the camels scavenging in a pile of rotting bougainvillea flowers looking for whatever it is that camels eat.

A wizened old woman, hunched over, her thinning white hair tightly wrapped in a white chador that covers most of her bent body, stands next to the camels. She's rooting through the garbage for food. I want to ask, why? Ask her when she started scouring through trash, where her family is, where she lives. But I can't. I say hello to her instead. She nods at me and goes back to work.

At night, Tara Bhai Karimji Bazaar becomes one of Lyari's famous food streets as the vegetable vendors put away their morning goods, laid out for shopping housewives, and bring out the good stuff. They sell small silver fish, burba, in the local Balochi vernacular. There are stalls selling pakora (potato and onions dipped in a rich batter of chickpea flour), and fried aloo channa (spicy chickpeas and potatoes mixed with tamarind sauce and onions sold on soggy paper plates), and sheekh kebabs grilled over open flames. The bazaar goes on well past midnight and is buzzing with men who sit on street curbs socializing, smoking and eating.

5. IT IS ALSO AT NIGHT when another part of Lyari comes alive, a more sinister side. It is not a secret, not like the poverty and the hunger and thirst are. Though one of the most ethnically and racially harmonious parts of Karachi, Lyari, due to its violent gang wars, is also one of the most dangerous.

Afshani Gulley, Shahbaig Lines, Channabad, Gul Muhammad Lines - these are gang territories. You cannot enter these areas without express gang permission. You cannot even drive past them without the appropriate gang approval. I tried. The closest I got was standing on the periphery of Shahbaig Lines, and even that was uneasy.

I stood alone on the street with the feeling I was being watched. Ordinary looking men, young fellows in their twenties with overgrown stubble and tight jeans, sat in the shade of apartment buildings, ordinary except for the Kalashnikovs slung over their shoulders. There were no cars, no motorcycles whizzing past, no hawkers on bicycles, or rickshaws looking for fares. It was desolate. And there I was, stupidly taking notes on how frightening the neighbourhood was.

These areas are the enclaves of two of the most infamous gang lords in this city. The first is Arshad Pappu, a young Baloch man who was arrested in 2006 after being hunted down and charged with over sixty cases of murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, extortion and armed robbery. At the time of his arrest, sometime in the dark hours of an October night, Pappu was found with two Kalashnikovs, several loaded magazines, and a hand grenade. Though he is behind bars in Karachi's Central Jail (one thinks, at least), Pappu's gang continues to flourish under his second-in-command, a fellow called Ghaffar Zigri, who ensures the smooth running of the illegal drug and mobile-snatching trade in his Lyari territory. Gangs in Karachi, like everything else, have become politicised and depend (as their benefactors depend on them) on political party patronage. Pappu, it is whispered, is allied with a provincial powerhouse of a party, but it was Pappu's rival, the legendary Rehman Dakait, who had federal party backing until his death this year.

According to local mythology, Dakait - whose name literally means Rehman the dacoit - is said to have moved into the seedy world of crime after killing his mother, Khadija Bibi, in the mid 1990s after she had allegedly cheated on his father, a petty gangster in his own right. Who knows if these stories are true. They sound ridiculous at times, too soap operatic, too titillating. But these are the stories that people tell me when I ask so I relate them in the spirit with which they are given to me: carefully.

Dakait joined the ranks of Lyari's most wanted and quickly rose to become the area's number one police catch. He was arrested in 1997-nothing short of a remarkable feat by police who seem either entrenched or unable to fight the gang wars in Lyari-but he managed to slip away and escape en route to a court hearing.

Once allies, Pappu and Dakait began to infringe on each other's territory and get on each other's nerves and it was with an element of the absurd that local newspapers reported on the gang feud, fought with grenades, rocket launchers and automatic machine gun battles in broad Lyari daylight. By 2001 Dakait had formed his own gang and had made powerful connections. He dealt in heroin, in Iranian diesel smuggled across the Balochistan border, in guns, kidnapping, murder and in a local kind of opium, 'taryak,' said to induce insomnia, which crossed over from Afghanistan via Balochistan. Taryak's street price is relatively cheap (two hundred rupees, or just over two dollars), and it's smoked easily through a pipe. Dakait roamed Lyari as he pleased, meeting with parliamentarians and politicians who were only too happy to employ his underworld expertise and skill. I visited one of Dakait's neighbourhoods in January 2008, when he was still alive, after I got bored of standing on the edge of Shahbaig Lines.

Chakewara Chowk, or roundabout, was the site of a fierce gun battle between the police and Dakait's men in November 2007 and was, thanks to our new media age, captured by GEO television. The footage which became an often forwarded YouTube sensation shows police officers lying on the streets of Chakewara Chowk in bullet-proof vests and cushioned by armoured tanks shooting at invisible gangsters. Several of Dakait's foot soldiers were killed that day and Nabeel Gabol, the area's Pakistan People's Party parliamentarian whose face appears in ubiquitous saucy posters that portray him as a local celebrity, lost no time in going on air and calling the gangsters who had been killed *shaheeds*. Martyrs.

On the day of my visit, a Saturday, I found most of Chakewara Chowk's shops shutters down and padlocked. It wasn't a religious or national holiday, I was told, but a security measure. Suppliers are too afraid to come to the area and re-stock the shops, so they simply don't. Shopkeepers grew tired of having their wares stolen at gunpoint, so they abandoned their trade.

As I walked around Saif Lines, a more residential and predominantly Baloch neighbourhood, I caught sight of a woman on a balcony waving to me. She seemed to want to talk, to say hello. She beckoned me to wait with her hand. As she opened the door to her home, which was bolted shut, a startled male relative inside screamed at her, "Close the door!" The woman- she must have been close to my age, in her mid-twenties- tried to explain that there was someone outside, me, and that she was just. but the relative didn't wait for her explanation. He raised his hand and moved to hit the young woman who teetered on the edge of her doorstep. She ducked to avoid his hand and I moved in quickly to explain her presence and mine. The man, her elderly uncle it turned out, apologized for his reaction, let his niece shake my hand and have a quick word and then hurriedly sent her back inside. "It's not safe" he explained, almost kindly, before adding "you shouldn't be out here either."

A local who was acting as my gang area chaperone - and who asked to be identified only as Mittal - waved his hands across the tight streets of Saif Lines. "You see how the doors are bolted shut here? It's the only place in Lyari where people don't leave their doors open for visitors." I hadn't, now that Mittal mentioned it, seen a single welcoming house in the area. The one place I had chanced upon had nearly involved a domestic incident. Though all of Lyari is dangerous, most of the apartment buildings have their main doors opened wide while children run around the blocks chasing stray cats and kicking footballs around with their friends. Here in Saif Lines I didn't see any kids, or cats for that matter. "They're too scared to come out and play" Mittal confirmed. "You never know what will happen here, but it's never good."

In Qaisar Qandi colony, the stories are disturbingly familiar, where I meet a man pushing a wooden cart. He walks up and down the neighbourhood's gulleys selling a combination of things. There's the betel leaf paan, spicy potatoes wrapped and stapled into plastic bags, boiled sweets wrapped in shiny cellophane, and Spouts chewing gum. I buy some gum and the man, Muhammad Hussain, begins to complain to me about life in Lyari. We feel an instant kinship. Muhammad was a well-known activist and political worker who joined Zulfikar Ali Bhutto early in the 1970s.

Muhammad is an old man now, maybe in his sixties or seventies. He has several teeth missing and wears thick-rimmed black eyeglasses held together by scotch tape. He used to own a shop, he tells me, but shut it down because of the gangsters who arrived daily at his door to collect their protection fee. They often came with weapons and would hold up the store while they were at it, walking out with a week's worth of Muhammad's earnings. So Muhammad shut the shop and moved his wares to a rickety old cart, constantly moving to stay safe, hawking his goods to passers-by.

People stop and listen to Muhammad's story, adding their own miseries to his tale. "I couldn't sleep the previous night" a man only slightly younger than Muhammad says out of the blue. There was gunfire. It kept him awake all night. I must have looked surprised or shocked because

another man materialises out of nowhere and waves his hands at me and my naiveté. "It happens every night," he says in Urdu, adding that the police are *"na kam hai."* They have no work here, they've failed. A third man, a younger one, points to the end of the street, "Last week, a sixteen year old boy, Wasim, was killed here. He got caught in the crossfire."

Everyone in Lyari knows a victim. The numbers of those maimed and buried by years of gang war are unrecorded, you only hear about the dead through stories, cautionary tales told through tears.

Hameed, 'Chachu,' was a political activist, as many men in Lyari are at one point or another, who went corporate in the late 1980s. By the decade's end he was done with rabble rousing and politics, he sat at a cubicle in the offices of United Bank Limited. He'd gotten out, his friends and family thought with relief at the time. But Chachu, as friends back in his Kalri neighbourhood called him, never really cut his ties to the underworld. A friend of his, someone he knew in his gang days, a man with suspicious ties to the crime networks across South Asia and the United Arab Emirates, went missing. Around 1998, Chachu's life was finally in order. Then everything began to fall apart.

Chachu showed up to the city courts to confront the suspect in his friend's disappearance, who was scheduled to be brought for a hearing. But before that could happen, shooting broke out between the jailed thug's men and the elite Ranger police force who guard Karachi's courts, landmarks, and very important people. Chachu was shot once, in the head. He lived, but he's paralyzed for life. He can't walk, can't speak, and is confined to a wheelchair. Chachu remained in Lyari for sometime after, but it wasn't easy. His nephew, a teenager, got involved in the gangs and Chachu was once again back where he started. He upped sticks and moved his family to Hyderabad where they still live.

When I called to speak with him over the phone, his wife came on the line and told me that he was in bad shape and his condition was very difficult. Their son, Najeeb, was seventeen years old- "Can you get him a job?" I didn't know what to say. I told her if I came across anything I would forward it on to them. The phone line crackled and wheezed before it went dead.

6. MOMBASSA, PRONOUNCED BOMBOSSA by the locals, is named for the predominantly Sidi community - an ethnic minority who trace their ancestry across the oceans to the coast of Zanzibar. They came here centuries ago as either as warriors or slaves, depending on whose story you hear. The neighbourhood's streets have blackboards nailed to the sides of decrepit buildings. It was here that the idea of street schools was established. Government schools are decidedly dismal and the streets too dangerous for children's games, so the locals of Mombassa banded together and set up street schools and tuition centres for their children.

Run by young women and men who volunteer their time, the tuition centres provide a safe space for children. Run on rooftops or in volunteer's houses, they keep the children off the streets of Lyari, where crime is an easy way to pass time. The centres keep strange hours. They start around five in the evening, when time is called on the children's main schools, and run till nine, though on particularly violent days they keep working till midnight or until it's safe for the children to return to their homes.

Extra lessons in maths, science, Sindhi and social studies are taught in one tuition centre where the rising occurrence of gunfire has forced classes from an alleyway, complete with street blackboard facilities, indoors. There are forty students, ranging from four years old to twelve. Zahida, a young woman who teaches at the unnamed tuition centre after coming from her day job in a public school in nearby Niabad, tells me that this is one of the few remaining centres in the neighbourhood. The violence has forced the others to shut down. Zahida is proud when she speaks of the work she does here. She is prouder still when she assures me her children will not be held hostage to turf war.