Residential segregation in Mithi and Karachi, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT This paper responds to the article by Trina Vithayathil and Gayatri Singh, on residential segregation by caste in urban India, in this issue of Environment and Urbanization. It compares caste-based residential segregation in India and Pakistan, focusing on Mithi and Karachi in Pakistan. The paper discusses how political change, migration, violence, and religious and ethnic identity in Karachi have shaped preferences on where different castes and religious minorities wish to reside. Meanwhile, in Mithi, where capitalism is not fully developed, caste continues to determine where one can live.

KEYWORDS caste / housing / Mithi / Karachi / Pakistan / residential segregation / urban inequality

The conditions described in the paper “Residential segregation by caste over time in urban India” have strong similarities with those in Pakistan, and at the same time differences as well. The similarities are because of a shared history of more than 5,000 years. The differences are because Pakistan is a Muslim country and Islam, in theory at least, believes in the equality of all believers; this equality is enshrined in mosque practices. In this brief paper I look at caste-related issues in two cities of Pakistan that I know well. One is Mithi, which is the capital of the Tharparkar district in the southeast of Pakistan and has a population of about 150,000, mostly Hindus. The other is Karachi, which is the capital of Sindh Province and has a population of about 22 million, 44 per cent of whom are descendants of Urdu-speaking migrants following the 1947 Partition of India.

As in India, Pakistan’s population census has a column on Scheduled (lower) Castes. However, it also has a column on religion. Muslims in the census cannot be categorized as Scheduled Castes, even if they are converts to Islam from Hindu lower castes, because as Muslims they are equal. Similarly, Christians are also classified as Christians even though most of them are lower-caste converts to Christianity as a result of missionary activity during colonial
times. As such, Scheduled Castes are limited to Hindus. Upper-caste Hindus have a separate column.

Migrants to the city bring their culture with them and caste is an important part of that culture. In the rural areas, mostly of Sindh and the Punjab and to a lesser extent in the country’s two other provinces, society has traditionally been broadly divided into four groups or castes: traders (a very small group), agriculturists, artisans, and untouchable castes that did “menial” jobs. Exceptions are Barhamans (Hindu priests) and Muslim Syeds (supposed to be the descendants of Prophet Muhammad’s family).

Along with the untouchables, artisans belonged to the lower castes. They served the agriculturists as cobbler, carpenters, masons, ironmongers, potters, weavers, entertainers and so on. They provided these services to the agriculturists in exchange for payments of grain. They had no social or economic mobility and their professions were hereditary in nature. Because of these two caste groups of artisans and untouchables, as well as the practice of barter, the villages were self-sufficient, something that Gandhi deeply admired. The artisan castes, who in Pakistan have been mainly Muslim, were discriminated against in many ways. They did not own their own houses, were not allowed to keep large animals, they could not grow out their moustaches with upward-pointing ends (a cultural symbol of virility) and could not ride horses, but had to make do with donkeys. Capitalism and Islam have changed much of this, but the stigma of belonging to a lower caste still applies in the rural areas. All property documents, official papers and police reports had (and in many cases still have) a column on the caste of the individual involved in these transactions. The name of the caste was also a part of the name of the individual. The treatment of Muslim lower castes by the Muslim upper castes was not much different from that of the Hindus by their lower castes. De facto caste still exists among rural Muslims.

As described in the Indian paper, the lower castes, especially the untouchables, lived in squalid conditions on the fringes of villages and were not allowed to share a water source or eating utensils with the higher castes. This was the condition when I started to work in the Tharparkar district in Pakistan in 1985, where no lower-caste individual could eat in a public
restaurant, or if permitted it was using separate utensils. This has changed to a great extent, although lower-caste households still live in poor-quality settlements on the fringe of the town.

The structure of Mithi Town, in Tharparkar, is built around caste neighbourhoods, and even today no family that belongs to a different caste can live, purchase property or rent in these neighbourhoods. The lower castes, who serve these neighbourhoods by sweeping the streets and homes and disposing of excreta, live on the fringes of these neighbourhoods. Even the katchi abadis (informal settlements) being developed on the town fringe are caste based. Commercially developed informal settlements have a mix of different lower castes. However, in Mithi (unlike Karachi), no upper-caste person would even dream of living in settlements, formal or informal, with the lower castes. Meanwhile, many members of the Scheduled Castes have received education and are in important positions in government, civil society, or professional fields.

Almost all of the old towns of Pakistan have a similar plan. There is the palace or citadel adjacent to the river, and adjoining it are the neighbourhoods of the elite and upper castes. On the fringe of the town, sometimes even outside it, are the lower-caste neighbourhoods. Between them and the upper-caste neighbourhoods are the settlements of the other castes, arranged in order of the caste hierarchy.

Prior to Pakistan’s independence, Karachi was also structured on caste and ethnicity lines, with very clear boundaries. Within these boundaries the religious and community institutions of the caste were located and, until the establishment of municipalities, these local institutions were responsible for the maintenance of their neighbourhoods. Even in the Karachi plan, developed under British rule in 1918, a separate colony was created for the Parsis (Zoroastrians) and one for the Amils (a Hindu upper caste). Before independence, Goans and Parsis, were the only non-Europeans to live in Saddar Bazaar (the European city), and it is here that most of their religious and community institutions are located. The rich and poor of these communities lived together and often they had accommodation for their lower-caste service providers as well. In Karachi, neighbourhoods for Scheduled Caste jamadar (collectors – also known pejoratively as “sweepers”) were also provided by the Karachi Municipal Corporation and exist to this day, although the demand for housing and commercial activity has changed the
demography of these areas substantially. In addition to plot-based settlements, there were many chawls, as in Mumbai. These were walk-up apartment complexes, and these too were religion or ethnicity based.

The merchant community settlements based on caste and religion in Karachi, in pre-independence Pakistan, were located near the wholesale markets. These in turn were in close proximity to the railway station and port to the south and west. Usually the British built the railway stations near the old towns because it was here that the wholesale markets were located in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The working-class districts in Karachi that served these markets and the communication networks were also in close proximity to the north and west. Between these functions and the European city to the east was a huge open space known as the Artillery Maidan, which separated the “native” city and its commercial functions from the European city and the cantonment (military base). After the 1920s, much of the Artillery Maidan was converted into housing. What was left of the open space was converted into the federal government secretariat in 1947, at the time of independence.

Things changed with independence, when refugees from all over India entered Karachi in large numbers. To house them, the state encouraged the creation of cooperative housing societies. These were also created on the basis of where people had originated. For instance, migrants from Delhi created the Delhi Mercantile Society, those from Hyderabad created the Hyderabad Colony, those from Bangalore created Bangalore Town, and so on. Only families that belonged to these specific areas could become a part of the cooperative. In this process, caste ceased to matter. With the passage of time, the prices of land and property in the locations of these cooperative societies increased substantially. The societies responded by removing the restrictions on membership and opened themselves up to other citizens as well, leading to a manifold increase in the value of their properties. Most of these societies are multi-ethnic today. Their younger generations generally do not even know what caste is and most of them have eliminated caste from their surnames, as my family has. The chawls have either been replaced by commercial housing or still exist as religious or ethnic specific accommodation.
The societies catered only to the middle- or upper-class migrants. The lower classes found accommodation in informal settlements or in government-developed resettlement colonies. Since the majority of migrants were from India, they were Urdu speaking, or those who were not adopted Urdu as their language. So most of the new settlements were Urdu speaking. Here, caste did not matter and still does not, but ethnicity, based on language and religion, does for reasons discussed below.

The Pakistani state created large sites-and-services settlements, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. The majority of these were also occupied by Urdu speakers. Post-1960 there were large migrations of Pashtuns from the then North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). These settled on the then fringe of the city and they did not allow any non-Pashtuns to settle in these areas. Elite settlements were also developed but not on a caste, ethnic or religious basis.

Things, however, have changed. Beginning with the Afghan War in the 1980s, there were many sectarian-targeted killings of important individuals belonging to the more liberal sects of Islam or progressive political parties, as well as bomb blasts in which hundreds of persons died. In addition, the migrants from India created their own separate political party, leading to ethnic conflicts with people of other sub-nationalities living in Karachi. This also led to ethnic violence, coercion and kidnappings, sometimes politically motivated, for which the drugs and arms “mafias” were recruited.

As a response to these conditions, in some informal settlements in West Karachi, for a brief period in the late 1980s, there was an exchange of population so as to make these settlements ethnically uniform. Pashtuns and Urdu speakers exchanged properties with each other in the process, which was aided by middlemen.

Also, new developments housing Muslim minority groups are increasingly based on ethnicity or religion. So in gated communities there are Shia, Bohri, Ismaili (Muslim minority sects), Christian and/or Hindu settlements that have increased in number in the last three decades. In addition, there are apartment complexes that are also religion or ethnicity based for these groups. However, in the settlements that are not based on ethnicity or religion, which are
the vast majority, ethnicity and religion do matter when a tenant is being chosen, but class, profession and marital status are important as well. For instance, landlords do not like to rent to lawyers and journalists. This is because rent laws are very pro-tenant in Pakistan, and tenants in these professions might create problems for the landlords. Normally, landlords in “decent” locations do not wish to rent out to single men or single women, who might give the location a negative reputation. As a result, there are now specific areas where single women and men seek accommodation. People wanting to rent also try to find accommodation in areas of their own ethnicity and/or religion.

People prefer to live with their own. Even where large-scale commercial development is taking place, as in Karachi, extended families, and sometimes even clans, purchase or rent entire apartment blocks so as live next to each other. Even Karachi’s two million plus refugees from other countries live in segregated settlements. So there are Afghan, Tajik, Bangladeshi, and Burmese colonies named after the place of the origin of the residents.

As far as Mithi is concerned, for the foreseeable future its neighbourhoods will remain caste based and caste will continue to be the basis on which rentals take place. Meanwhile, the Hindu and Christian leadership is happy to be classified separately from Muslims as there is a quota for minorities in governmental and semi-governmental jobs, and in representation in the political system.