

## Sheetal Chhabria “Locating Karachi's Urban Poverty”

Although the problem of poverty was the earliest and most obvious indictment of colonial rule in the subcontinent, anti-colonial nationalism subsumed and delayed the resolution of the urban poverty problem in cities like Karachi. In the 1930s, Karachi's industrialists cast their city as Bombay's “periphery” thereby absolving themselves of solving the poor housing problem by appealing to the assumption that it had not modernized as much as Bombay since it was a part of the Bombay Presidency. While the process of urbanization had resulted in slums in all major cities across the Bombay Presidency, including in Bombay, Karachi and Aden, a particular engagement with the temporality of capitalist development sustained such notions of regional distinction. These regional distinctions lent credibility to autonomy movements which eventually removed Bombay as the seat of power over Karachi, but it also productively delayed the problems of the urban poor. A desire to “catch up” to Bombay's stage of commercial advancement meant that leaders advocated for more infrastructure for more commercial opportunities, not a restraining of commercial ambitions.

This paper foregrounds empirical questions about rural to urban migration, the politics of urban housing, attitudes towards the poor, and the control of urban space in the long 19th century in an attempt to overcome the nationalization of Karachi's urban poverty problem. Due to the administrative unity within the colonial period many migrants moved up and down the western coast, and the largest numbers of migrants into both Karachi and Bombay came from Ratnagiri and Cutch. Lyari in Karachi was thus a much older shantytown than Dharavi in Bombay; Dharavi was likely not densely settled until well into the 1930s, 1940s and beyond, whereas Lyari was a site of urban reform, renewal, and even complaints as early as the 1910s. Such facts enable an understanding of urban impoverishment that moves outside of the nationalist imagination so that Karachi's urban poor don't become constrained as “Pakistan's” poverty problem until well after 1947. Thus deeper historical processes resulted in urban disenfranchisement and alienation. Karachi's poorest dwellers, when placed in their proper historical circumstances prior to their legibility as Pakistan's impoverished citizens, allows us to see larger economic and social processes which encapsulated the vast majority of the Western subcontinent through the turn of the nineteenth century, before such peasant migrants were distinguished from each other through the politics of regionalism, nationalism, and Partition.