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Between the People and the Polis:
Southasia's Megacities and the Urban Future

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Between the People and the Polis: Southasia's Megacities and the Urban Future*

Delhi is special to me. I was born here, and left on the last train that ever went from Delhi to Karachi. That was the 15th of August 1947. So it's always nice, in a way, being back in Delhi.

The content of my talk is drawn from my research work, teaching and activism in Pakistan in general, and in Karachi in particular. I have also had the privilege of being associated with programmes and projects in a number of cities in Southasia and in Asia in general, and over the last two and a half decades, I have worked on a number of projects in these countries and have had the benefit of meeting their planners, government officials and NGO activists, and on occasion spent some time with the communities that live in these cities.

The subject of megacities has been discussed almost to death and has been written about. Economists write about the economic aspects of it; environmentalists write about the terrible environmental conditions; planners write about the infrastructure issues that are so damaging to the lives of poor communities. And now, you can add climate change to it. All these discussions take place in the press all the time, and also are subjects of academic research. They are all available on the net. I will approach this issue from a somewhat different perspective: from the point of view of socio-economic change that is taking place and the state's response in physical and in investment terms. Since most of my research is on Karachi, I will refer to Karachi often. But much could also resonate with other cities.

*Lecture delivered by Arif Hasan at the India International Centre on 25 November 2014. The article also appears in Himal magazine.

The only areas where the poor can find affordable land, and that too informally developed or only for occupation, is on the extreme city fringe, which is far away from work areas.

One statistic stands out regarding the megacities of Southasia. And that is the phenomenal increase in their populations, especially after the last census. This is true except for Calcutta. For instance, Delhi's population, according to the 2011 census, was between 16 and 17 million. Today, it is said to be more than 24 million. I don't know how accurate it is, but serious writings claim it to be so. Dhaka's population was projected at 18 million for 2015. I am told that it is 22 million today.

I would believe none of this because the figures are so large. I wouldn't believe it if I didn't come from Karachi, because Karachi has grown at a phenomenal rate. It was 11 million in 1998. Today, it is about 21 million—almost double the number. Not only that, the city has expanded spatially by over 100 per cent, swallowing up villages and pasture lands and ruining the districts' rural economy. Twenty-three per cent of this expansion is dense and consolidating. There are two points of view here. A very able Karachi planner, Farhan Anwar, has documented the terrible damage this expansion has done to rural communities and how it has impoverished them. Parween Rehman, on the other hand, supported this expansion because she said it was going to benefit the poor who were coming into the city. These are two pro-poor planners thinking in very different terms. I think this is a subject that needs attention.

Further, in 2011 it was estimated that the total urban population of Southasia was 243 million, of which 34 per cent lived in megacities. If we take today's figures, it's already 40 per cent. I find it very difficult to believe, but evidence suggests that this is so. But the question I've been engaged with is why is this phenomenal increase taking place? Roland deSouza, another Karachi planner and architect, has argued that this expansion is simply because Southasian populations have grown by about 550 per cent between 1941 and 2011, whereas in other countries the growth has been much less. For example, Thailand increased during the same period by about 280 per cent, and Britain by 160 per cent. He argues that if we had increased by only 300 per cent, we would be living in a

very different world. So, as he says, our positive achievement is that we have produced so many children. It's simple: less growth, less migration; more growth, more migration. Percentages do not tell us the truth anymore because the figures are so large. Therefore, I think we should talk more in terms of figures than percentages.

Our own research on Pakistan has established that the most important reason for increases in migration are the changes that are taking place in the socio-economic condition of rural areas. Through a long process, which I have documented in my writings, the rural economy has been transformed from a barter economy to a cash one. And in the process, the link between caste and profession, which made village self-sufficiency possible, has either vanished or is under pressure. As a result, the village no longer—in most of Pakistan—has a *lohar*, a *kumhar*, a *barai*, a *chamar*, a *raj*, etc. They have all migrated to the cities. The village today depends entirely on urban-produced goods and is no longer self-sufficient—a self-sufficiency that Gandhi admired very much. The landless labourer and the traditionally lower caste cannot afford the city-manufactured goods; migration is the only option left.

The earlier migrants made a conscious decision to migrate to improve their livelihoods and provide for their families back home. They came from stable societies where local community governance systems functioned, even if they were questioned. The present migrants come from societies where the *jirga*—a form of inter-tribal association to sort out disputes—has no moral authority and the *chaudhry*, *panchayat*, the *mukhi*, the *patel* and the *numberdar* are all non-existent. Also, with the clan and extended family disintegrating, there is freedom to move, and freedom from community controls and loyalties. This is the trend that cannot be reversed.

For the first time, 'lower castes' such as *bheels*, *kohlis*, *meghwars* and *jogis*, who did not migrate before except as individuals now have the freedom to migrate

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en masse. And they do. However, due to their lack of skills, they are, in essence, large, circulating populations going back to the rural areas during the harvesting season with no permanent residence. All this is new. In the last 15 to 20 years these changes have started consolidating themselves.

Something else has happened. Most of the migrants used to work on building sites, but the mechanisation of construction projects has limited their jobs. We have just studied a small road-building project which was completely mechanised—excavation, earth refilling, compaction and the laying of the tarmac. We asked the contractor how many people he had employed and he said sixty. And, if you didn't have these machines, how many people would you have employed? About a thousand, he said. This is a study that we are currently doing to see how this works and how it affects migrant labour. There are other reasons for migration as well which I will discuss later, but one very important factor is that the cities that we are talking about are increasingly becoming cities of migrants. The local population will have less of a presence, and this is already true of Karachi.

The cities to which migration is taking place have also changed. For one, they have expanded spatially and land and real estate has replaced gold as an investment. As a friend said, *jobhi sone ki liye hota tha, zamin kiliye hota hai* (Whoever used to deal with gold now deals with land). 'You kill, you occupy, you pressurise', has replaced gold as an investment. It is no longer possible to squat near the city centre and work areas as it was before. The Katchi Abadis of Karachi history are not going to be there anymore because the land is gone. The only areas where the poor can find affordable land, and that too informally developed or only for occupation, is on the extreme city fringes, far away from work areas. In terms of land values in Karachi, in 1991 one square metre of land on the city's periphery used to cost 1.7 times the daily wage at that time. Today, it is 40 times the daily wage, far away, even further away from the city than it was in 1991. There are other problems. Non-regularised informal settlements and even regularised ones are needed for middle-class housing whose demand has grown

by 300 per cent in the last decade. And this demand is likely to grow as the middle class expands.

Living on the fringes is more expensive than renting within the city. Commuting from the fringes makes transport expensive, as also time-consuming. Fathers often do not see their children all day because of long hours spent travelling, often in uncomfortable transport. Entertainment and recreation are not accessible. The worst affected are women. Our transport studies, which will be out soon, show that 62 percent of the women interviewed said that if they lived nearer to their places of work, they would have better job opportunities. Many said they did not work but would if they lived nearer the city, or if transport was cheaper and better.

The impact on men was less. What has happened now is that these informal settlements which were single- and double-storey and were near the city are now becoming five-, six- or 10-storey buildings. This has already happened in Bombay. And these are informal ownerships because this is informal high-rise development. They are becoming extremely overcrowded and suffer from all the negative consequences. This is a vicious circle—with more space, the number of renters is increasing and so is overcrowding. Before you had a house and you lived in it. Now, you live in a building, and your house has become six or ten floors. The environment has changed, it is not the same place. There are people whom you don't know, the street is no longer a public space.

Meera Bapat, an architect planner in Pune, and I made some studies, she on Pune and I on Karachi for the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. We went back to the settlements that we knew 30 years ago and found that although the infrastructure and social indicators had improved, overcrowding had adversely affected the quality of life. Another very important aspect was the vulnerability of the renters in these settlements because the buildings are owned by musclemen who can throw out the renters whenever they like and increase the rent at any time. This also has been documented in fairly great detail.

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What has the government's response been? After the 1990s, the government's response, both in India and in Pakistan, has been 'go and access the market'; except for small projects that really don't make much of a difference. To access the market, the government has liberalised finance. But this has benefitted the developers more than anyone else because they can access finance for their clients. But the requirements are such that if an individual wants a loan, he cannot access it. You need a formal job, you need an asset that you can mortgage, etc. Further, these additions to the loan capital can serve only 16 per cent of the demand. So to make affordable the product, the units are becoming smaller and smaller, both in the formal and in the informal sector. In fact they are becoming so small—24 to 30 square metres—that a family cannot live in them. Yet, they sometimes house up to 10 to 15 people.

I was in Delhi in 2007 and my friends pointed me in the direction of some informal development taking place in the area called *Jamuna Par*.

My taxi driver, a sardarji, said, *Wahan kya karenge aap?* (What will you do there?).

I said, *Mujhe plot kharidna hai*. (I want to buy a plot).

He was very excited; he said he knew exactly the place and asked me how big a plot I wanted. 'About 60 to 100 metres', I said.

He said, *Aap us me kaise rahenge?* (How will you live there?)

Nahi, mere driver ke liye hai (No, it's for my driver).

We went to an office where the signage was in Hindi so I couldn't read it; I don't read the Devanagari script. But underneath it was written 'Property Advisor', so we spoke to him. He showed me the map, showed me which was the best plot, and told me no corner plot was available since he had allotted them to those who had helped him set up this colony. Finally, we agreed on a price, and I said to him, 'Is this scheme approved by the government?'

He said, 'No, it is not an approved government scheme.'

I said, 'Why should I buy a plot there?'

He said, *Ho jayega, approve ho jayega na* (Approval will come).

I said, 'I don't believe it. I construct a house here, I have no proof of ownership?'

He said, 'You have. I'm giving you the proof of ownership. I'm giving you a paper.' This paper, he said, is acceptable for all transactions: renting, building, etc. It could cause me great problems, I said. He responded, *Tusi kyu ghabratay ho? Main hoon na* (Why are you flustered. I am here to help you).

This is exactly how development takes place on the fringes of Karachi as well. And these are huge developments, they exist but are not recognised. What do we do about them? How do we deal with them? I leave that as an open question.

The second change is in the older settlements that were built between 1970 and 1980. When I began working the settlements, the older people used to come to the community leaders and, although illiterate, spoke in very poetic Urdu using words like *janam, husoor, sain, niazmand, sharf-hasil-hoa*, etc. Today, there are young men, and sometimes women, who are literate, call me 'Uncle', and speak in English. So these families have changed, these settlements have changed. They are no longer purely working class settlements. Truckloads of women go to work in the factories everyday which they didn't before. There are beauty parlours, marriage halls, community centres and schools that the people have set up themselves. In these settlements, their needs are less about water, electricity and sewage. Instead, they want their aspirations fulfilled, and want to be integrated into the middle class of the city. Therefore, they want more schools, they want vocational training, they want health, and they want culture. This is something that they are fighting to get, but are not conscious that they are fighting specifically for this.

The voting patterns of these old settlements have also changed. Whereas previously they voted for progressive parties who promised them regularisation of their settlements, they now vote for the more conservative parties and

There are other increasingly have middle-class values. Unlike before, they are new concepts that reluctant to join movements against evictions and/or reform. The have emerged nature of their relationship with officialdom has changed from among the more protest to negotiation. They also constitute the largest group of radical planners voters in Karachi and their voices are heard. Meanwhile, and academics—shopkeepers, *mandi* operators and transporters have become very the concepts of powerful political agents. They have not yet exercised their power, new urbanism— but they are in a position to do so and I don't think it would be and budding too different in the rest of Southasia. architects and
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trained in them.

There are other new concepts that have emerged among the more radical planners and academics—the concepts of new urbanism—and budding architects and planners are being trained in them. This has also been pushed by international financial institutions and Western academia who are promoting the ideas of higher densities, mixed land-uses and 'inclusive cities'. However, the three most dense cities in the world are situated in Southasia—Dhaka with a density of 4,440 persons per hectare, Mumbai with 3,090 and Karachi with 2,800. These densities could not have been achieved without the violation of existing density laws. For instance, Karachi's by-laws permit a maximum of 1,625 persons per hectare and Mumbai's existing density could not have been achieved if its floor-to-area ratio of 1:1.33 had been followed. The difference between the actual density and rules and regulations is because low-income settlements have extremely high densities. In Karachi, they go up to 6,000 persons per hectare, similar to that of Dharavi in Mumbai, while elite settlements have densities of less than 200 persons per hectare. Also, housing units on 400–2,000 square metres of land in Karachi are only 2 per cent of the housing stock, but they occupy 26 per cent of the residential land of the city. Similar figures have been quoted for the other Southasian megacities. This form of development not only continues to take place but has increased due to the changes in the urban development paradigm. But the question is, is it sustainable?

Let me summarise. Megacities will have to find homes, transport and social services for their new arrivals who are not related to any formally structured

group. They will have to cater to the needs and aspirations of the older informal settlements, which can only happen if they are protected from evictions and relocations and supported through laws, regulations and procedures in developing the social and physical infrastructure that they are already trying to develop on their own. New societal values will have to be promoted to accommodate the changes that are taking place. I will also briefly mention something else which is important: the nature of social change in the older settlements. The most important group in the census is between 15 and 24 years of age because it is the present and the future. In this age group, in 1981, 39 per cent of women in Karachi were married. Today, in this age group, less than 20 per cent women are married; 17 per cent of men were married in 1981. Eight per cent of men are married today. For the first time in the history of the city, we have an overwhelming majority of unmarried adolescents and this is enough to change social structures and gender relations, and this is what is happening. Extended families, clans, settlements based on clan are rapidly becoming a thing of the past. There are other factors too: court marriages where a couple goes to a court to seek protection because it's a self-willed marriage. In 1992, we had 12–15 applications per day for court marriages. In 2006, we had 250 plus applications per day. It has probably increased, but a time will come when it will decrease rapidly when the concept of marrying of your own free will becomes acceptable in society. More than half the applications today come from the rural areas. These are important changes that are taking place which are going to affect the future of these cities.

One important thing is the changing nature of official planning. We inherited the welfare state model from our colonial masters. However, we were not able to implement it except on paper due to institutional and financial constraints and a lack of political will. This is what is normally said, but I don't think they are the only reasons. The real reason was well-entrenched anti-poor social systems and land-ownership patterns. This concept of the welfare state has been eclipsed by the neoliberalism of the 1990s and beyond, and has been promoted aggressively both by international institutions and their local partners. Collectively,

these organisations and their local partners have promoted what has come to be known as the 'free market' economy, which aims to remove subsidies on health, education and housing; increase taxation on utilities; sell government industrial and real estate assets to the national or international corporate sector; and remove restrictions on imports and exports. This had been done. I am not against this, but there are other considerations.

Whole new terminologies and concepts have been developed to support this market economy. It is often heard that 'it is not the business of the state to do business', or 'cities are the engines of growth', and concepts such as direct foreign investment and linking economic well-being with GDP growth have had a major impact on the national policies of Southasian countries and especially on the megacities. A whole new world, a whole new thinking has become acceptable. From what I read about India, 500 Special Economic Zones have been established and corporate farming has been promoted. And, according to some reports (I am not certain about their accuracy) between 2010 and 2015, it was estimated that 400 million people would willingly or unwillingly be forced to move from rural to urban areas. This is twice the population of the United Kingdom, France and Germany put together. All this has also affected agriculture. It is replacing food crops by cash crops, and in the process increasing the cost and exacerbating shortage of food, thus making the state vulnerable to corporate sector pressures and interests. I think this was nicely summed up by a farmer in Tharparkar who said to me, *Pehle hum jo botay thay, khathe thay, ab jo botay hain, usko bechta hain, aur khana kharidtey hain* (Before we used to eat what we grew, now we grow it to sell and then buy our food). I think this has affected a very large section of our population.

The free market promoted political reforms and deregulations that have also had a major impact on property markets and have reshaped the politics of land development. Trading across borders in gold and contraband goods is no longer lucrative. As a result, the gangs and mafias involved in these underworld activities have become involved in the real estate business and linked up with their underworld partners. The narcotic trade today funds much of the real estate

development, at least in my city. All this has introduced an element of violence and targeted killings and kidnappings of opponents, rivals and social activists in the land and real estate sector.

The state in almost all cases has responded to these market pressures and made land available for development through land-use conversions, new development schemes and by bulldozing informal settlements. NGOs and CBOs who have challenged this process have faced two constraints (apart from their own internal weaknesses and culture): one is an unsympathetic media, which reports stories but not the causes, and the other is an absence of laws to prevent environmentally and socially inappropriate land conversions. Even where such laws do exist, rules, regulations and procedures and institutions to manage and implement them are often missing. As a result, courts often deliver judgements that promote inequity, poverty and social fragmentation. The media is also increasingly being controlled by a few organisations, and 82 per cent of Karachiites have access to TV according to the census.

To come to a few more important issues. What has been elaborated and said before has had a profound effect on the shape and politics of our cities. The shape that our cities are taking and the reasons for it are the result of a powerful nexus of developers and investors (many of dubious origins, otherwise such large sums of money could not have been mobilised), compromised government institutions and bureaucrats, and politicians seeking global capital for re-shaping their cities in the image of the West—an image that is promoted (implicitly or explicitly) by the leaders of the market economy. To promote this paradigm, a new term and concept has been developed, and that is the world-class city.

Karachi, Mumbai, Delhi, all aspire to become world-class cities. Some wish to become like Shanghai, as with Mumbai, others wish to

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become like Dubai, as with Karachi, although the context of Shanghai or Dubai is very far removed from them. A world-class city has been defined beautifully and also sympathetically by Mahbubur Rahman (a Bangladeshi planner) in a brilliant paper and in other literature as well. According to the world-class city agenda, the city should have iconic architecture. It should be recognised by symbols like the highest building or fountain in the world. It should be branded for a particular cultural, industrial or other product. It should cater to international tourism and hold international events. It should have high-rise apartments as opposed to upgraded settlements and low-rise neighbourhoods. It should have malls as opposed to traditional markets. This is how it has been described and this is what a global city or a world-class city today is trying to achieve.

To establish this image, poverty is pushed out of the city to the periphery and already poor-unfriendly by-laws are made even more unfriendly by permitting environmentally and socially unfriendly land-use conversions. This is driving out informal industry and businesses from poor settlements. The three most important repercussions of this agenda are: (1) that global capital increasingly determines the physical and social form of the city; (2) in the process, projects have replaced planning; and (3) land-use is now determined on the basis of land value alone and not on the basis of social and environmental considerations. Land has unashamedly become a commodity and so the poor cannot be adequately serviced. The city stands divided as never before. My city is now four cities. They speak different languages, they have different types of shopping centres. They even have different types of educational institutions, and they only meet at the beach or in some parks at the city centre.

We have conclusively shown that high-rise settlements can be upgraded to four or five storeys with the help of the residents and can be regularised. So we do not feel the need to pull down these settlements and re-plan them as the state insists on doing. From what one has gathered, about 500,000 people were evicted from Delhi in preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth Games alone. Numerous studies show what happens to the poor people after relocation: there is loss of social and physical capital, and the relocation sites are often 20-30

kilometres—sometimes much more—from where they work. Children’s education is the most serious disruption. In one of the projects that we opposed, which was partially successful, 2,800 students could not take their metric and pre-metric exams because their settlements had been bulldozed.

The world-class city image is all about gentrification and it has no place in it for informal businesses and hawkers, except as organised tourist attractions. Hawkers make life for low income people and commuters affordable and easy. But this is not recognised and large-scale evictions of informal businesses and hawkers have taken place without any compensation in all the megacities in Asia, of which Calcutta is perhaps the worst example. This has impoverished millions of families.

Projects should seek to serve the interests of the majority who live in our cities, who are the lower-middle class and the working class.

The free market economy has also led to a considerable liquidity in banks and leasing companies. This has been utilised for providing loans for the purchase of cars. In 2006-07, Karachi registered 606 cars per day. When I was in Delhi in 2007, I was told that car registrations were 1,250 per day. Bangkok was even more at 1,750 cars per day. There is a nexus between the automobile industry, the banking sector and the oil sector. We learnt this when we discovered that 1.6 billion USD worth of loans had been given by Karachi banks for the purchase and leasing of cars. Taseem Siddique went to the prime minister on our behalf and said, ‘Can’t we use this for some other purposes?’ He was excited, so we had a meeting with 18 bank heads who said no, that it was automobiles they would invest in because the loans were short, they knew the clients, they were sure of returns, and housing was not something they would invest in. One of them said to me when we were leaving, ‘Arif, you must realise that the automobile industry, the banking sector are one and the same thing, they are not two different things. ‘These are the new realities which we have to deal with.

There are some other factors that I will also just touch on. Transport: we can have all the mass transit systems, we have big plans for Karachi, but when we study them we see that transportation for people living on the fringes, in large

informal settlements, will not improve. The transport that we will be providing them will be far too expensive, unless a very major subsidy is attached to it. It is expensive because we are building on a process of build-operate-and-transfer, which is also a free market economy concept, whereas if we just let the Pakistan Railways manage it, the costs would be considerably less.

Karachi has about 80,000 autos and we have an additional 60,000 *qingqis*—six-seater motorcycle rickshaws. The Karachiites love them, they find them cheaper, and women find them safer. But the government wants to ban them, and in fact they did, but a High Court of Sindh decided that they are essential for the people. Now the problem is, what do we do with them in the face of so much official and middle-class antagonism towards them. Even though they now have a right to function, the police does everything possible to limit their movement. The other way in which the transport issue is being tackled is with motorbikes. In 2004, we had 400,000 motorbikes, while today they number 1.7 million. Our surveys at bus stops showed that a majority want motorbikes. And if we reduce the price to 20,000 rupees instead of 32,000 rupees, I don't think we will need a mass transit system or any expansion of a mass transit system. Now the question is, do we promote these forms of movement, these forms of transport? It is a serious discussion in which we are engaged—should they be promoted?

I don't know any cities that have produced an alternative vision for the city. There has been a lot of writing on 'what should be or should not be', but a vision that is acceptable or seriously pursued has not been presented. When the Karachi Special Development Plan was being made, I was a member of one of the committees, and we said, 'Let's not have this vision of a world-class city, but a vision of a pedestrian and commuter-friendly city.' It would change everything if such a vision was accepted. But one person from the Asian Development Bank who was a member of the meeting said, 'With this vision, nobody would invest any money in the city.'

The other serious issue is that projects are replacing planning. Karachi for the foreseeable future will only have projects. There is going to be no serious planning,

and planning will be overtaken by projects. Accepting this, I tried to promote some principles on the basis of which projects could be judged and/or modified. These principles are: one, projects should not damage the ecology of the region in which the city is located; two, projects should, as a priority, seek to serve the interests of the majority who live in our cities, who are the lower-middle class and the working class; three, projects should decide land-use on the basis of social and environmental considerations and not on the basis of land value alone; and four, projects should protect the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the communities that live in them. In my opinion, this would produce much better projects and improve people's lives. But again, at the same meeting, the same person responded, 'With your four points, there would be no projects.' So that is another issue which needs to be taken into consideration.

To conclude, the question is whether the megalomania and opportunism of politicians and planners will accept a new and more humane paradigm that curtails their profits and decommunitises land. I think that this is a very fundamental issue. I do not think that they will unless they are pressurised by city-wide networks armed with alternative research and an alternative vision. In this, I think professional education can play a very important role. At present, professional education is increasingly becoming pro-neoliberal in a negative sense of the term. I have often thought that it might help if graduating architects, planners and engineers could take an oath similar to that of doctors, and if they did not follow the terms of the oath, their names be removed from the list of practicing professionals.

In 1983, after evaluating an important urban renewal project which led to poverty and environmental degradation, I made a pledge in writing. I quote: 'I will not do projects that will irreparably damage the ecology and environment of the area in which they are located. I will not do projects that increase poverty, dislocate people and destroy the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of communities that live in the city. I will not do projects that destroy multi-class space and violate building by-laws and zoning regulations. And I will always object to insensitive projects that do all this, provided I can offer viable alternatives.'

Well I have tried to keep my promise, except that I have violated building rules and regulations, but they were bad ones. But I have put this before the leaders of the architectural community many times, 'Why don't we have such an oath?' And one of the architects answered, *Arif bhai, hum toh bazaar meh bhettain hai* (Arif, we are part of a market). And this is a reality that we have to take into consideration when discussing a new paradigm.

Arif Hasan is an urban philosopher and social researcher based in Karachi. He has been involved with the Orangi Pilot Project since 1982, and is the founding Chairman of the Urban Resource Centre.



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