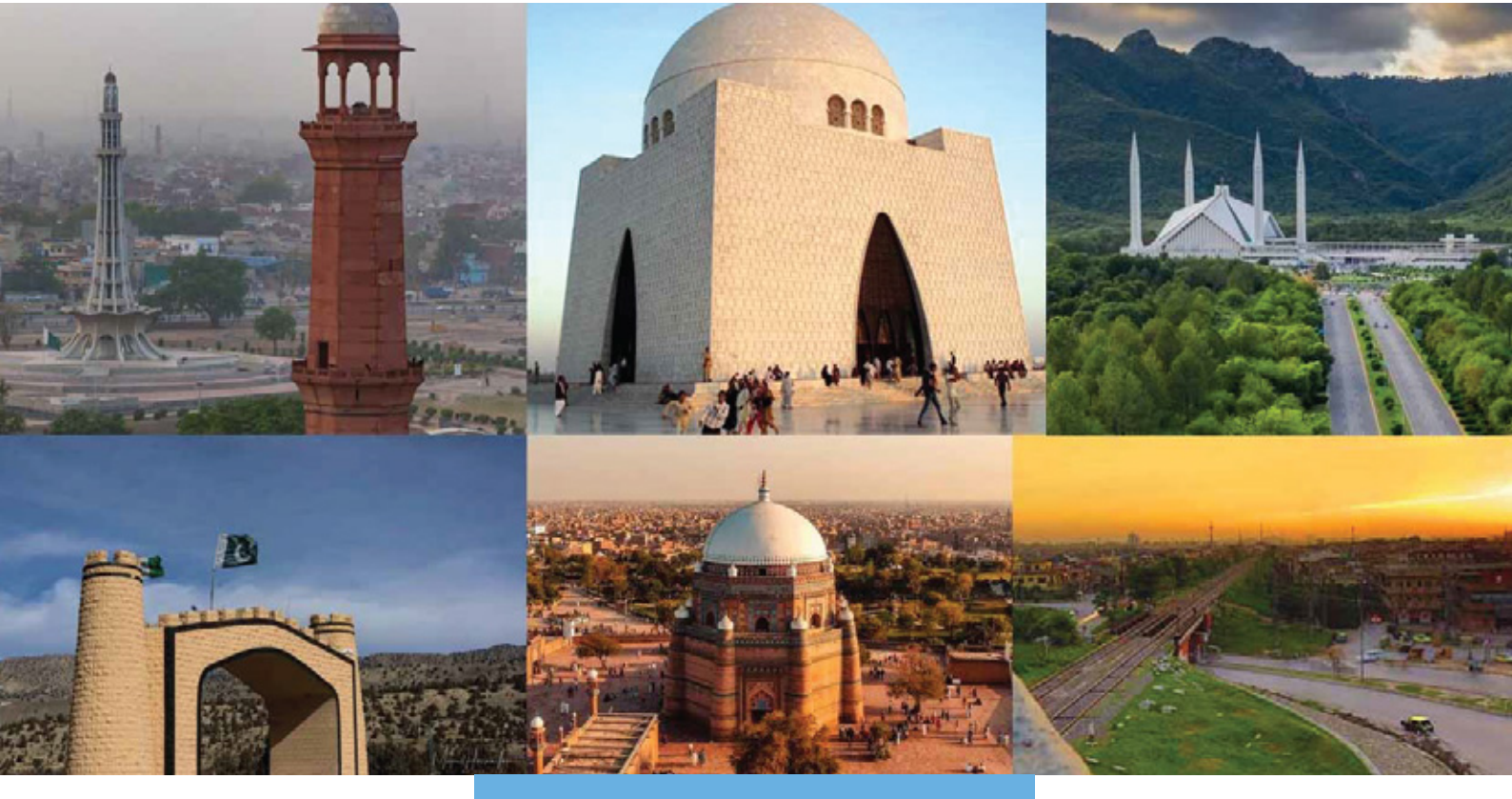


# RESHAPE CITIES INTO ECONOMIC MACHINES



## Saddam Hussein

Cities mark one of the most critical junctures in the human history, signifying a monumental shift from the transient nomadic existence to the permanence of settled agricultural societies. This began when early humans realized that settling in one place, cultivating food, and establishing communities around surplus production could lead to significant advancements. As people embraced this new way of life, the first cities began to emerge, laying the foundation for complex social structures and economic systems in the centuries to come. This transition from wandering to settlement, catalyzed a profound change in human activity, sparking the specialization of labor. Individuals could now focus on specific trades such as pottery, metalworking, or administration, fostering a rich tapestry of economic exchange. Thus, these early cities became hubs of innovation, driving economic growth and development through their vibrant marketplaces and burgeoning networks of trade.

Hence, for next many centuries, cities across the planet had been the epicenters of socio-political, scientific, technological, and economic progress. These served as breeding grounds for new ideas, where advancements in governance, technology, and infrastructure took root. From the grand structures of ancient Rome to the bustling trade routes of medieval cities, urban centers have continuously evolved, reflecting and shaping the course of human development.

In modern times, cities have now transcended their traditional roles as mere marketplaces or commercial hubs. Modern urban centers are dynamic ecosystems of innovation and creativity, where entrepreneurship thrives and new ideas flourish. These are no longer just places where goods are exchanged but have become vibrant centers for the rapid dissemination of information, cutting-edge technological advancements, and business ventures.

Fast forwarding, today's cities are characterized by their diversity and adaptability. They have embraced roles beyond economic exchange, acting as crucibles for cultural, intellectual, and technological progress. In essence, cities continue to be at the forefront of human advancement, driving the evolution of society through their vibrant, ever-evolving landscapes of innovation and enterprise. What does this all tell us? It tells us that cities, with all its dynamics and dimensions have always proved to be the engines of growth.

## **In The Beginning**

The rise of early cities was driven by several key factors. Firstly, as agriculture advanced, early communities began producing more food than necessary for immediate survival, creating an agricultural surplus. This surplus allowed individuals to move beyond mere subsistence farming and engage in specialized activities such as craftsmanship, trade, and administration. This shift was crucial in developing the first division of labor, where people could focus on specific trades like pottery or metalworking, thus fostering economic growth and innovation.

Secondly, early cities typically arose at strategic locations such as the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia and the Nile or along crucial trade routes. These locations were ideal for long-distance trade, which not only brought wealth but also facilitated connections between distant regions. For instance, the cities of ancient Mesopotamia benefited from their position along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which allowed them to trade goods like grains and textiles with neighboring regions, thus integrating them into broader economic networks.

Thirdly, the accumulation of wealth and people in these urban centers required organized defense to safeguard against external threats. Many early cities, such as those in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, were fortified with walls and supported by military forces, which helped ensure the stability necessary for economic activities to flourish.

Fourthly, governance became a critical element in managing resources, distributing surplus, organizing labor, and resolving conflicts. As a result, urban centers evolved into political and administrative hubs, controlling economic flows and implementing taxation. For example, ancient Sumerian cities like Uruk had established administrative systems to oversee trade and resource distribution, further supporting their economic systems.

Fifthly, permanent marketplaces emerged as central hubs for economic activity within these cities. They functioned as venues where goods were exchanged, information disseminated, and new products introduced. These markets attracted traders from various regions, boosting economic prosperity. For example, the Agora in Athens was a bustling marketplace that played a crucial role in the city's economy and social life.

Sixthly, infrastructure development was another key factor in promoting economic activity. Early urban centers invested in constructing roads, ports, and irrigation systems, which facilitated trade and transportation. The construction of the Roman roads, for instance, greatly enhanced the connectivity of cities across the empire, linking agricultural areas with urban markets and establishing cities as central nodes of economic activity.

It is obvious now that, right from their inception, cities have been the pulse of economic drive. Governance, regulations, defense, and infrastructure all erected in parallel with one underlying purpose - to boost commerce and drive development .

## **The Tale of Pakistani Cities**

Now coming to Pakistan, its old cities such as Lahore, Peshawar, Karachi, and many other, have been avenues of trade and commerce for centuries, literally being at the crossroads of history, where culture and economy have intertwined to shape the identity of the region. Lahore is always a city beyond words: it is the "Heart of Pakistan," and for centuries, it has been one of those grand porte cities along the Grand Trunk Road that was initiated in the Mughal period. It has been an artery of commercial routes connecting South Asia to Central Asia and through the dynamic streets of Lahore, wave after wave of merchants, wanderers, and narrative tellers passed . The oldest surviving market in South Asia is renowned for Anarkali Bazaar, which remains a vibrant marketplace even today and was originally known for the trade of spices, jewelry, and textiles. Similarly, Liberty Market is based on the modern nucleus but retains the rich culture of Lahori business and craftsmanship that has attracted merchants to Lahore from all over for generations.

Moving up north, Peshawar, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, sits at the gateway to Central Asia. It has been a crucial stop on the Silk Road, with traders from Persia, China, and beyond passing through its historic Qissa Khwani Bazaar , a marketplace once filled with the voices of travelers and storytellers sharing their tales as they exchanged goods from distant lands. This city's strategic importance as a trade route has long made it a vibrant melting pot of cultures and economies, weaving together the threads of the East and West.

Then comes Karachi - often known as the 'Mother of the Poor', as it accommodates most of the people that takes shelter in the city for bread and butter - is Pakistan's largest metropolis as well as the country's largest port city . Its economic power has been traced to the British colonial period, when Karachi became an important port to connect India with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Saddar Bazaar and the now-famous Empress Market were hot spots of trade, where merchants from all corners of the world would gather, and Karachi's coastal position allowed it to grow rapidly into the sprawling megacity it is today, widely referred to as the backbone of the Pakistan economy.

Another city, Faisalabad, often called the "Manchester of Pakistan," also has a rich history as an industrial and commercial hub. Originally known as Lyallpur , it was established during the British colonial period as an agricultural market town. However, its rapid transformation into an economic powerhouse came with the development of its vast textile industry, which continues to drive the city's economy today. And yet, the story doesn't end here.

Cities like Multan - the City of Saints, also played a critical role in economic exchange, famous for its bazaars filled with vibrant colors of handwoven textiles and ceramics, which attracted traders from across the globe. Likewise, Quetta, located near the Afghan border, acted as a key trade route for Central Asia, with bustling markets that traded fruits/dry fruits, carpets, and precious stones. Even the historical city of Hyderabad in Sindh was a flourishing center of commerce under the Talpur dynasty, with its Shahi Bazaar being one of the longest markets in Asia, stretching over two miles.

These cities weren't just geographical points on a map; they were living, breathing entities fueled by commerce. The bazaars and markets were the heartbeat of economic life, where goods, ideas, and cultures converged. Whether it was Peshawar's traders bringing silk and spices from the East, Faisalabad's craftsmen weaving tales through their textiles, or Karachi's ports linking Pakistan to the global economy, the thread that bound all these cities together was their role as bustling centers of economic activity. These cities weren't just local hubs; they were known far and wide, famous for their commerce and their role in connecting the region to the outside world. From the Mughal Empire to British rule and beyond, it was the economic vibrancy of these cities that made them known to the world, securing their place in history as beacons of trade and culture.

## **The Urban Puzzle: What Went Off Track?**

If one is curious that despite such a rich urban history, what went wrong with our cities, "Contextualizing Pakistan's Cities" by Dr. Nadeem Ul Haque is a must-read. This collection of sharp insights on urban governance and development reveals a critical truth: the difference between wealthy and poor nations often lies in the productivity of their cities.

For centuries, cities have been the engines of innovation, growth, and progress, evolving from traditional trade hubs into modern powerhouses of entrepreneurship and technological advancement. Today's cities thrive on diversity, learning, and networking, offering fertile ground for creativity and development. Dr. Haque brilliantly answers the burning question: Why do some cities fuel national prosperity while others lag behind?

The answer lies in how cities are structured. Dynamic, inclusive urban centers boost individual productivity and social organization, fostering inclusive growth without discriminating by age, gender, or class. Well-managed cities balance historical legacies with modern needs, creating spaces for commerce, innovation, and conflict resolution.

Yet, in Pakistan, urban policies are trapped in outdated frameworks. Cities are sprawling horizontally, gobbling up valuable agricultural land, while housing remains in short supply for growing populations. Zoning is poor, commerce stifled, and governance fragmented into multiple layers of inefficient bureaucracy. Large tracts of government-owned land sit idle, blocking critical economic opportunities. In fact, cities have turned into a resource for rent-seeking and protecting the privileged. Zoning and the misuse of public land have become key tools for distributing rents. Pakistan's lack of transparent laws, clear property rights, and effective city administration has only fueled this issue. Centralized and opaque processes have not only stifled economic growth but also spurred rampant speculation.

Dr. Haque doesn't hold back till here. He calls for a radical rethink: fiscal federalism, urban policies centered on development, smarter building regulations, and more professional, accountable urban governance. Commerce, not government, must become the heart of city function. In the lines to follow, I will be analyzing some of the factors in detail that PIDE's research is been echoing for long.

## **Anchored in Colonial Antiquity?**

Early development policies in Pakistan, rooted in colonial bureaucracies, focused on industrial growth through industrial estates outside the city. This approach expanded the power of policymakers, who controlled development through licenses, subsidies, and protectionism. Unfortunately, this outdated model still persists, limiting economic innovation. Our policymakers remain fixated on old planning methods, toggling between industry and agriculture, while neglecting domestic commerce, services, and construction.

However, contemporary cities foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity by bringing people together to exchange ideas, goods, and services. Research shows that thriving cities are dense, walkable, and feature high-rise, mixed-use centers. Sadly, Pakistan's cities remain sprawling, with colonial estates and vast open spaces, devoid of the development seen elsewhere.

Construction, a key indicator of growth, is the backbone of economic development, as seen in cities worldwide filled with tower cranes. In contrast, Pakistan's cities rarely witness such dynamic growth, stifled by colonial zoning laws that resist density and high-rise development. Without real urban development and a booming construction sector, expecting accelerated growth in Pakistan remains a distant dream.

## **Cities for Cars Only**

PIDE is of the view that Pakistani cities are being built more for cars than for people. Walking and biking, once a regular part of life, have been pushed aside by a car-obsessed culture. Highways, flyovers, and underpasses now dominate the landscape, making it nearly impossible to walk or bike safely. Sidewalks have disappeared, and bike lanes are nowhere to be found. Crossing the street feels like an exhausting climb, even for the fittest among us. Public transport, too, is being moved to elevated platforms, leaving less and less space for pedestrians and cyclists.

This car-first approach comes at a heavy price - traffic is a constant headache, pollution is on the rise, and so much time is wasted stuck in traffic jams. The more our cities grow, the less these car-centered solutions seem to work. Cars, rather than improving mobility, are making it worse. Expanding roads and building more underpasses won't solve the problem, as the space needed for cars and parking will always outstrip supply. It's clear that cities need to rethink their priorities and shift toward transportation that serves everyone, not just car owners, by focusing on sustainable and inclusive mobility solutions.



## The Reluctance to Rise

The city planners in Pakistan still refuse to embrace vertical growth, unlike cities like Dubai, Seoul, or New York, where skyscrapers symbolize progress. Instead, Pakistan has clung to sprawling, low-rise development rooted in colonial-era ideas and capacity limitations. This obsession with single-family homes and two-story limits has created a 'Plotistan' - a term coined by Dr. Nadeem Ul Haque - of housing societies riddled with delays and scams, while cities become congested, underdeveloped, and car-dependent.

The reluctance to allow high-rises prevents the expansion of crucial spaces like playgrounds, community centers, and pedestrian-friendly areas. High-rise development would not only rejuvenate old, cramped neighborhoods of old bazaars, but also offer much-needed housing solutions. By allowing buildings to rise by just a few floors, cities could unlock investment, create jobs, and address the growing housing crisis.

All of this is leaving Pakistani cities without vibrant downtowns or central hubs. Instead of creating dense, mixed-use districts where people can live, work, and play within a walkable space, cities are spreading out endlessly. This unchecked expansion is also swallowing valuable agricultural land, much of it sustained by costly irrigation, all for the sake of sprawl.

Vertical growth is not just about building upwards - it's about making cities livable, inclusive, and sustainable. City planners need to prioritize people over cars, remove the outdated two-floor restriction, and embrace the potential of urban verticality to transform Pakistan's cities for the better.

## The Unwarranted Collateral Damage

It appears that our misguided urban policies have resulted in a collateral damage of khokhas/dhabas/chabri walas - the street vendors. Street vending is a timeless and legitimate avenue for the underprivileged to earn a living. Historically, street vendors - from kiosk owners to mobile vendors - have thrived in cities worldwide, offering everything from fruit to unique collectibles. In Pakistani cities, these vendors were once a vibrant part of local life, providing affordable goods and personal touches that larger stores couldn't match.

However, the rise of suburban development in the 80s led to the erosion of these vital vendors. Streets were widened for cars, and vendors were pushed out, often left destitute. The shift towards an American suburban model - favoring cars and single-family homes - meant less space for the vendors, who were increasingly removed from urban spaces.

Despite numerous poverty alleviation programs, such as cash transfers and skill development initiatives, many of which fail to address the fundamental issue: where can the poor set up shop? Without designated spaces, their entrepreneurial spirit is stifled.

Street vending is not just about survival; it's a vibrant part of city life that enhances community interactions, offers diverse goods, and promotes price competition. It's high time Pakistani cities, especially the new developments within cities, embraced street vending, integrating it into their urban fabric. Instead of pushing vendors out, cities should develop

thoughtful policies that balance cleanliness and aesthetics with the need for entrepreneurial space. If global landmarks can accommodate street vendors, why not our own cities? It's time to give the poor a fair chance to thrive, not just handouts.

## **The Factor of Non-Inclusivity**

Pakistani cities, despite their few positives, exhibit pronounced deficiencies in inclusivity that undermine their social and economic fabric. The landscape of urban development is often characterized by a glaring divide between the affluent and the underprivileged. Expansive suburban projects, driven by the allure of American-style residential models, prioritize the construction of gated communities and luxury developments at the expense of traditional neighborhoods and informal settlements. This shift not only marginalizes lower-income residents but also erodes the historical and cultural significance of areas once bustling with local businesses and street vendors.

The urban planning model frequently prioritizes car-centric infrastructure over pedestrian-friendly environments. The focus on broad avenues and high-speed thoroughfares contributes to the disenfranchisement of those who rely on public transportation or non-motorized means of travel. This imbalance exacerbates social segregation, isolating lower-income populations from economic opportunities and essential services.

Affordable housing is another critical area where inclusivity falters. The scarcity of low-cost housing options forces many individuals into informal settlements on the outskirts of cities, where access to basic amenities and infrastructure is limited. These areas often lack the necessary public services, such as healthcare, education, and sanitation, which further perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Moreover, the urban environment often fails to accommodate people with disabilities or other marginalized groups, highlighting a significant gap in the inclusivity of public spaces. The absence of accessible facilities and services limits the participation of these individuals in the city's social and economic activities, further entrenching their marginalization.

The cumulative effect of these factors creates a fragmented urban experience where the benefits of economic growth and development are unevenly distributed. To foster genuinely inclusive cities, there must be a concerted effort to integrate affordable housing, support informal economies, and create accessible public spaces that cater to all residents. Only through such comprehensive measures can Pakistani cities hope to bridge the gap between different socio-economic groups and cultivate a more equitable and vibrant urban environment.

## **Cities Without Soul**

Pakistani cities, once rich with cultural and historical significance, face a profound challenge as rapid urbanization threatens to erode their heritage. The contemporary urban development often disregards these cultural treasures in favor of modernity and expansion. The relentless drive for progress has led to the demolition of historic buildings, the displacement of traditional markets, and the loss of culturally significant neighborhoods.

Ironically, while Pakistani cities grapple with the erosion of their cultural and historical identity, contemporary cities around the world are actively creating and preserving their own heritage. Cities like Dubai and Singapore, despite being relatively young, have invested heavily in crafting distinctive architectural styles and cultural landmarks to establish their own sense of history and identity. They have adopted strategies to integrate their modern infrastructure with cultural elements, thereby creating an artificial yet cohesive narrative of progress intertwined with heritage.

In contrast, the erosion of Pakistan's historical sites and cultural hubs reflects a disjointed approach to urbanization, where the past is sacrificed at the altar of development. This not only diminishes the cities' cultural richness but also impedes the potential for tourism and economic benefits that stem from preserving heritage. The loss of these cultural assets means losing a critical connection to the past, which could otherwise offer valuable lessons and a sense of continuity.

To reverse this trend, there must be a renewed focus on integrating heritage preservation and contemporary establishment of heritage into urban planning. This involves protecting and restoring historical landmarks, supporting cultural institutions, and promoting policies that balance development with conservation. By valuing and preserving the cultural and historical dimensions of their cities, Pakistan can safeguard its unique identity while continuing to evolve in a manner that honors its rich past.

## **Conclusion**

PIDE believes that there is a sense of urgency to transform Pakistan's cities into economic machines. For that, a bold reimagining that cuts through bureaucratic red tape and hands the wheel to commerce and entrepreneurship is needed. Outdated master plans should be replaced with flexible guidelines, while zoning needs to simplify into clear distinctions between city centers and suburbs. A unified authority should oversee urban management, allowing high-rise buildings by relaxing floor area ratios and nurturing a thriving rental market. Revolutionary car policies, including congestion tolls and separate parking sales, must complement an efficient public transport system that serves every corner, especially congested areas. Legalizing and establishing street vending zones can revitalize local economies, and unlocking government-owned land will optimize city resources. Designing cities as 15-minute hubs, where essential services are within a short walk, will boost economic activity by concentrating people in vibrant, vertical spaces. Integrating these modern strategies with a renewed focus on preserving cultural and historical landmarks will ensure Pakistan's cities evolve while cherishing their unique heritage. This blend of innovation and tradition promises to create dynamic, resilient urban environments that honor the past and embrace the future.



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