

Karachi as an Urban Center of Nationalism: Colonial Urbanization and Political Mobilization (1913-1947)

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Abstract

This article explores the transformation of Karachi as an important urban center of nationalism during the late colonial period (1913–1947). It focuses on its historical trajectory, beginning with its capture by the East India Company in 1839. And its subsequent role as the capital of Sindh from 1843 to 1847. After Sindh's annexation into the Bombay Presidency in 1847, Karachi remained a divisional capital until 1936, when Sindh was separated from the Bombay Presidency and Karachi once again became the provincial capital. The period from 1913 to 1947 is critical as it marks the emergence of Karachi as a center for political mobilization, first during the movement for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency and later as the center of the Pakistan Movement. By analyzing the interplay between colonial urbanization, political activism, and the role of Karachi in nationalist movements. This study argues that Karachi's urban landscape became a site of contestation and collaboration, shaping the trajectory of anti-colonial struggles in British India.

Keywords: Karachi, Colonial Sindh, Nationalism, Colonial Bombay, British Rule

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INTRODUCTION

Karachi, a metropolitan port city of Sindh, Pakistan, underwent a significant transformation under the British Raj. It emerged as a critical hub for nationalist movements between 1913 and 1947. It was captured by the East India Company in 1839. After the annexation of Sindh, Karachi became the capital replacing Hyderabad (1843) under the governorship of Sir Charles Napier. However, in 1847, Sindh was annexed into the Bombay Presidency, reducing Karachi to a divisional capital. This administrative subordination persisted until 1936, when Sindh was separated from Bombay, and Karachi regained its status as a provincial capital (Ansari, 1991). This colonial urbanization and political restructuring laid the groundwork for Karachi's emergence as a center of nationalist activities, shaped by the interplay of colonial urbanism and urban nationalism.

Colonial urbanism, as a theoretical concept, refers to the deliberate shaping of urban spaces by colonial powers to reflect their social, political, and economic goals. These strategies often involved spatial segregation, prioritizing imperial infrastructure, and reinforcing colonial authority (Beverley, 2011). In the case of Karachi, colonial urbanism manifested in the division of the city into distinct zones, with European-style cantonments and civil lines reserved for the British elite, while native populations were relegated to overcrowded and poorly serviced neighbourhoods (Mahmud, 2000; Kosambi & Brush, 1988). This spatial segregation not only reinforced racial hierarchies but also created a sense of alienation among the local population, which later fueled demands for self-rule.

The following figure illustrates the spatial and social segmentation of colonial cities like Karachi, highlighting the deliberate urban planning of the British Raj. The diagram represents the division into distinct sectors, such as the European cantonments for military and administrative purposes, the Intermediate Sector for mixed Asian and Eurasian populations, and the Indian Sector, which housed laboring classes and indigenous communities. The Fort and the commercial waterfront are key parts of this area, focusing on trade and defense. The outer areas show the social and economic differences and organized land use typical of colonial urban planning in Karachi.

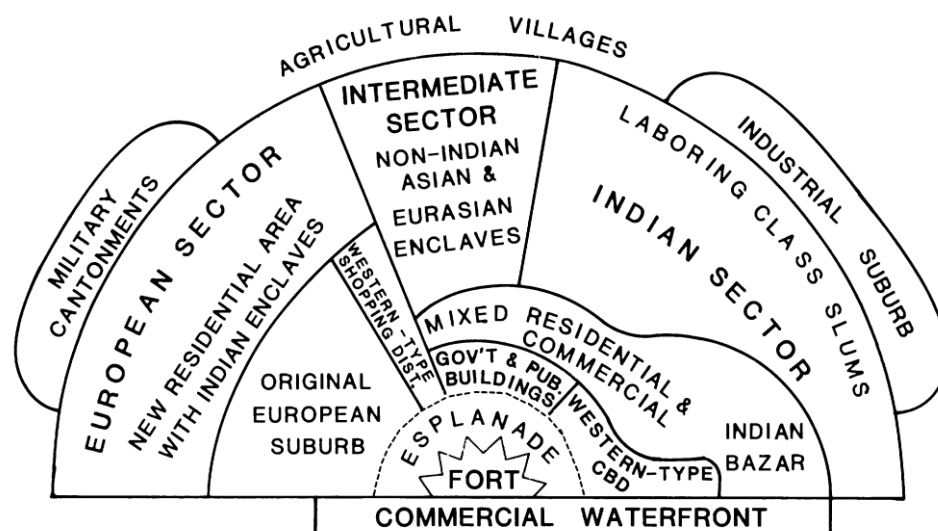


Figure 1: Schematic Model of the Colonial Port City

Source: Kosambi and Brush (1988)

Urban nationalism, on the other hand, refers to the expression of anti-colonial resistance through localized issues of public policy and urban life. In colonial societies, urban spaces often became arenas of resistance, where grievances over housing, water rates, and municipal governance fueled broader anti-colonial struggles (Magid, 1992). Karachi, as a colonial port city, served as a microcosm of significant political and social struggles, where tensions surrounding governance, representation, and identity manifested in public spaces like parks, bazaars, and educational institutions. By examining Karachi through the lens of colonial urbanism and urban nationalism, this article explores how the city's urban landscape became a site of contestation and collaboration, shaping the trajectory of anti-colonial struggles in British India.

The study of nationalism in colonial India has traditionally focused on institutions, political movements, and ideologies, often tracing its origins to the late colonial period following the Indian Mutiny of 1857. However, recent scholarship has emphasized the need to examine the urban roots of nationalism, particularly in cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Karachi, which served as hubs for political mobilization and intellectual exchange (Masselos, 2007; Seal, 1968). These cities, shaped by colonial urban planning and economic policies, became fertile ground for new ideas and political activism, particularly among the educated middle class (Joshi, 2020).

Karachi's role in the nationalist movement has often been overshadowed by studies of larger cities like Bombay and Calcutta. However, as this article argues, Karachi's unique position as a port city and commercial hub enabled it to become a microcosm of broader anti-colonial struggles. The diverse population, which includes Sindhi trader and politicians, Gujarati traders, Punjabi laborers, and Baloch artisans, has contributed to a vibrant and dynamic political culture characterized by fierce contests over issues of language, religion, and political representation (Low, 1991). This article situates Karachi within the broader scholarship on colonialism, nationalism, and urban studies. It highlights the city's significance as a site where colonial urbanism and urban nationalism intersected to shape the trajectory of anti-colonial resistance.

The annexation of Sindh into the Bombay Presidency in 1847 marginalized the region, as Bombay flourished as a financial and political hub while Sindh remained neglected (H. Khuhro, 1982). Proposals to transfer Sindh to Punjab, first raised in 1856 and again in the 1880s, were rejected primarily due to financial and administrative considerations rather than concern for Sindh's interests. This long-standing neglect sparked local frustrations, leading Sindhi political leaders and intellectuals to demand greater autonomy for Sindh. As a result, Sindh was separated from the Bombay Presidency in 1936 (Ansari, 1991). This struggle for autonomy shaped the political landscape of Karachi and set the stage for its role in nationalist movements.

The inclusion of Sindh in the Bombay Presidency increased tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Although Sindhi Muslims were a local majority, they felt disadvantaged under a province-wide Hindu majority. The Hindu population, associated with Bombay's larger demographic, was perceived as alien to the interests of Sindh. Sindhi Muslims observed Hindu dominance in land ownership, administration, and education during the early 20th century, prompting greater political mobilization. A significant example of this was the establishment of the Sindh Mahomedan Association in 1883. The association aimed to advocate for Muslim representation in government jobs and increased educational opportunities (Ansari, 1991). These tensions and mobilizations were critical in shaping Karachi's role as a hub for nationalist activism.

The period from 1913 to 1947 is particularly significant for understanding Karachi's role in the broader anti-colonial struggle. The movement for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency began in 1913, and by 1936, Karachi had re-emerged as a political and administrative center. By the 1940s, it became a central stage for the Pakistan Movement, culminating in its designation as the capital of Pakistan in 1947. This article investigates how colonial urbanization policies and political mobilization intersected to centralize Karachi to nationalist activities. It aims to address these questions: How did the administrative and political status influence the role of Karachi in nationalist movements? How did urban areas function as centers of resistance and collaboration during the anti-colonial struggle? After exploring these questions, the article enhances the scholarship on urban history, colonialism, and nationalism. It argues that the urbanization of Karachi was a result of colonial economic policies and a dynamic process that fostered political mobilization and the expression of anti-colonial sentiments.

Colonial Urbanization and the Making of Modern Karachi

The British Raj recognized Karachi's strategic importance because of its natural harbor and proximity to trade routes. Following the annexation of Sindh (1843), Karachi was developed as a key port city, with investments in infrastructure, transportation, and communication networks. The construction of the Karachi Port Trust in 1886 and the introduction of railway lines connecting the city to the hinterland further solidified its position as a commercial hub (Mead & Macgregor, 1912). During the British Raj, Karachi became a center for trade and commerce, largely because of its natural harbor. The city exported raw materials such as cotton and wheat that improved its trade opportunities and attracted a diverse population of traders, laborers, and merchants. This influx of people significantly influenced the urban development of Karachi. However, colonial urban planning was not just about economic efficiency; it was also a tool for control and segregation, reflecting the racial and social hierarchies of the British Empire.

The following graph shows the tonnage of imports and exports at Karachi's port from 1919 to 1944, emphasizing the interval from 1936 to 1944. During this period, both imports and exports exhibit a consistent upward trajectory, indicating Karachi's growing significance as a commerce center following the 1936 secession of Sindh from Bombay. A significant increase in exports, especially during World War II, underscores the port's contribution to the war effort and international trade. The apex in 1942-43 illustrates the escalation in both imports and exports, propelled by heightened resource demand. This era highlights Karachi's increasing significance in global trade, bolstered by infrastructural developments that enhanced its capability.

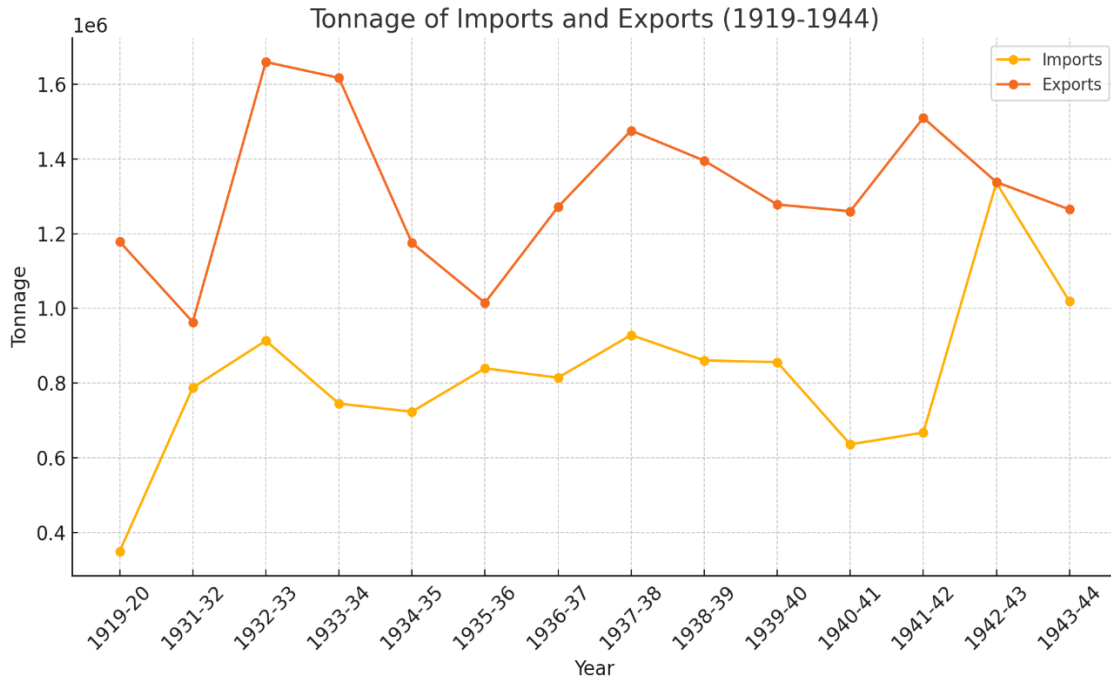


Figure 2: Tonnage of Import and Exports at Karachi port (1919-1944)

Source: Data from Administrative Reports of the Karachi port Trust (Pithawala, 1946).

The urban planning policies implemented in Karachi played a vital role in determining the city's future. Preliminary endeavors to update the urban infrastructure, such as establishing new roadways, bridges, and public buildings, laid the foundation for more extensive development initiatives (H. Khuhro & Mooraj, 2010). Urban planners and architects conceived of a future in Karachi characterized by contemporary civic facilities, well-structured residential and commercial areas, and enhanced public transportation networks (Lari & Lari, 1996). These initiatives, however, were not evenly distributed. While European cantonments enjoyed modern amenities, native neighborhoods like Lyari remained neglected, highlighting the disparities inherent in colonial urban planning. Implementing progressive urban planning initiatives would enable Karachi to effectively handle its fast population expansion and steer its improvement into a well-structured and habitable city.

Karachi's educational and intellectual landscape also saw significant growth during this period. The establishment of institutions like Sindh Madrasatul Islam (1885) and DJ Science College (1887) marked the beginning of Karachi's transformation into a center for learning and innovation. It was expected that its status as a center for learning and innovation would be further solidified in the future, as seen in today's Karachi. The city's educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and emerging universities, have produced a new generation of professionals, academics, and leaders. Expanding educational initiatives, updating curricula, and improving access to higher education could strengthen Karachi's status as a center of intellectual activity in the region (Shaikh, 2018).

The history of how Sindh was governed highlights Karachi's key role in the British Empire. After the annexation of Sindh, the region was put under the control of General Sir Charles Napier, who

reported directly to the British Governor-General in Calcutta (Cook, 2015). However, in 1847, the British East India Company reduced the administration of Sindh while placing it under a commissioner, who reported to the Governor of Bombay. This change meant Sindh was governed as part of Bombay until 1936 when it became a separate province. As Sindh's principal city, Karachi became a focal point for this administrative and political transformation. The Sindh Legislative Assembly was formed on April 27, 1937 and Khan Bahadur Allah Bux formed new ministries on March 23, 1938 (Syed, 1989). In 1947, Sindh—and by extension, Karachi—merged with the newly formed nation-state of Pakistan, marking the culmination of its colonial and post-colonial journey.

The shift to direct British rule brought major social and historical changes to Sindh. After the Battle of Miani in 1843, the indigenous rulers were exiled, and the British forced the region's elites, business classes, and landowners to adjust to new colonial laws and tax systems. While the British avoided a complete overhaul of Sindh's social and economic structure, they gradually drew in the region's service elite—landowners, merchants, and local administrators—into the colonial administration. The Raj gave important roles to local leaders to gain their loyalty. They used these leaders' knowledge and authority to keep their rule stable while maintaining much of Sindh's traditional social structure (Cook, 2015). This strategy allowed the British to maintain control while shaping the urban and economic development of places like Karachi.

Karachi experienced an influx of migrating people because of economic opportunities and urbanization in the early 20th century. This influx of diverse communities, including Gujarati traders, Punjabi laborers, and Baloch artisans, transformed Karachi into a cosmopolitan center. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Karachi's urbanization also brought about modernization prospects. A series of new infrastructure projects were launched to meet the increasing demands of the city, which included the enlargement of highways, ports, and public transportation mechanisms (The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Karachi to Kotayam, 1908). However, it also exacerbated social tensions and competition for resources, often framed in communal terms by colonial authorities (Ansari, 2005). Among these migrants, a significant number were Indian immigrants, primarily merchants and government officials, while the city's Muslim population consisted largely of artisans, laborers, fishermen, and a small aristocratic class (H. Khuhro, 1978). The treatment of these communities was not equitable. For example, the Haji Camp, where pilgrims were housed before departing on steamships from Karachi. They lived in poor living conditions in Lyari, a predominantly working-class area, highlighting the disparities in living standards and the uneven distribution of resources. ("Karachi Haji Camp," 1926) (Bombay-1925-26: A Review of the Administration of the Presidency, 1927).

Karachi's demographic diversity contributed to its vibrant political culture but also increased communal and ethnic tensions, which colonial authorities exploited to maintain control. In 1909, the introduction of separate electorates increased tensions by dividing voters based on religion. This created separate constituencies for Hindus and Muslims. As a result, people began to see Hindus and Muslims as distinct political groups. This division made it easier for colonial authorities to take advantage of these communal differences (Gilmartin, 1998). In Karachi, Hindu merchants were the leading players in the economy, which made many Muslim artisans, laborers, and fishermen feel insecure. This situation caused resentment and competition for resources among these groups. Muslim leaders used these economic differences to argue that self-rule was necessary

for fair development. By the 1940s, the Muslim League had successfully mobilized Karachi's Muslim population by framing the demand for Pakistan as a solution to both colonial exploitation and Hindu domination (Shaikh, 2018).

The story of Seth Naomal, a well-known figure among the Bhaiband, shows the skillful maneuvering of local elites in the colonial urban spaces to secure political and economic advantages. Wealthy Bhaibands, excluded from high-ranking government positions under Talpurs,¹ found new opportunities by supporting the British East India Company (Balouch, 2014). Naomal's support to the Company allowed him to take on the influential roles of head kardar and Deputy Collector of Karachi in 1843. From this position, he could appoint fellow Bhaibands to jobs that the Amils traditionally dominated. This change reshaped the local power dynamics and compelled many Amils to seek employment under Naomal's authority. The rise of the Bhaibands as a dominant political class in Karachi had significant social and political consequences, reflecting broader transformations in urbanization and governance during the colonial period (Cook, 2015). This example illustrates how local elites navigated colonial urban spaces to secure their interests, reshaping power structures.

Karachi became a center for national and political activities after the movement for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency. This political awakening was evident in major events such as the Indian National Congress' Karachi session in 1931, where the issue of fundamental rights was raised, including concerns about the unfair treatment of Muslims under Congress rule. However, Karachi's political transformation was not solely tied to elite discussions in party conferences—it was also shaped by grassroots mobilization and changing governance structures (Nanda, 2013). The city's public spaces, such as parks, bazaars, and educational institutions, became critical venues for political activism, where ordinary citizens—students, workers, and professionals—participated in the nationalist struggle.

The British Government of India Act of 1935 marked a turning point politically and administratively. The Act transformed Karachi into a central point for debates over language, religion, and political representation because it transferred significant powers to provincial governments. This shift not only gave Karachi greater political agency but also intensified struggles over identity and governance, as different communities sought to define their place within the evolving political landscape. As the capital of Sindh, an independent province after 1936, the city became a hub for nationalist activism, with political rallies, press movements, and student mobilization reshaping its urban fabric. This process of colonial urbanization shaped not only Karachi's physical infrastructure but also its role as a center for political mobilization (Low, 1991).

¹ Talpurs were a Baloch dynasty that ruled Sindh from 1783 until the British annexation in 1843. They established their rule after overthrowing the Kalhora dynasty and divided Sindh into semi-autonomous regions governed by different Talpur chiefs. Known for their decentralized administration and patronage of Sindhi culture, the Talpurs were eventually defeated by the British East India Company at the Battle of *Miani* in 1843, leading to Sindh's incorporation into British India.

Political Mobilization and Nationalist Activism

Karachi's urbanization played an important role in political mobilization. From the early stages of formal 'national' institutions in the middle of the nineteenth century, the question of language – in both literary and every day or formal usage – was central. By the early twentieth century, it was clear that languages (especially in India, Hindi) could be vehicles for debates about social change, ideas of national progress, and shared cultural heritage. Vernacular and bilingual newspapers became the primary outlets for the jurists and lawyers who spearheaded 'national' organizations, including the early Indian National Congress, founded in 1885 (Could, 2022). Newspapers like *Al-Waheed* (Sindhi) and *The Sind Kossid* (English), alongside other publications from Karachi, in shaping political consciousness and nationalist activism. These newspapers, including *Sindh Gazette*, *Daily Gazette*, *Dawn*, and *Sind Observer*, played an important role in articulating regional identity, mobilizing public opinion, and challenging colonial narratives (Rashdi, 2009).

In the nationalist movements, women did not initially play a significant role, as these were male-dominated, and women remained absent from the struggle for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay presidency. In various regions of India, where Muslims discussed the involvement of women in Muslim League politics, Jinnah's role is highly commendable ('The Quaid-i-Azam Brought Women into Mainstream Politics,' 2017). The initial struggle for Sindh's separation from the Bombay Presidency was a united movement involving Hindu and Muslim communities. However, as politics grew increasingly communal, women's participation became more pronounced. During the Khilafat Movement, Bi Amma (Abadi Bano Begum), the mother of the Ali brothers, gained prominence for her activism. However, debates over purdah and conservative societal norms initially restricted Muslim women's public involvement. By the 1930s and 1940s, women like Fatima Jinnah and Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan emerged as key figures, organizing women through the All India Muslim Women's Committee (Willmer, 1996). Miss Jethi Sapa Hemlani, a Sindhi nationalist from Hyderabad and settled in Karachi, also contributed significantly, serving as Deputy Speaker for the Congress Party (Rashdi, 2009). Women's grassroots efforts, such as those of the Women's Relief Committee, supported political prisoners and their families during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Despite societal constraints, women's moral and organizational influence became a driving force in the nationalist struggle, as seen in the Muslim League's appeals during the 1946 Direct Action Campaign, where women were urged to inspire their male relatives to sacrifice for Pakistan (Willmer, 1996).

In addition to their other contributions, these newspapers played a significant role in movements such as the Khilafat Movement. One notable daily, *Al-Waheed*, was published with the support of Abdullah Haroon, Sheikh Haji Abdul Majeed Sindhi, and others, representing the interests of the Muslim community. Similarly, Naseem Talvi Baloch from Lyari published the newspaper *Modern Balochistan*. Another publication, the *Zamindar* newspaper, was edited by Maulana Zaffar Ali Khan in Lahore. These newspapers were part of the anti-colonial movement. They aimed to inform the public about how important urban centers, like Karachi, were in this struggle (Rashdi, 2009). In the middle of the nineteenth century, local leaders were permitted to participate in municipal organizations following a decision by Viceroy Ripon in 1882. Indian representation in municipal bodies was frequently limited to fifty percent or less, and variables such as land ownership affected the franchise. In theory, colonial subjects could engage in official political action within the municipality by 1882 (Beverly, 2011). Between 1847 and 1908, non-natives dominated the

administration of the Bombay Presidency. Since 1909, when four Karachi natives—Harchandrai Vishindas, Rais Ghulam Muhammad Burgri, Jethmal Parsram, and Abdul Majid Sindhi, were elected to the Bombay Council in response to the Minto-Morley Reforms, there appears to be a minimal number of indigenous individuals who could effectively advocate for Sindh-related issues (G.M., 1989).

A prominent Sindhi Hindu Harchandrai Vishindas initially demanded separation of Sindh from the Bombay presidency at the Congress' annual session held in Karachi in 1913. He argued its need based on Sind's distinctive cultural and geographical character. However, his motion reflected a desire on the part of Sind's commercial community to extricate itself from competing with much more powerful Bombay interests (Ansari, 1991). Though, during Bombay's presidency, the administration was complex due to the distance of approximately 1,050 kilometers and a lack of awareness regarding the people's problems. The commissioner acknowledged delays in education and engineering-related correspondence delivery (M. A. Khuhro, 1983). Sindh faced a twofold challenge as it was a part of the Bombay Presidency until 1936 before becoming a province. This resulted in its geographical distance from the political and economic hubs of the British Empire, like Calcutta, New Delhi, and London, which put it at a potential disadvantage (Ansari, 2015).

Nevertheless, the separation of Sindh from the Bombay presidency was not solely a Muslim-led demand. Many Hindus and Parsi leaders also recognized its potential benefits. Jethmal Parsaram and Jamshed Mehta, for instance, actively supported the movement. They believed that an independent Sindh would offer better political and economic opportunities for all communities. Mehta, as chief of the Karachi Municipality, proposed forming a cross-communal committee to address Hindu concerns about separation. At the same time, Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas chaired the official committee that studied the issue (Siddiqi, 2022). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India's Muslims grappled with their place in a British- and Hindu-dominated India. This struggle was deeply rooted in the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of Western imperialism, which threatened the Islamic world. In response, movements like Pan-Islamism emerged, seeking to unite Muslims worldwide against colonial domination and the secular nation-state model (M. N. Qureshi, 1999). Colonial port cities in Asia, such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Colombo, were centres of rising national elites and contributed to revolutionary transitions (Murphey, 1977). Similarly, Karachi, as a port city and urban center of Sindh, became a center for rising national elites and contributed to the rise of nationalism.

The movement for Sindh's separation from the Bombay presidency significantly impacting the region's politics by promoting ethnic enterprises and parties before the Partition of 1947. Karachi witnessed the emergence of advocates for Sindh's separation from the presidency (Faiz, 2022). These debates found expression in urban centers like Karachi, where the All-India Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, advocacy for separation of Sindh from Bombay at the Centre. The Muslim provincial leadership of Sindh, including G. M. Syed, Khan Bahadur Ayub Khuhro, Sir Shahnawaz Bhutto, and Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah, were also activists in their demand mobilized support for a separate Muslim state. However, within Sindh, Muslim leaders often framed their political aspirations through a regional rather than pan-Indian lens, reflecting the province's distinct historical and social dynamics (Jalal, 2014).

During the debate on Sindh's separation from the Bombay Presidency, the provincial Muslim leader Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah dismissed the idea that Sindhi Muslims should align with their coreligionists in Punjab, calling it political suicide. The Sindhi Muslim League's 1938 proposal to divide India into Muslim and non-Muslim states reflected an assertion of regional identity rather than a broader communal affinity (Jalal, 2014). By the 1940s, Karachi had become a center for the Pakistan Movement, hosting key rallies and meetings, which galvanized public opinion. The diverse population of Karachi and vibrant public sphere made it a vibrant nationalist struggle. The issues of language, religion, and political representation were fiercely contested (Low, 1991). In early October 1938, the Sind Provincial Muslim League held a conference in Karachi, where, for the first time, a Muslim League meeting hinted at the demand for Pakistan (I. A. Qureshi, 1965).

In colonial societies, cities like Karachi were often the primary hubs where political discontent took shape and transformed into organized movements against colonial rule. Nationalism grew out of the desire to resist colonial rule, offering a way to challenge the unequal power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized. This nationalism was articulated chiefly by the literati and middle classes, who used it as a "people's brief" for anti-colonialism, even as the question of who constituted "the people" remained contested in the colonial context (Magid, 1992). The city's nationalist elite continued actively participating in municipal politics after founding the Indian National Congress in 1885. Indeed, many of its leading lights juggled with dexterity their roles in national and local arenas of politics (Low, 1991). The Karachi Municipality Corporation evolved after the municipal reorganization in 1911, incorporating institutions such as the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Karachi Port Trust, citizen committees. Philanthropists also played important role in shaping municipal affairs. However, despite these developments, the municipal system remained undemocratic, with the commissioner holding more power than the elected mayor and members (Ahmed, 2010).

The Municipality prioritized public health and sanitation. Their authority had been increased by sections 46 and 48 of the bylaws (Municipality, 1922). Karachi faced numerous challenges during the epidemic plague (1896 to 1905) while Mr. Tahilram was the president of the Municipality. The most pressing issues were related to water and malnutrition. The city experienced sixteen plague outbreaks starting in December 1896, which led to the loss of 39,826 lives and forced the relocation to different parts of Sindh. The epidemic was particularly severe in Karachi, and it had a significant impact on the city (Brunton, 1913). The Bombay presidency provided finances to the Karachi Municipality on a temporary loan basis, which included an annual interest rate of 60%. However, if the Municipality of Karachi could pay within three months, they would have to pay a four-and-a-half percent interest rate. Despite this, there were occasions when the Municipality was unable to obtain the necessary funds from Bombay (Application for Loan to the Indian Government, 4th November, 18998). These challenges underscored the intersection of municipal governance and nationalist activism as the elite navigated both local and national political arenas to address Karachi's pressing issues.

During the interwar years, the Raj attempted to maintain control through a strategy of 'cooperation.' Whereas introduced constitutional reforms like the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms (1918) and the Government of India Act (1935). These measures aimed to grant limited self-government while keeping India firmly within the British Empire (Fischer-Tiné & Framke, 2022).

However, they also inadvertently provided Indian leaders a platform to push for greater autonomy. In Karachi, these reforms fueled the nationalist movement, as local leaders used the new political spaces to rally support for Sindh's separation from the Bombay Presidency and later for the Pakistan Movement. This period marked a critical shift, as colonial attempts to placate Indian demands only deepened the resolve for complete independence.

The First World War marked an important moment in the relationship between India and the Raj. India played an important role in supporting the empire while contributing over two million soldiers to the war effort. The war, however, also exposed the weaknesses in colonial rule and activated a growing demand for self-governance. In response to India's sacrifices, the British authorities promised to take steps toward "self-government." Although they tried to delay these promises, the commitment set the stage for change. Across the country, these pledges gave people a new sense of hope and determination, fueling the rise of nationalism and sparking widespread political action (Fischer-Tiné & Framke, 2022). A particularly noticeable feature of Sindhi politics, both before and after the creation of Pakistan, was the active participation of hereditary Sufi saints or pirs. These spiritual leaders were revered for their religious authority and wielded significant social, economic, and political influence. Pirs played a crucial role in mobilizing rural support for the Muslim League, which sought their backing to generate momentum for the Pakistan Movement. By the 1940s, the League had established a firm footing in Sindh, with pirs acting as intermediaries between the party and the rural population. Their involvement underscored the intersection of religion and politics in colonial Sindh and Karachi's role as a hub for nationalist activism (Ansari, 1991).

The 1940s witnessed the rise of the Pakistan Movement, with Karachi at its forefront. Muslim League leaders, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and others, made Karachi a center for meetings and where they mobilized support for the demand for a separate Muslim state. Public rallies, such as the historic session of the All-India Muslim League in 1943, highlighted Karachi's role as a hub of nationalist activity. These gatherings were not just political events but also moments of collective aspiration, where ordinary citizens—students, workers, and professionals—came together to shape the future of their nation (Joshi, 2001). The 1946 elections were pivotal in shaping the political landscape of Karachi. The Muslim League centered its campaign around community issues, framing the election as a choice between supporting Pakistan and facing Hindu domination. This approach resonated with Muslims' concerns about the potential loss of their cultural identity within a united India. It increased the divide between Hindus and Muslims and strengthened the claim of Muslim League to represent all Indian Muslims. Karachi became a central place for nationalist activity, with parks and schools playing important roles in organizing political activities.

Urban Spaces as Sites of Contestation

Karachi's public spaces, such as parks, bazaars, educational institutions, were not just physical locations but became critical venues for political mobilization, protests and nationalist discourse. These spaces were part of a broader public sphere that emerged in colonial India, where the middle class—through presses, civic associations and intellectual gatherings—asserted their political aspirations (Joshi, 2010). As a colonial port city, Karachi functioned as a microcosm of larger political and social struggles, where tensions over governance, representation, and identity played

out in public spaces. In colonial societies, urban spaces often became arenas of resistance, where localized grievances fueled broader anticolonial struggles. Early in the history of anticolonial nationalism, parochial issues about urban life—such as house and water rates, elective municipal institutions, and property expropriations for official use—formed the basis for what James S. Coleman has labeled “primary resistance” in the colonial milieu. These issues, which created important burdens for town dwellers, were often perceived as inherent to the colonial situation. Demonstrations triggered by resentment over such grievances also expressed, symbolically at least, objection to colonial rule (Magid, 1992).

Karachi’s urban spaces were also key sites where language, religions and political identities were contested. The promotion of Hindi and Urdu, for instance, became intertwined with Hindu and Muslim interests by the 1920s, fueling communal divisions. The Sindh provincial Muslim league’s conference in Karachi in October 1938 marked a pivotal moment as it was here that a Muslim League meeting first hinted at the demand for Pakistan. Debates over language, cultural identity and political autonomy were not just confined to elite circles but played out in public rallies, newspapers, and street politics, shaping Karachi’s role as a centre for nationalist activism (Low, 1991). The urban spaces of Karachi were not only passive backdrops but active participants in the political process. Newspapers like *Al-Waheed* and *Sindh Gazette* played an important role in disseminating nationalist ideas and countering colonial propaganda (Rashdi, 2009). Similarly, intellectual institutions, like as, the Karachi Theosophical Society, provided platforms for intellectual exchange and debates. However, nationalist activism in colonial Karachi was fraught with institutional barriers and repressive measures. Before the First World War, nationalist leaders faced systematic exclusion from municipal governance as colonial authorities questioned their legitimacy and curtailed their political influence (Kidambi, 2012). Even in the interwar years, nationalist movements struggled to assert unchallenged authority over Karachi’s colonial spaces, as British administrators maintained strict control over civic institutions (Kidambi, 2012).

The colonial government’s repressive measures often backfired, strengthening nationalist resolve. For example, the imposition of Section 144, which banned public gatherings, led to widespread acts of civil disobedience, illustrating Karachi’s resilient political culture. However, the nationalist struggle over Karachi’s urban spaces was not monolithic. There were different ideological groups, shaped by class, caste, and religious affiliations, contested visions of political identity and representation. Therefore, Karachi became a deeply contested space where colonial authority, nationalist aspirations, and competing social identities clashed (Kidambi, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Karachi became a center of nationalism due to colonial urbanization, demographic shifts, and political mobilization. As a colonial port city, Karachi became a microcosm of broader anti-colonial struggles, where governance, representation, and identity issues were fiercely contested. The diverse population of Karachi and its vibrant public sphere promoted nationalist sentiments, while its urban spaces—such as parks, bazaars, and educational institutions. The movement for the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency and the subsequent rise of the Pakistan Movement underscored Karachi’s centrality in the nationalist struggle, culminating in its designation as Pakistan’s capital in 1947.

Karachi's experience reflects broader patterns of urbanization and political mobilization in colonial South Asia. Like Bombay and Calcutta, Karachi's colonial urban planning reinforced spatial segregation and racial hierarchies, which fueled anti-colonial resistance. The city's role as a hub for nationalist activism highlights the importance of urban spaces in shaping political identities and mobilizing collective action. However, the growth of nationalism in Karachi also revealed the contradictions of communal politics, as ethnic and religious divisions deepened in the lead-up to Partition. The legacy of colonial urbanism continues to shape Karachi's spatial and social organization, with persistent inequalities and communal tensions reflecting its colonial past. By examining Karachi's historical trajectory, this study contributes to broader debates on the role of cities in fostering political participation, social cohesion, and sustainable development in post-colonial societies. Karachi's story underscores the enduring impact of colonialism on urban landscapes and the transformative power of urban spaces in shaping nationalist movements across South Asia.

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