

## **THE LESSER CITIES OF PUNJAB: Forgotten or Neglected**

**By**

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### Abstract

Among the professional circles of planners and architects there is palpable excitement about the Mega Cities of the Future. Even the general press e.g. special issue of Newsweek, has also joined the bandwagon of anticipating the city of tomorrow. However the point is that not all cities will grow into Mega Cities and a substantial proportion of the urban population will continue to live in the Lesser Cities.

In Pakistan these lesser cities face a future that promises less of welfare and more of problems. These cities have all the characteristics of concentrated population with employment opportunities that attract the people from the villages and the host of problems of urban life that multiply with the continuing influx of people uprooted from the villages. The growth of these cities themselves is no less than the mega cities. According to the population census the growth rate of Bhawalpur (4.93), Gujranwala (3.79), Rahimyarkhan (4.04) is more than Lahore (3.32) and even Karachi (3.49). The point is that the simultaneous concern and excitement about the plus 20-million-city does not carry over to the cities with 0.1 to 0.5 million population.

Karachi will indeed become a Mega City followed, albeit at a distance, by Lahore and professional planners and architects are concerned with the host of problems that it would entail. With the present inability to cope with the existing scale of population of the cities what does the future hold? Utter traffic chaos, failing services of water and drainage, large pockets of unsanitary and dismal housing for the ever-increasing numbers of poor do not promise a bright future.

However there is also a state of excitement at the new technologies that promise a different and perhaps a better world. The environment of generation of such new technologies is to be found in the urban centers with their universities and research institutes. Mega cities are thus seen as both the harbingers of new technologies and their best consumers creating new areas of study in the field of communication with millions of mobile phones and instant sharing of trading information. Breakthroughs in biology and nano-technology promise unlimited potential of increase in food and user appliances; there is the increasing potential for service industry, multinational companies, advertising and beauticians; in the city to come therefore there are millions to be made. But how do the lesser cities fit into all this or do they?

As the recent elections in India have shown the shining glitter of a few centers does not transform into support by the general public, nor does it mean the well being of the whole urban spectrum. In a society like ours in Pakistan where election mean little in the way of acquiring or transferring of power the total focus of the leaders on the national and provincial capital cities is, to put it mildly, unfair. Every politician, every bureaucrat or military officer

with authority, talks of the mega cities only. All levels of bureaucracy exist in Lahore, from the DCO, Chief Minister to the Governor, and they all profess to care for the city and sometime outdo each other in making promises of the bright future that they will personally ensure. They want to build underpasses, over passes, roads and promise to beautify them. They are perpetually beautifying the already beautiful canal, increasing the large number of traffic nodes with monuments for all to see and admire and perhaps be in awe of the power that can place a submarine, plane, tank, waterfall, engraved concrete, replica of Shalimar, in the middle of chaotic and whirling traffic. Car is the focus, the cyclist and pedestrian do not count in the design of these urban improvements. Every new leader on gaining power promises yet greater efforts to improve the city; circular roads, mass-transit projects, housing for the poor are glibly mentioned in one sentence.

But the lesser cities fare worse. Nobody owns them. Lesser cities do not interest these purveyors of false dreams for they know they are selling something unattainable and the population of lesser cities do not provide the audience to be pampered; they do not have the same nuisance value. In Pakistan these lesser cities do not seem to count.