

Saddar massacre

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ON the orders of the Supreme Court, over 1,400 shops, including leased ones, have been demolished in Karachi's Saddar area. Over 4,000 hawkers have also been removed. Many of these shopkeepers and hawkers had been here for 50 years or more, and running businesses that their fathers had established.

The support system to these services (chowkidars, jamadars, manufacturing of items that are sold, transport, etc) is more than twice as large as the businesses themselves. So one can easily say that over 10,000 families lost their livelihoods in a two- to three-day period.

Agreed, footpaths and roads should not be encroached upon, obstructing pedestrian or vehicular movement. But if the markets and hawkers had to be removed, alternative plans for their relocation in or outside Saddar should have been prepared and implemented before removing them. The offer of compensation after evictions, given past experience, is at best a bad joke.

The Saddar demolition is not only inhumane it is also shameless because of its scale, the cruel manner of its implementation and because it has taken place in a period of unbearable recession and inflation for the marginalised of this country. It has proved once again that Pakistan's establishment, professionals and its political parties are simply anti-poor.

The demolition in Karachi's Saddar area is inhumane and shameless.

One of the reasons given for the demolitions is the protection of heritage. But heritage is not simply a dead colonial stone building. It is a living thing, enjoyment and a form of participation for people from all walks of life, an expression of our diversity, which planners and politicians, if they have consciousness and sensitivity, can integrate into their plans as part of a larger city culture.

As such, the bird, fruit and tea markets in Saddar are heritage by any definition, and so are the area's newspaper hawkers' kiosks which, along with the markets, were established more than 50 years ago. They were the product of their times and an important part of Karachi's post-Partition history. Karachiites of all classes and many generations have shopped here, except for perhaps the younger generation of the city's district south.

With this demolition, many questions arise. What will happen to the second-hand weekend book market at Regal Chowk, which has been around for more than 40 years and which is visited by customers, mainly the young, from all over a culture-starved city? Will it be possible to hold weekend and Ramazan cricket matches? And what will become of the scores of Sunday markets on the streets of Saddar and on Bunder Road?

There is strong interdependence between hawkers and poor commuters. Will that be maintained under the new arrangements? If not, they will both be impoverished. With all the palmists evicted from Saddar, where will people go to have their fortunes read, or listen to the music of their choice while waiting for a bus? To insensitive politicians and planners, these may be frivolous issues, but catering to them is what 'equitable' planning is all about.

What Saddar needed was a rehabilitation plan whereby the markets could have been relocated within the area, where they belong. And the hawkers, in a disciplined manner, could have been placed at bus stops and on semi-pedestrianised streets in Saddar. The holding of hawkers' markets should have been discussed with the hawkers, for no one understands better than them the issues involved. In the process, a multi-class public space, which Karachi desperately requires, would have been created. Saddar's populist culture and history could have preserved and, if sensitively designed, it would also have been aesthetically pleasing.

But that is not the objective of the demolition. The objective is to rob high-value space from where the poor are located and use it for the benefit of the rich and the speculators who serve them. It is to replace hawkers and indigenous markets with malls and high-end retail outlets. That they can coexist with hawkers and Saddar's history is beyond the comprehension of a paranoid elite and enemies of a multi-class city. There is also a possibility that Empress Market itself may lose its historical function and be turned into a museum or a high-end dining facility.

This process of gentrification of which the Saddar evictions are a part is dividing the city as never before and pushing the working classes towards religious extremism. The signs are already there.

As a Karachiite, I feel ashamed at what has happened. I do not think that we can talk anymore, without embarrassment, about equity, culture, the city's history, poverty alleviation or professional and academic values. And as for those who justify this shameful destruction on legal grounds, they must understand that apartheid was legal and that the demolition of Palestinian homes is also legal under Israeli law because they, like the Empress Market evictees, do not possess ownership papers.

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