

Demystifying Ethnic Violence in Karachi 1980–1990

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Keywords: Migrant Communities, Ethnic Violence, Drugs Trafficking, Illicit Economy, Urban Violence, Afghan Refugees, Karachi	ABSTRACT <i>By applying Kalyvas's theory of selective violence, this article argues that the primary factor that transformed Karachi into a center of violence during the 1980s was the clash of economic interests between established migrants (Urdu-speaking migrants from India) and newer arrivals (Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtun communities). It analyzes the outbreak of armed ethnic violence in Karachi and its organization along ethnic lines throughout the decade. The emergence of intense economic competition in Karachi, particularly after the influx of Afghan refugees, created a new illegal economic order sustained by black money. This study demonstrates that violence was instrumental in maintaining this illicit economy. Over time, armed violence was further employed to produce, protect, and expand illegal economic activities. However, this violence was cloaked in ethnic rhetoric to evade scrutiny from law enforcement agencies. Drawing on primary sources such as newspapers, government gazettes, and firsthand accounts from key figures in various movements, this article explains how criminal violence was reconfigured as ethnic violence. This work investigates the connections of famous incidents of ethnic violence in Karachi to private issues of participants.</i>
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1. Introduction

This study examines the economic pursuits of various migrant¹ communities in Karachi and their role in the use of violence. Due to intense competition among these groups and the impact of the Afghan crisis, economic rivalries grew increasingly complex in the 1980s. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the nature of these economic activities, this study seeks to establish a link between ethnic violence and these multilayered economic struggles. Additionally, it explores the confrontations between the state and the drug mafia, shedding light on the state's inability to contain violence. The study further investigates the dichotomous framing of violence, which ultimately transformed it along ethnic lines.

Prior to 1970, Karachi experienced general protests rather than organized ethnic violence. These protests primarily stemmed from issues related to the rehabilitation of post-1947 migrants from India, particularly concerning health care, food security, education, and employment opportunities. During this period, mobilization occurred along class lines, with labor and student unions leading the

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struggle for rights rather than ethnic organizations. The decade of 1980–1990 marked Karachi's most violent period in history. While intergroup clashes, particularly among student factions, occurred earlier, firearms were absent from these conflicts. A defining feature of the 1980s was the dual influx of Afghan migrants and firearms into the city following the Soviet-Afghan War. Nearly one million Pashtun migrants entered Karachi during this decade, with migration continuing throughout the 1990s (Laurent, 2014, p.24). Consequently, Karachi's Pashtun population grew from 8.7 percent to 11.4 percent as per 1981 and 1998 census reports respectively. Notably, a substantial number of Pashtun migrants remained uncounted in the 1998 census, with Pakistani government estimates suggesting approximately 600,000 unregistered Afghan refugees in Karachi (Blank Jonah, Clary Christopher, 2014, p. 19-21).

Karachi experienced a dramatic surge in illicit drug trade following the arrival of Afghan refugees. Pakistan's number of registered drug addicts skyrocketed from just 50 in 1976 to 1.7 million by December 1986. Law enforcement seizures reflect this escalation: in 1985, authorities confiscated 4,562 kilograms of heroin, while 442 kilograms of *charas* (cannabis concentrate) were seized in just the first seven months of 1986 ("Drug Addicts," 1986). Another report indicates even more staggering quantities - 800,000 kilograms of *charas* and 511 kilograms of heroin were intercepted in the first half of 1986 alone (Abbas, 1986a). This drug boom occurred against the backdrop of an international narcotics shortage following strict anti-drug measures implemented after the Iranian Revolution (Yusufi, 1985). The high-risk nature of this trade necessitated armed protection, with research consistently showing a direct correlation between arms trafficking and drug smuggling (*Dimensions, Scale and Dynamic of the Illegal Economy*, 2011). The extraordinary profits transformed Karachi's *katchi abadis* (squatter settlements) and slums like Sohrab Goth into secure operational bases for drug cartels. Afghanistan, producing 90 percent of the world's heroin at the time, saw 44 percent of it smuggled through Pakistan to Gulf states, the Middle East, and Europe. Pashtun smugglers reinvested their profits in real estate and transportation sectors. To protect these lucrative operations from rivals and law enforcement, they forged alliances with land mafias and organized crime syndicates, permanently embedding Karachi's notorious Kalashnikov culture.

2 Debates on Violence in Karachi

The first scholarly strand analyzing Karachi's violence established a connection between state actors and violent conflict. Laurent Gayer a prominent scholar of Karachi's violence, cites Parween Rahman's observation that "the official is illegal" - highlighting how state officials routinely accepted bribes to facilitate illicit activities. Gayer's work emphasizes both the scale and patterned nature of violence in Karachi, arguing that this violence was not anarchic but deliberately contained. His research demonstrates that while state authorities possessed the capacity to suppress violence, they instead normalized it as a means of maintaining political and ideological control. Gayer further contends that Karachi's violence never spiraled into complete chaos precisely because the state itself participated in this orchestrated disorder. During General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, the state - along with its ally Jamaat-i-Islami - actively tolerated (if not encouraged) the gun culture of Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba (IJT) to suppress leftist and pro-Pakistan People's Party (PPP) factions (Laurent, 2014).

Similarly, Nazia Hussain argues that the "state produces informality through purposeful deregulation," strategically using informal systems to advance its own agendas. Scholarships on urban planning consistently link informality (particularly informal settlements) with increased violence and criminal activity (Hussain, 2016). Nausheen Hafeeza Anwar builds on this analysis through her concept of "collaborative government," demonstrating how state actors cooperate with violent actors to normalize both informality and violence (Anwar, 2014). Lieberman and Perna Singh's research on ethnic violence across eleven African states reveals how state-perpetuated ethnic categorization fuels conflict. They argue that the "consistent employment of ethnic categories across institutions by state results in emergence of ethnic violence." They establish an institutional theory of violence in two stages: first, institutional practices amplify ethnic differentiation; second, this heightened differentiation creates competitive dynamics that increase the likelihood of violent conflict (Lieberman Evan S & Singh Perna, 2012).

Two additional scholars who have examined the state's relationship with ethnic violence - albeit from slightly different perspectives - are Mohammad Waseem and Vazira Fazila Yaqoobali Zamindar. Both scholars attribute Karachi's disorders primarily to systemic governance failures under successive administrations. Waseem specifically argues that the state's non-policy decisions deliberately steered Karachi toward violence (Waseem Mohammad, 1996). Zamindar, focusing on post-partition rehabilitation processes, demonstrates how state policies regarding refugee settlement and evacuee property management inadvertently generated conditions for long-term disorder (Zamindar, 2010, p.170). While these scholars collectively establish the state as a key stakeholder (whether directly or indirectly) in Karachi's violent conflicts, this article primarily examines how migrant communities' competing economic interests fueled violence. The complexity of these economic pursuits - intensified by post-partition displacement and the Afghan refugee crisis - pushed these communities toward illicit activities, particularly drug trafficking. This study specifically analyzes how these illegal economic activities both generated violence and became progressively framed in ethnic terms.

The second major scholarly approach to analyzing Karachi's tragic waves of organized violence emerges from social historians. This school predominantly attributes both the origins and perpetuation of systemic violence to various social phenomena, including recreational violence, protest drinking, masculine labor cultures, and collective emotions like fear, hatred, and resentment. The seminal figure in this tradition, Oscar Verkaaik has extensively documented how social factors facilitated mass participation in violence. His conceptual framework highlights the "dichotomy between ethnicity and religion," interpreting Karachi's conflicts through an ethnographic lens as manifestations of competing identity claims (Verkaaik, 2018). Nichola Khan significantly advanced this discourse through her "history from below" methodology. By collecting anthropological and ethnographic testimonies from individuals embedded in Karachi's violent underworld, she revealed how Mohajir nationalism's violent expressions were sustained through psychosocial mechanisms - particularly protest drinking, masculine labor rituals, and alcohol-fueled socialization patterns (Khan, 2010). Roger Dale Peterson an American political scientist, challenged primordialist explanations by demonstrating how ethnic violence stems fundamentally from emotional and cognitive processes. His analytical model identifies four core affective drivers: fear, hatred, resentment, and rage (Petersen, 2002). While this scholarly tradition roots violence in psychosocial dynamics, the present study focuses specifically on physical manifestations of violence arising from extreme economic competition between migrant communities. Our analysis traces how these material struggles became articulated as ethnic conflict.

The third strand of scholarship on violence in Karachi categorizes it in terms of ethnicity. However, the formation of ethnic identities in Karachi remains debated. Scholars have employed two approaches - primordial and instrumental - to trace these identities, drawing on frameworks developed by theorists of ethnicity and nationalism such as Herder, Gotlieb, Peter van den Berghe, and P. Brass (Yang, 2000, p.8). Primordialist view ethnicity as an inherited ancestral bond or an extension of kinship. When this bond is based on kinship or bloodline, it represents the sociobiological perspective; when based on shared culture, it constitutes the culturalist form of primordialism. Instrumentalists, conversely, perceive ethnicity as a rational construct for achieving future goals. As Brass argues, "elites competing for resources 'draw upon,' 'distort,' and 'fabricate' materials from group cultures for collective and individual advantage" (Brass, 2003, p.8).

However, Mohammad Waseem contests the applicability of both views to 'Karachiite'ⁱⁱ violence. Primordialism proves inapplicable because *Muhajirs* lacked a collective shared past, having originated from distant regions of India - including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and other culturally distinct areas (Waseem Mohammad, 1996). Secondly, Brass's instrumentalist approach fails to explain Karachi's context because Muhajir violence was not elite led. Overall, this scholarship primarily examines ethnicity formation through various ethnic discourses. While the instrumentalist approach demonstrates how migrant communities were organized along ethnic lines by local actors for future goals and economic motives, it neglects two crucial aspects: first, the nature of economic activities and their relationship to violence; second, the process through which violence became transformed along ethnic lines.

The fourth strand of scholarship relates violence to the dichotomy between national and ethnic identity politics. According to Oscar Verkaaik *muhajirs* initially resisted provincial or ethnic labeling, preferring identification with Pakistani nationalism. However, after the 1970 elections, local identities began dominating Pakistan's ideological landscape, prompting *Muhajirs* to develop their own nationalism in response to Sindhi, Balochi, and Bengali nationalist movements (Verkaaik, 2018). Mohammad Waseem observes that Karachi's violence was fundamentally political, with the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) as its primary beneficiary (Waseem Mohammad, 1996). The MQM orchestrated large-scale street violence to expose the PPP government's inability to maintain law and order. Adeem Suhail's extensive research on Lyari similarly identifies political parties as key benefactors of violence, using it to strengthen territorial claims (Adeem, 2015). As Stathis N. Kalyvas argues, "there may be substantial disjuncture between the master cleavage of a (ethno-political) conflict and the motivations for violence on the ground" (Kalyvas, 2003, pp. 475-494). This work similarly reveals that while mainstream narratives - including media, government, and academia - framed Karachi's violence as ethnic, its roots lay in competing economic interests, particularly drug trafficking. Beyond master cleavage, this study examines ground-level motivations through analysis of specific violent incidents.

By utilizing Kalyvas's theory of selective violence, this research focuses on local/private issues rather than the dominant narrative or master cleavage to understand Karachi's large-scale violence during the 1980s. This approach helps investigate connections between prominent ethnic violence incidents and participants' private motivations. Local actors deliberately portrayed micro-level issues as macro-level conflicts to exploit the situation. They employed identity claims to serve their interests - protecting illegal activities, manipulating populations, and undermining opponents' or government's reputations through ethnic framing.

3 Reliable Causation of 1985 Ethnic Riots

The on-the-ground factor behind Karachi's notorious 1985 ethnic riots was the unprofessional conduct of minibus operators and drivers, rather than the portrayed ethnic conflict. To understand this, we must examine data from Karachi's local transport sector, which was broadly divided into two categories: public-sector buses (operated by the Karachi Transport Company/KTC) and privately-owned vehicles controlled by influential operators. Most transport-related violent incidents involved these private vehicles used for public transport. Notably, in 1985, Karachi had the world's second-highest rate of traffic accident fatalities ("Deaths in Traffic," 1985).

This issue stemmed more from private-sector operators' and drivers' unprofessionalism than from their ethnic affiliations. Altaf Hussain even demanded that "minibus drivers should be trained to deal gently with passengers." The vehicle operators were highly unprofessional; in fact, they employed violent tactics against competing bus operators. One such incident occurred on March 7, 1985, when private minibus operator Muhammad Shafi abducted KTC driver Nawab Ali following a minor collision between a KTC bus and a private minibus. This incident brought North Karachi's entire transport system to a standstill.

Greedy minibus operators pressured drivers to maximize profits, leading to reckless driving through speeding and illegal overtaking. Their carelessness frequently caused fatal accidents - with 600 and 684 traffic deaths recorded in 1982 and 1984 respectively ("The Price of the Traffic Chaos," 1985). Consequently, private minibus drivers became constant targets of public anger. This volatile situation required only a spark to ignite, which came with the Bushra Zaidi incident. The 1985 "ethnic" riots erupted after April 15, 1985, when a speeding minibus driver killed female student Bushra Zaidi in Nazimabad while attempting to overtake another vehicle (Laurent, 2014). Her death triggered mass protests, particularly among student organizations like Islami Jamiat Talaba (IJT), who began burning buses. The public fury reflected accumulated grievances from numerous similar tragedies (Irshad, 1985, p.45). Crucially, the April 1985 violence represented anti-police and anti-transporter sentiment rather than inter-ethnic conflict (Afaq, 1985, p.55).

The drug addiction among minibus drivers exacerbated the situation, ultimately prompting people to burn buses. Newspaper reports indicate that most minibus drivers were drug addicts (Ali,

1986). In the first three months of 1985 alone, over 150 people died in road accidents, yet drivers were routinely released even after assaulting police officers - protected by their powerful drug lord patrons ("Deaths in Traffic," 1985, pp.44-45). Public anger reached a boiling point on November 30, 1985, when protesters burned a minibus after its driver crushed a motorcyclist to death. These vehicles became such a menace that Karachi residents dubbed them "yellow devils." Crucially, the 1985 riots and bus attacks stemmed not from ethnic tensions, but from the public fury at drug-addicted drivers whose reckless behavior caused hundreds of fatalities.

4 Data, Scale and Nature of Violence

Data on the scale, locality, and intensity of violence plays a vital role in identifying on-the-ground motivations for conflict. The evidence reveals that areas controlled by drug mafias have become violent hotspots. Sohrab Goth, where forty people died in clashes between the MQM and residents in November 1986 alone, stood as the most notorious narcotics hub (Abbas, 1985). Authorities seized nearly 800,000 kilograms of *charas* and 511 kilograms of heroin from Sohrab Goth between January and June 1986 (Abbas, 1986a). Beyond narcotics, Sohrab Goth's drug lords also trafficked arms and ammunition. The scale and profitability of this illicit trade attracted foreign participants, some of whom were apprehended (Abbas, 1986b). On November 19, 1986, law enforcement intercepted a 100-kilogram heroin shipment bound for Europe ("100 Kg of Heroin Seized," 1986).

The situation had deteriorated so severely that Federal Interior Minister Muhammad Aslam Khattak admitted in parliament that ninety-nine percent of senior officials were corrupt and supported the drug mafia. In an interview, Altaf Hussain stated: "This administration and bureaucracy engineered this conflict because they have ties with drug mafia" ("Altaf Hussain's Interview," 1987a). The National Assembly consequently formed a 15-member special committee to investigate narcotics production and trafficking comprehensively ("Death Penalty Under Study," 1986). Amid these dire circumstances, 'Operation Clean-up' was launched in Sohrab Goth to dismantle the narcotics trade. However, the operation seized far fewer drugs than anticipated because its secrecy had been compromised. When the drug mafia received advance notice, they quickly relocated their contraband to secure locations ("The Mafia Must Not Prevail," 1986). Nevertheless, Operation Clean-up proved so extensive that drug cartels found themselves severely constrained by law enforcement pressure.

The drugs and arms mafia responded in an unprecedented manner, aiming not only to seek revenge but also to divert law enforcement attention by creating civil war-like conditions across Karachi. Beginning immediately after Operation Clean-up, the mafia unleashed armed violence in non-Pashtun neighborhoods. Within just three days, Karachi witnessed 153 fatalities and nearly 1,000 injured ("Death Toll Rises to 153 Amid Fresh Violence," 1986). The violence proved so extraordinary that Federal Interior Minister Muhammad Aslam Khattak admitted in parliament that the government had neither anticipated such retaliation nor prepared for its scale. ("Khattak Pledges Thorough Enquiry," 1986) Orangi Town, with its heterogeneous population of one million, became a major violence hotspot. However, this was not ethnic violence - residents didn't attack each other along ethnic lines. Rather, externally based armed gangs orchestrated the attacks (Azam, 1985).

4.1 Transformation of Violence on Ethnic Lines

The systematic transformation of sociopolitical and economic conflicts into ethnic violence marked a significant development in Karachi during the 1980s. This phenomenon demands serious scholarly examination, as all stakeholders deliberately ethnicized the violence to serve their interests. The drug mafia, as prime instigators, had clear material objectives in framing the conflict along ethnic lines. As Altaf Hussain stated in an interview: "I can say that the majority of Pashtuns want to live with us peacefully, but it is the drug mafia who used one (Pashtun) group against us" ("Altaf Hussain's Interview," 1987b). Their strategy served dual purposes: first, instigating violence not merely for revenge but to create chaos conducive to their illegal economy; second, disguising this violence under ethnic pretexts to divert attention from their criminal activities.

Moreover, Karachi's Pashtun population was divided into two major categories. The first group consisted of Afghan refugees, arms and drug dealers, and Sohrab Goth transporters. Empowered by black money from illicit trades, they formed the 'Pakhtun Jirga'. The second group comprised working-class Pashtuns living in Banaras and Frontier Colony, who had joined multiethnic labor unions to

demand better wages. In this context, the Pakhtun Jirga, composed of powerful, ruthless drug traffickers and arms smugglers, deliberately created ethnic divisions within labor unions to exploit Pashtun workers. Consequently, Pashtun laborers began insisting on working exclusively under Pashtun employers and leaders, regardless of wage considerations (Abbas, 1985).

The second most important stakeholder in this conflict was the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) of Altaf Hussain (later renamed Muttahida Qaumi Movement). Established in 1984, MQM emerged as the political successor to the All Pakistan Muttahida Students Organization (APMSO), which was founded at Karachi University in 1978 to represent Muhajir students. At that time, most *Muhajirs* supported Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). The newly formed APMSO faced fierce opposition from IJT. Unable to establish itself on campus, APMSO was eventually expelled from the university. Consequently, its founder Altaf Hussain abandoned student politics and turned to street-level organizing.

To attract Muhajir masses to MQM, Altaf Hussain needed to counter Jamaat-e-Islami's (JI) Islamic narrative with an alternative ideology. He strategically employed Muhajir ethnic identity as a substitute for Islamic political ideology, aiming to draw JI supporters to MQM. Furthermore, he heightened ethnic consciousness by portraying *Muhajirs* as victims of ethnic targeting and violence. Afaq Hussain, leader of MQM (Haqiqi), revealed in an interview that he advised Altaf Hussain: "We should strengthen our Muhajir community economically rather than burning tires on roads". Altaf Hussain reportedly rejected this suggestion, responding: "You don't understand politics. As a newcomer to the central cabinet, you fail to realize that solving all problems would leave us without rallying cries. It's the sense of deprivation that brings crowds to our demonstrations" ("Afaq Ahmed's Interview," 1985). Undoubtedly a skilled orator, Altaf Hussain masterfully reinterpreted the causes behind traffic accidents and drug mafia violence, framing them as ethnic persecution against *muhajirs*. He famously demanded constitutional recognition of *muhajirs* as Pakistan's "fifth nationality" ("Jhalkian," 1985).

Altaf Hussain established MQM's armed wings under the pretext of protecting *muhajirs* but ultimately used them to escalate ethnic violence. He deliberately framed the December 1986 drug mafia violence, which was retaliation against Operation Clean-up, as ethnic conflict, deploying his armed units against Pashtuns. Arshad, a key member of these armed groups, confessed: "Pashtuns killed 300 *muhajirs*, so we killed 900 Pashtuns in one December night in 1986" (Khan, 2010, p.18). Regarding Altaf Hussain, Arshad stated: "I gradually realized he was dishonest. He preached one thing but never intended to reform the system - he merely sought absolute power and godlike status" (Khan, 2010, p.19). Altaf Hussain's motivations were purely self-serving. First, he sought to cultivate ethnic tensions as a pathway to political power. Second, he weaponized these armed groups for illicit profit through extortion and ransom schemes. As Arshad later reflected: "I felt no shame then, but now I understand we were fighting for hidden agendas"(Khan, 2010, p.16).

The state's role in transforming and portraying Karachi's violence as ethnic conflict was no less significant than other stakeholders. General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law regime faced fierce opposition from the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) while failing to protect Karachi from drug and arms proliferation. Following persistent civil society demands, authorities launched Operation Clean-up against Sohrab Goth's drug mafia. Yet the state suffered another embarrassment when this top-secret operation failed on two counts: first, operational secrecy was compromised, allowing mafias to relocate most drugs and weapons; second, despite advance warnings from some sources about potential retaliatory violence, state officials proved unable to contain the deadly armed backlash.

The Zia-ul-Haq regime employed the 'ethnic violence' narrative to conceal its failures in controlling organized crime and maintaining law and order following Operation Clean-up's violent aftermath. Karachi descended into lawlessness, witnessing over 200 brutal killings and more than a thousand injuries within just three days. This sudden eruption of violence enabled MRD leaders to expose the martial law regime's governance failures, fueling momentum for the 'Zia Jaway Jaway' (Go Zia Go) movement. To counter these protests, the regime deliberately framed organized crime

violence as 'ethnic conflict.' However, as Muhammad Siddiq Rathore, leader of opposition councilors in Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, clarified: "In fact, there was no *Pakhtun-Muhajir* conflict. They were victims of a conspiracy. The government failed to control the drug mafia and criminal elements, yet blamed ethnicity instead" ("No Conflict Between Pakhtuns and Muhajirs," 1986).

5 Conclusion

This study analyzes the outbreak of intense armed violence in Karachi and its ethnic framing during 1980-1990. It establishes that the primary factor transforming Karachi into a violent epicenter was the competing economic interests between existing (Urdu-speaking migrants from India) and newer (Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtun) migrant communities. Karachi not only absorbed migrant populations but became victimized by migration's consequences. The 1950s-1960s witnessed frequent labor strikes, while the 1970s saw student activism emerge - all occurring without ethnic consciousness or ethnic nationalism. These activities constituted conflicts rather than armed violence. Armed violence arrived with Afghan migrants, who faced severe livelihood crises in Karachi. Struggling for survival, they engaged in complex economic activities, blurring legal/illegal distinctions. Refugee camps were strategically located in lawless slums, while unregistered migrants settled in *katchi abadis* like Sohrab Goth to evade authorities. The lucrative drug and weapons trade soon enabled Pashtuns to dominate narcotics, real estate, and transport sectors. The 1985 riots, later mischaracterized as 'ethnic', stemmed from the brutal killing of student Bushra Zaidi in North Karachi. *Muhajirs* protested driver misconduct rather than Pashtun ethnicity. The drug mafia primarily benefited from this ethnic masking, protecting their black-market economy while diverting law enforcement attention. MQM's Altaf Hussain secondarily exploited this, replacing Islamic ideology with ethnic consciousness to gain Muhajir support. The Zia-ul-Haq regime doubly failed - neither controlling narcotics nor preventing violence. It too employed ethnic framing to conceal governance failures, despite opposition from Karachi's leaders. Once ethnicized, violence became a strategic tool for mafias, gangs, and corrupt leaders to expand illegal economies.

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Notes

ⁱ According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) the migrant "term is increasingly used as an umbrella term to refer to any person who moves away from their usual place of residence, whether internally or across a border, and regardless of whether the movement is 'forced' or voluntary."

ⁱⁱ The term "*karachiite*" is widely used by scholars across disciplines, including historians, to denote anything associated with Karachi. Prominent partition historian Vazira Fazila-Yaqoobali Zamindar and Karachi violence expert Laurent Gayer have extensively employed this term in their respective works. Gayer specifically defines "*karachiite*" as synonymous with "*karachiwala*".