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The water tanker mafia

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Master of Science in Journalism



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THE WATER TANKER MAFIA

This Research Report is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment Masters of Science in Journalism degree

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research report to my mother, Dr Farzana Sajjad, my father Sajjad Ahmad, my sister Ramsha Sajjad and my teachers and the staff at the Centre for Excellence in Journalism at the Institute of Business Administration.

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Abstract

This is a thesis about the Water Tanker Mafia in Karachi. The citizens of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi suffer from an acute lack of water for drinking and domestic use. To cover for this lack of water, there is a network of tankers, run illegally but also with a large degree of connivance with parts of the state in Karachi, that provides water to the citizens of this city. This paper seeks to explain this network, its history, organization and the infrastructure in Karachi that it supports or in many cases, supersedes. This paper places the Karachi water tanker mafia in the matrix of corruption and utilities that exist to try and sate the city's need for the basic infrastructure that it lacks.

The Water Tanker Mafia

Chapter 1

Introduction

Water remains essential for life. However, considering how the distribution of water is treated in Karachi, it seems that the people running Pakistan's biggest city and sea port, do not seem to value life. Karachi's water is not fit to drink. When its citizens open their taps, at best the water they get is good enough for cleaning themselves and their possessions. At worst, no water will come out of the tap. This city, the capital of the Sindh province, is one that has long outstripped its infrastructure.

Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city has not so much grown as it has exploded in population. Karachi is the major port city of Pakistan, and has experienced exponential demographic growth since the independence of this country 72 years ago.

Now this city of officially over 16 million people has tap water that has not been drinkable since the end of the Cold War. If this undrinkable water is not available, a problem in many parts of the city without connection to the pipes of the official water distribution system, then they turn to the water tanker mafia. (Saeed, 2017)

Chapter 2

What is the Tanker Mafia

The Tanker mafia as it is colloquially referred to, is a collection of water tankers run by organized groups stealing water from state-run freshwater pipelines, ground aquifers and open bodies of water. The reason for their existence, in the rawest number's that can be stated, are that Karachi has a water demand of 1,100 million gallons a day (MGD) as per the 2018 Sindh Water Commission. (Kaleem, 2018) It receives 500 MGD as per the recently appointed Managing Director (MD) of the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, Asadullah Khan. In this shortfall arise many strange and varied work-arounds to fulfill the demand for usable, potable water. The tanker mafia, is one such strange, uniquely Pakistani workaround.

As a frankly illegal network, the tanker mafia's origins are hard to pin down. References begin to appear in academic literature in the 1980's, especially with reference to the larger network of illegal "networks" that had sprung up in the wake of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, for which Pakistan was being used as a base by the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship (1977-1988). In Arif Hasan's 1987 paper "A study on metropolitan fringe development in Karachi, focusing on informal land subdivision," we find references to private water storage facilities for Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) supplied tankers, created by charging residents. In these sort of informal relationships, playing around with government water assets, we see the corruption of Karachi's infrastructure, which had become over-stressed by then from the well-known Afghan refugee crisis of the era and the subsequent political tensions and political distortions it had wrought.

Whereas the heroin and gun smuggling networks that emerged and expanded during the Zia era are more popularly covered, and even the land grabbing mafia that began to emerge and strengthen then is more notorious for the financial and physical clout it brings, the water tanker mafia is less well studied. It is only in this decade, as Karachi has been more closely studied and reported on by a generation that grew up in the shadows of these rackets that these phenomena are being more widely studied.

The water mafia emerges in the press and academic literature at the same time as the land mafia, in the late 1970's, specifically after the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship begins to take hold and strengthen its hold by transferring resources in a way that gives bureaucrats a free hand to do with these assets as they like, with no oversight worth the name. This facilitated the rise of such

phenomenon as the “regularization” of urban slums and the acceptance of the previously illicit funds that were collected from them to provide utilities to these extra-legal communities. Karachi’s unrestrained growth in the wake of the Zia era’s Afghan Jihad allowed an expansion of the city in a manner that it was neither prepared for, nor equipped to handle. As the population outstripped the infrastructure, illicit utilities, like illegal electricity hook-ups (the *kunda*) to the water tanker mafia providing water, we found that services would follow population growth, but with the no plan and contingency to deal with the expanding population and the deteriorating infrastructure all of this was leeching off.

I spoke with Rafey Siddiqui, the lead hydraulic designer of the K-IV pipeline that would bring water from Keenjhar Lake to Karachi, about what he saw as the origin of the water mafia. By the time I spoke with him in 2019, all these networks from the Zia era, for drugs, weapons, illegal land, had grown, metastasized and in some cases been cut down. People can still get drugs, illicit weapons and illegally acquired land in Karachi, but it is harder as multiple anti-militant and anti-criminal operations by provincial and federal law enforcement agencies had cut down access for these commodities in Karachi, especially to choke criminal and militant financing. The water tanker mafia was not the juggernaut it had once been, when it even had links in the past to terrorists like the Pakistani Taliban, who either extorted from it or used earnings from it to fund their activities. Those connections have been mostly wrapped up by the Karachi operation from 2014 onwards.

Chapter 3

A Criminal Workaround to a Broken System

However, the origins of the water tanker mafia according to Rafey Siddiqui (Siddiqui, 2019) was the decrepit and near-obsolete water transport infrastructure in Karachi. As per this civil engineer, the water delivery infrastructure of Karachi, the pipes and the pumps and the paraphernalia that came with it, had run through its natural life and needed to be replaced. The fact that it hadn't been replaced was why there were between 100 to 150 MGD of water losses through the pipes, which gave the water tanker mafia its target market. He is helping to bring water to Karachi through the K-IV pipeline but he has made his exasperation clear with how line losses will only lose water for the citizen of Karachi before the water reaches his or her house. According to him the problem of line losses in the last mile is one that has to be dealt with if Karachi wishes to deal with the problem of its water issues and tanker mafia in a decisive way.

The tanker mafia transports approximately 260 MGD of water every day. The sheer quantity of water that it transports and sells illicitly makes the illegal water industry in Karachi a lucrative industry. The amount of money that this generates warps the social and political fabric of Karachi and can act as a constant enticement towards corruption of the civil bureaucracy and politics. Reports keep swirling about members of political parties being involved in the illegal extraction of water and its distribution by tankers associated with them.

The murder of Parween Rahman in 2013 is the most extreme example of the consequence of the corruption of Karachi's civic functions by mafias and crooked civil bureaucrats amidst the dysfunction of Karachi's utilities. As a Geo report said, "In 2013 a social activist Parveen Rehman was gunned down in Orangi area allegedly by the tanker mafia for speaking out against them, police and her family claims." (Shoaib, 2016) She was supposed to be providing residents of slums with proof of their ownership. This got in the way of the land mafia, who were trying to swindle slum dwellers out of their land. In 2013, with Karachi racked with a high rate of crime as well as being infiltrated in many slums by terrorists from the Taliban, and attacks happening in Karachi every few months, it seemed that these forces of anarchic dysfunction came violently together and killed a woman who was only trying to help the vulnerable in society. The same forces of administrative dysfunction and corruption that spawned the water mafia, came together in an atmosphere of violent religious extremism and killed Parveen Rehman. There were continuous

rumours of her murder being linked not just to the land mafia but also the Pakistani Taliban, who had gained strongholds in parts of the city at that time.

There is a clear cost to the city when these sort of mafias operate. Not only are citizens not provided the opportunities and services that they are owed, but criminal behavior becomes institutionalized in the governance, or mis-governance of the state. This metastasizes and grows as the economy and state grows and the mafias become a bigger and bigger problem moving forward. Their presence acts as a brake against further growth and a deterrent to legitimate business investment in affected zone. One can see this in foreign unwillingness to invest fully in Pakistan due to the level of bribes or payments for illegal connections that have to be paid to get work done. There are laws against bribery in foreign states and these laws and ethical requirements are enforced. If a foreign company pays a bribe in Pakistan for an illegal water connection, this can have deleterious effects in its home nation if this sort of behaviour is found out. In Pakistan, the norms against being caught giving or receiving bribes are weak. This is not the case in the rest of the world. A reputation for illegal activity creates reluctance amongst investors in spending money in a country. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2017)

The mushroom growth of Karachi in the 1980's lead to the expansion of the tanker system of delivering water to out of the way localities and informal housing localities that had sprung up around the city. Whereas water is pumped from Keenjhar Lake and delivered to the pumping station at Dhabeji, just outside the city, through a series of open canals and underground pipes, with some line losses and theft of water by farmers along the way, the piping system in the city has not expanded to all the localities in the city to provide water. At the same time, people in Karachi and its outer regions have had the permission to bore underground for well water. These underground sources of water become known as hydrants above ground. Between the open canals and the hydrants, we find the water mafia using these as the source of the water for their product. A look back at history shows that the hydrants, especially illegal ones, became the serious source of water for the Karachi water tanker mafia, which they would sell on to their customers. These illegal hydrants began to become a serious problem for the city as a way for the water mafia to keep itself in business.

Chapter 4

Liquid Crime: Illegal Hydrants of the Tanker Mafia

According to a report in Herald from 2014, illegal hydrants became part of Karachi's water landscape because of two men in 1995, Ajab Khan and Taj Muhammad Kohistani. While Khan started the initial illegal hydrant he had in Nazimabad No. 2, Kohistani dug through Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB) water lines in the Nauras Chowrangi area close to SITE, to get his water.

According to a former illegal hydrant owner, Muhammad Gillani, Kohistani and Khan were actually working for the industrialists in the SITE area who needed water supply in bulk but had not been receiving it through the official system. Gillani says that illegal hydrants were initially built under the pretense of carrying out underground boring. Gillani himself has abandoned the illegal hydrant business after he suffered multiple personal tragedies which he believes stemmed from his involvement in the illegal hydrant business.

The injustice in the consumption of illegal tanker water is fed by the demand of the privileged and those running capitalist industrial estates. This becomes clear as one looks closer from Dhabeji to the factories, the houses and the apartment complexes gulping down the water that they want, while showing scant askance at where this water comes from. As the cases of Muhammad Kohistani and Ajab Khan show, the demands by private factory owners turbo-charged the business of those running illegal hydrants and created a supply of illegal water tankers that privileged domestic uses, such as those in the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) or living in newly created apartment complexes can use to supplement the not always reliable supply from KWSB. KWSB and its water infrastructure certainly deserve blame, but the behavior of privileged water consumers (as opposed to the low demand residents of slums and unregulated settlements) drives up the rewards to the water mafia and makes it worth their while to set up illegal hydrants and divert the water to paying customers.

Managing Directors (MDs) of the KWSB, from Misbahuddin Farid to Asadullah Khan have spoken about the outsize strain that factories put on Karachi's water distribution system. When speaking to Herald in 2014, Farid spoke about how KWSB was unable to meet the demand made by factories on the KWSB water supply. When speaking to Samaa in 2019, Khan, the current KWSB MD spoke about how the factories do not pay enough to KWSB, and are in fact paying

ridiculously low and outdated rates for their water. This works to the industrialists' advantage. Then there is the issue that Gillani addresses where he tells how KWSB pipelines were bored into and water was extracted and taken to factories to be used. Farid also indicates as much, though as a bureaucrat, he does not say it explicitly that factory-owners abuse the weaknesses of the KWSB system and even patronize illegal methods for water to be sent to their factories.

Large apartment buildings also present a serious bottleneck in terms of the provision of water to their residents. The builders who made them have multiple times failed to adjust the design of their water supply network to the amount of water that an apartment building would need to supply to all of its residents. This creates an unmet demand of the residents for water. They then satisfy it through the use of tankers. Alternatively, if either the residents of the apartment are connected to any political party, they use their connections to expand the water pipeline that runs to their building, while the KWSB looks the other way.

In comparison to these two categories of patrons of the water tanker mafia, the poor people from slums, or informal settlements who do not have piped water but are necessitated by their lack of infrastructure connecting them to the KWSB to then purchase water from the tanker mafia, look relatively blameless. They are not accelerating the corruption of the water infrastructure, but rather are taking advantage of the expansion of that corrupt infrastructure in the service of industrialists and residents of newly built, large apartment complexes. To fix their problem, these people have to be acknowledged as residents of the city, who deserve to have water connections and subsequently the infrastructure must be built out to where they live. If that is done at the same time as tackling the water tanker mafia, then a serious strike can be made against the tanker mafia, while depriving it of its customers, who would now be connected to the KWSB.

Chapter 5

Karachi's Water Infrastructure

K-II was completed in 1998 and K-III was completed in 2006. This shows Karachi, Sindh and Pakistan can handle the water infrastructure it possesses and can create systems to bring in more water into the system. Then the question arises why something like the water mafia continues to exist? This brings us back to the designer of the K-IV, Rafey Siddiqui's argument that the water distribution system for Karachi are decrepit and need to be replaced. He has been the lead designer for a water project, K-IV, that was initiated in 2006 immediately after K-III came online. This shows that the political system is responsive to public water demand. However, what is called in the parlance of supply chain management, the "last mile" is where Pakistani service delivery systems tend to breakdown and the historical weakness of responsiveness to individual Pakistanis creeps in and collectively deteriorates the system of governance. The "last mile" in Karachi's water supply's chain is the pipes and pumping stations that have to bring water to consumers and industrial users of water in the city and their lack of capacity in the face of this city's growing population. The governments involved in running Karachi, whether it is the provincial government, or the local government, in the face of the build-up, sprawl and vertical growth of the city have not committed effectively to expanding the water supply network of the city as well. The various kind of hydrants illustrate the depth of the problem of water pilferage and sale by the tanker mafia. The illegal hydrants run machinery that extracts the water from either underground bore wells or steal it from the main KWSB pipes. They continue to run because the people arrested for using them were not effectively prosecuted, or there was corruption among the KWSB officials or the police. Then there is the issue of the problems that plague the KWSB water system which can cause water shortages and thus create a demand for the illegal water supply.

Chapter 6

Bribes and Blind Eyes Amidst Broken Pipes

DHA and Clifton remain a prime target for the water hydrants because they are at the tail end of the KWSB water distribution system, so any shortage strikes them hard. The mushroom growth of high rise buildings in these locations as well as the expansion of new phases of DHA also add to the water demand. If there are people willing to pay a high enough price for water, there will be others willing to tap into the water supply, probably with the help of willing and corrupt bureaucrats, to turn a profit.

Besides the illegally set up hydrants, legal ones are regularly abused for the purpose of supplying the water tanker mafia. Contractors are allowed to set up legal hydrants if they submit themselves to official processes and fees. In theory, these hydrants are set up to meet the needs of the domestic consumers in the area or if the official pipelines of the area are incapable of supplying water or face a technical difficulty. In reality, they can be and have been exploited by the water tanker mafia.

Contractors have been known to collude with the KWSB and increase the capacity of their hydrants beyond their sanctioned strength so as to draw more water from the supply lines than they are permitted. Then they sell this water at inflated prices to commercial and industrial users who are not permitted to access water from such hydrants. Putting a number on the volume of this contraband water from these hydrants is very difficult.

The people running illegal hydrants and private pipelines do get help from crooked KWSB officials but the organization most complicit with them is the police. Since the work of setting up a hydrant and the underground pipes is so publicly visible, without active police collusion, continuing these activities would just not be possible.

It is also not just in the city and its environs that this sort of illegal activity takes place. As per a report in the newspaper Dawn, “A Day in the Life of a Water Tanker,” the driver of the water tanker describes driving far outside the city, to a farm watered by a canal. Over there, the landlord of the farm allows the truck driver to pump water from a hydrant into the truck. The tanker driver pays of the farmer and hydrant owner, who has not been paying the government for the public water he has now been selling, while the tanker returns to Karachi to sell the water. Despite stories

of illegal hydrants being destroyed in Karachi through law enforcement operations, this is how the owners of tankers continue to keep supplying water and making money of their racket.

Chapter 7

Poor Drying Cities

When the KWSB was created in 1983, it was able to provide everyone with water. However, the continuous growth of the city put the strain on it that it was unable to cope with and resultantly corruption allowed the water tanker mafia to fill part of the role that this service should provide. In the today's environment of institutionalised corruption amidst the growth of urban sprawl, the KWSB also misses out on revenue from legitimate sources such as the infrastructure charges that contractors would have to pay on the high rises that they are building. The sums paid are either paltry, or they are lost in the bureaucracy or they are not paid at all. This leaves the KWSB with a dearth of funds, that if it had, could be used for creating an infrastructure commensurate to a city in which multi-storey high rises are now springing up on plots meant for bungalows. This growth has taxed the pipes that brought water to these plots and took sewage away from them and were built to handle a volume that was assumed to be at most a few families that would live on it. Now however, the city of Karachi has become more and more of a dense concrete jungle of multi-storey buildings, and the pipes or the methods to pay to upgrade them have not kept pace with this exponential growth. The result is the water shortages, the choked sewer pipes and the paralysis of the KWSB in dealing with all of this.

When looking at other cities and the problem that they face with water, we unfortunately find that Karachi's problem with needing to resort to a water tanker mafia is not a unique problem. Many cities in India, like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, have had localities that were not connected to the official water supply chain. Due to this, their populations had to turn to water tanker mafias that transported illicit volumes of water from sources they were not supposed to be tapping, all the while greasing their operations by corrupting the local officials. Outside South Asia, this phenomenon has been observed in the urban centres of Tanzania, a country where half the population does not have access to clean drinking water. It is clear that tanker mafias are a product of South Asian cities' unique and unequal growth, where large enough sections of the population come to inhabit parts of what are considered the city, but do not have access to basic utilities. This deprivation makes it economically viable for cartels like these to set up operation and charge money for providing what should be a basic service, while the larger bureaucracy is

corrupted by their presence, and a political-bureaucratic nexus emerges to paralyse upgradation or provision of basic utilities to marginalized communities.

While more naïve foreign observers would classify the tanker mafia as the “free market” in action, it is clear to residents of Karachi, and the other South Asian cities where this occurs, that it is a manifestation of a number of maladies that come together uniquely in their own countries. These urban mafias that provide utilities are a symptom of runaway population growth, especially in the cities, as well as the negligence of the state, a mafia filling in the role of the state and then corruption between the civil bureaucracy and the political actors and finally, a close enough distance between neglected populations and their water source that a tanker could cover it. The density of population does make it easy to transport the water and cover the distance in a tanker, which makes this a geographically unique phenomenon for South Asia, with both its population density and its political corruption. The role of political corruption in keeping this racket going should not be understated.

Political corruption in the form of co-optation by political actors, or their key role in running the hydrants and keeping the tanker networks plying the roads cannot be understated. One of the most notorious hydrant operators was Awami National Party leader from Orangi Raheem Swati. He ran a number of hydrants in Karachi and was a prime accused in the murder of civil activist and organizer, Parveen Rehman of the Orangi Pilot Project. Swati ran an illegal hydrant on Manghopir Road while also being involved in land-grabbing in Orangi. He also allegedly farmed out the murder of Parveen Rehman to a Taliban militant. Swati’s activities are an intersection of a Venn diagram of some of the worst activities in Karachi in the 2010’s.

Chapter 8

The Firebrand's Words

Last year, during the 2018 election, I reported on politician and human rights activist Jibran Nasir speaking at a town hall with other politicians of his constituency he was competing with. Over there he spoke about the issue of the tanker mafia and how no political party confronts them. He commented how, “Our basic rights are being privatized.”

Water does remain a basic public right. So I spoke to him about the issue of the water mafia, how he sees its operations and what can be done about it. When he was asked to expand on his statement from the election last year, he spoke about how when water is stolen and then sold back to you, “Then people are bound to suffer.” In terms of connections of the political parties with the tanker mafia, Nasir said that, “They aren't attached at the senior level. What happens is that the juniors in the party, their workers, considering how there's such a large tanker mafia here, has someone owning a tanker, running them or being connected with the business.” He continued, “Everywhere in these political parties, there is a pressure group to preserve, support and let this tanker mafia operate. Because at the end of the day, black money is involved in politics. And the black money that the tanker mafia earns, comes to the political parties in a roundabout way.”

When asked how high up the civil bureaucracy he thought that the water tanker mafia was being paid off he said, “That is contemplation. I put it quite simply; either you are compromised or you are incompetent. It's one or the other. Either you are taking money or fixing this is beyond your capacity.” This characterisation of Karachi and Sindh's bureaucracy's visible inaction in the face off the tanker mafia was a stark but honest explanation of their neglect.

When asked about what action should be taken against the tanker mafia, Jibran Nasir responded, “Well, you have to take the KWSB on board. They very well know their lines; they know very well where the water is being stolen from. Karachi's water is being stolen from KWSB's pipelines. And the people operating the tankers are doing so openly, out on the road not in some caves. The police know who is running the rankers, whose tankers are unregistered and who is selling water at inflated prices. So if they want to take action, then they can take it. Water theft is a crime. Their tankers can be sealed, their entire network can be shut down, their businesses can be bankrupted, and the corruption of the linemen involved can be caught. What has to be done with the crime is very obvious: you have to carry out justice.”

When asked about why these obvious steps are not being taken, Nasir said, “It’s not happening because no one at the top wants to do this. That’s why all the political parties are selling you desalination plants in the elections. Now the question is, where are these desalination plants? It’s going to be nearly a year since the election. Why hasn’t it been announced?” (Butt, 2018)

In terms of finding how the government can wrap up the water tanker mafia, Nasir said that, “That would depend on their own investigation (by the government) to find out who is corrupt. I can’t say that they need to fire x, y or z. Their own internal investigation, their police investigation, their NAB investigation is what can tell them who was taking money, who was making money and who was allowing this to happen; and on whose signature, who was related to whom. A real investigation would reveal who all is involved with this. You can’t just start dropping names.”

Nasir also had some choice words for the way that the KWSB had been reporting its statistics and how calling out deception there could lead to uncovering the water tanker mafia. He contended that, “35% of KWSB’s water is counted as losses, daily. This means 225 MGD. Then it turns around and says that out of this, only 1% is sold off by tankers and 34% seeps into the ground. If it were true that that 34% was seeping into the ground, then Karachi’s would have started to sink, the pillars of your buildings would be waterlogged, if this much water was seeping daily into Karachi. So the KWSB admits itself that it has no control over 35% of its water, that it’s non-revenue water. Where’s one third of Karachi’s water going? It is definitely going into the tankers. If you just observe all of this, then their corruption becomes visible.”

Nasir also reported, for the benefit of water tanker customers in Karachi what they can do to lessen their dependence on this mafia, that “KWSB has taken out a scheme, in which they regularized some tankers, which were supposed to sell the water at the government’s rate. But it’s not enough. There were not enough tankers. They should expand it out to everyone.” (Nasir, 2019)

These insights and observations by an independent politician in Karachi help to direct our sight on what is so visibly wrong with Karachi’s illegal water tanker system, why it isn’t being judiciously resolved and how it can be if, frankly, the political will to dismantle the tanker mafia emerges.

While the tanker mafia represents a cottage industry of corruption in the city’s utilities, Karachi’s system of piped water has been so bad for so long, that nearly a generation has passed without the tap-water being drinkable. Karachi’s tapped water simply cannot be drunk, without

putting oneself at the risk of multiple diseases and possible adverse reactions. The water is infested with bacteria, which make their way into the tapped water due to the leakiness of the KWSB's pipes. This is why bacteriological agents are easily found in Karachi's drinking water, and the city's residents must make alternative arrangements for drinking water. These alternatives include boiling tap-water, physically collecting drinkable water from neighbourhood filtration plants or buying mineral water. All of these actions represent a failure of the state, particularly the KWSB and the Sindh provincial government, in providing drinkable water to the people of Karachi.

Some of the hydrants run by the water tanker mafia do provide potable water, but the water tankers are not built particularly to transport drinking water. This makes them unreliable as a source of potable water and so the citizens of Karachi, particularly individual families, are left to fend for themselves when it comes to making sure that their families have drinking water.

Chapter 9

The Designer Speaks

Returning to what Rafey Siddiqui, the designer of the K-IV pipeline said, he quoted the World Health Organisation when it said that one person requires 54 gallons of water per day. By these standards, the people of Karachi are lacking an adequate supply of water, but they are somewhat making do. By Siddiqui's estimate, Karachiites are receiving 15 to 18 gallons of water per capita per day. This is not a complete dearth of water, but it certainly is inadequate to live a decent life.

Before elaborating on the water tanker mafia, he spoke about how the large water projects such as the K-IV pipeline and the large pumping stations like Dhabeji that are inaugurated, are large and eye-catching for politicians. He contrasted the relative flash of these projects with the social and political abuse that politicians would incur if they dug up and replaced the pipelines in Karachi under its streets and alleys, in its byways and its slums. Siddiqui said, "The problem is, Karachi has an aging infrastructure. This city's water infrastructure, most of it is more than 50 years old. It has served its useful life. When your infrastructure can't even carry water, but water is available but it is unable to carry it, then the only option that remains is to supply the water with tankers."

Siddiqui continued further, "If you were living near Safoora Goth, you would know that it is home to one of the biggest water hydrants in Karachi. It fills thousands of tankers per day. Right behind it is a society called Gulshan-e-Umair. Over there people are receiving an intermittent supply, people there don't have a continuous supply of water." He then acknowledged the tanker mafia, "Yes there's a mafia, it's an uncontrolled mafia. It's an uncontrolled mafia, it's an unregularised industry."

Siddiqui continued, "40% of the city's water is supplied through tankers. That means that we are talking about roughly 200 million gallons per day (MGD). This means that 10,000 tankers are operating in Karachi, which are making eight trips per day. Assuming that one tanker carries around 3,000 gallons. If you're selling one tanker for Rs 5,000, that means there is a Rs 150 billion industry or a billion dollar (illegal) industry that exists in the city. That is why these lines are not getting repaired. This business is being promoted; it is an unregularised business in which nobody is keeping any tabs on who bought how many tankers, or checks the number of tankers you have plying the streets. There is no tax on any of them or on this activity. There is no check or balance."

To emphasise this, Siddiqui gave a very unhygienic example that “In an edible oil tanker, you could transport potable water supplies.” And he repeated the reason this could happen that, “This is an unregularised industry.” He also mentioned that the tanker mafia also had the gall to sometimes plead the its existence on humanitarian grounds, because as Siddiqui repeated, “They supply water. When the society just behind a hydrant isn’t getting any of it and all the water is going to that hydrant for the tankers. It doesn’t give you political mileage to replace aging infrastructure. But launching big projects like the K-IV pipeline or the Dhabeji pumping station or the Haleji pumping station does. I think somebody has to take the tough decision of changing the city’s water infrastructure.”

Clearly, Siddiqui highlighted the condition of the pipes and the water infrastructure and the low supply it gave and the losses along the way as the reason that Karachi’s water crisis allowed for the water tanker mafia to take root. When I asked whose responsibility it was to resolve this issue, to fix the aging pipes of Karachi; whether it should be the local government or whether it should be the provincial government he said, “You’re talking about Karachi. Karachi is an exceptional case. If you were talking about a small city, like Sukkur, Larkana or Tando Adam I would say that the local government should take care of it. You’re talking about Karachi. You’re talking about at least 15,000 to 20,000 kilometres of pipeline. So this is not something that the local government has the funds or capacity to do. So I think the federal government, or the Sindh government (should be involved). This is something that should have been done in phases over the years. But now you’ve ignored it and it’s an elephant in the room that you are not addressing. I think it’s a mass scale exercise. Right now I would say that the Sindh government is responsible for it. And the Sindh government and the local government ministry should at least move a big project. And then you know, the funding is the next phase that who is going to fund it or where the funding is going to come from. But right now, you need to launch the project.”

Siddiqui observed the collusion across parties in favour of the tanker mafia. He said that, “In my experience, as far as I know, this is the one segment of society where all the parties are united. Each and every party is equally to blame for this and they absolutely have equal contribution and they have equal mileage to gain out of this, whether it is the MQM, PPP, ANP, they all have their fair share of involvement in the water mafia.”

Chapter 10

The Infrastructure and Economics of Karachi's Water

Siddiqui warned that the water being pumped from K-IV could just be wasted by the terrible infrastructure in place across the city. He said that his concern is that if the infrastructure is not changed, then, “If 10,000 tankers ply the streets of Karachi, then tomorrow 20,000 tankers might start plying the streets. This is because the additional water that will arrive, it will have to go through these lines. Your basic infrastructure doesn't have the capacity to take in that additional water. Then how will the water go to people? Will it go through tankers again?”

He also spoke about the ridiculously low water metering in Karachi and the need for comprehensive legislation in regards to water pricing in Pakistan, “You may get cable at your home for Rs 5000, or internet for Rs 6000, but if I started sending you a water bill for Rs 4000, there would be public feuding and fighting. There's been a problem in Pakistan that water has been treated as a free commodity. The water for agriculture is charged at Rs 1500 per acre, annually, dating back a long time. If you look at the bulk water supply price for Karachi, it's nothing. So somebody has to take an unpopular decision. The thing is that we need legislation on water (there is no legislation on groundwater in Pakistan) and that would be a very unpopular decision. And no government would want to take unpopular decisions. Somebody has to take these decisions and set the thing right.”

Attempts at raising the price went nowhere. As per reports that Siddiqui got, “The Water Board has written to the Sindh government six times that the prices have to be drastically changed. The Sindh government rejects this, saying that if they did this and charged someone used to paying Rs 400 for water, Rs 4000, then that person will raise a ruckus and why should we listen to people's abuse?” Politically sidestepping this issue for so long has left the Water Board in a position where it is charging people so little for the water that they use that this is undermining their own infrastructure funding, which in turn just further undermines the overburdened water infrastructure of Karachi.

Siddiqui emphasised the need to upgrade the infrastructure of the water pipes in Karachi by listing off all the places in the city that were suffering from a water crisis when he bought up the water shortages in Gulshan and even the new phases of Defence. He used the water crisis of

these established, settled bourgeoisie districts as an example, without bringing the informal settlements into the discussion.

Siddiqui elaborated that “Where there was a supply of water, it is no longer there. In Gulshan there was no problem with supply of the water line. Now there is a shortage in Gulshan. At some point there was no problem in Defence with regards to water, but after Phase V, VI and VII were built problems started to come up. Now there isn’t even water in Phase I. All of this is because your infrastructure is getting worse and worse, day by day. It’s getting worse and worse and the Water Board realised that if we pump the water through the lines, we will lose 200 million gallons due to the leakages. What’s better than this is to save the water and to supply it to people through tankers. Everybody took the easy way out.”

This only confirms the complicity and relative helplessness of the KWSB in the face of the water crisis that its decrepit infrastructure has led to in Karachi and spawned the tanker mafia. However, unlike Jibran Nasir, when asked if the FIA or NAB should be used to investigate the water tanker mafia Rafey Siddiqui responded, “I think this is a lost cause. That’s because they will all collude in this because it’s a big money industry and all the agencies cannot be trusted with it. It can cause a humanitarian crisis. What if all the tankers go on a strike? What will you do? Because now you’ve played into their hands. They’re blackmailers now. Right now if they go on strike, you won’t be able to supply water to the west of Karachi.” Effectively, Siddiqui confirmed that the water tanker mafia could hold Karachi hostage, if they were effectively challenged. I am worried to test his hypothesis out, but then the question rises, where is our vaunted strength as an alleged security state?

While Siddiqui grasped the nettle of what was wrong with Karachi’s water distribution network, and how its obsolescence facilitated the tanker mafia, the KWSB had to also know that the remedy involved fixing its network of pipes and pumps. One of the very shocking reports that I kept coming across were criticisms of the state of the pumping equipment. Whereas Dhabeji pumping station has had a face lift since it is the main pumping station for Karachi, news comes in every month of pumping stations suffering from power outages (Samaa Digital, 2018), machinery breakdowns and bursting pipes. The lack of dedicated back-up generators at so many of these facilities is a shocking situation, considering Pakistan’s chronic electricity issues. I also have to agree with Siddiqui’s assessment of how big ticket projects like K-IV are used as a way of signaling that the government has started work on key strategic water infrastructure, but the lack

of an across the board approach to all of Karachi's water infrastructure is alarming. The broken pipes, the obsolete pumping equipment across the city's water network, the lack of any serious water treatment or sewage treatment make all of Karachi's water infrastructure an alarming issue to contemplate. The water mafia, as an addition to this general state of dysfunction only looks like the crystallisation of all this disorder.

A low-tech cause of water contamination in the city is the leakage of material into the old pipes that the KWSB has laid around Karachi. These pipes are old and need to be replaced. What is worse is that residents and thieves break these pipes to pilfer their water. Members of the tanker mafia have been known to steal the water from broken pipes and then sell it through trucks in other parts of the city.

All of these infrastructure issues were made clear in the words of an anonymous water board official who spoke with a website that covers Asia's water problems, thethirdpole.net. He said that, "A complete rehabilitation of the entire distribution network is needed." He also indicated that they were aware of the scale of the problem when he continued that, "It is a huge undertaking and may require two to three years. It is also very expensive."

In the meantime the water treatment plants running in Karachi are not functioning optimally. The lack of full water treatment combined with the contamination of the piped water supply of the city guarantees that the water from the taps will not be fit for human consumption. According to an investigation by thethirdpole.net, the machinery for water treatment is installed in KWSB plants but the technicians do not have the proper training to operate them. The result is that the water coming out of Karachi's pipes remains unfit for drinking.

There are also no functioning sewage treatment plants and this is a problem. Karachi produces a great deal of sewage much of which flows untreated into the sea. This obviously creates a great deal of pollution and degrades the health of Karachi citizens and puts the lives of the local fauna and flora at risk. The fish industry of Karachi is also threatened as the marine life is sickened by the effluent and the people ingest contaminated seafood. Frankly, if the sewage treatment plants were running, they could help alleviate the water (and pollution) crisis in Karachi, by providing water for the city's green spots and parks and for industrial uses as well, if not tap water. By providing recycled water for industry functional sewage treatment plants in Karachi could help reduce the demand for water that lead to the flourishing of the water tanker mafia.

Treating the effluent would provide a reward of itself in which not only could the sewerage be recycled into usable water but the byproducts could produce useful material for fertilizers and be the raw ingredient for other manufacturable products.

Chapter 11

Water and Politics: Promises Barely Made, Hardly Kept

From the mundane water infrastructure that Karachi is supposed to have, but either doesn't or operates in a dysfunctional manner we move onto the more innovative kind of technology that politicians promised during the 2018 election and failed to deliver: desalination plants. (Guriro, 2018) Sindh's current governor promised this year that a desalination plant would eventually be opened in Sindh. However, news from Gwadar, where a desalination plant is supposed to operate, has not been inspiring. The coastal town in Baluchistan has not shed its reputation of being a water-stressed city, where its own version of a tanker network gives its residents access to water at exorbitant prices. Meanwhile in Karachi last year, at an election event for the 2018 vote, I saw the PML-N's Afnan Ullah Khan, the PPP's Qadir Khan Mandokhail and PTI candidate and current governor of Sindh Imran Ismail, speak about installing desalination plants. This struck me as being far-fetched and especially in consideration of the run down state of the rest of Karachi's water infrastructure, struck me as a waste of resources. Theoretically, setting up a desalination plant could save the city from its water crisis. However, it is unclear how setting up a desalination plant could tackle the water tanker mafia that plagues this city. As good as a desalination plant would be, it would also be best if the resources devoted to this unnecessary over-technological solution were to be put into making the water treatment and sewage treatment plants of this city fully operational while the water distribution network of pipes and pumps was fixed and upgraded. (CBC to become first bulk customer of proposed desalination plant in Karachi, 2019)

As my examination of Karachi's Water Mafia continued, one thing that became clear was that as much as the tankers plying the city's streets were a problem, they were also a symptom of a deeper failing in the city, its infrastructure and those who are supposed to take care of it. Rebuilding the pipes in Karachi with the appropriate volume for them to carry the needed amount of water and build them out to new settlements if need be, would require a multi-year commitment by the provincial government, with possible help even from the federal government to accomplish. Without this level of commitment to fixing the water network of the city, even when the K-IV pipeline comes online, the water tanker mafia, and the illegal hydrants will remain an ugly feature of Karachi's infrastructure, economy and politics.

One of the strangest things about presence of the water tanker mafia is the deaths associated with transporting water through the streets of Karachi. There are reports every month or so, of some pedestrian or vehicle occupant, being killed by a speeding tanker. To call this tragic state of affairs ridiculous would be an understatement. Karachi is the same city where the death in traffic of the young Muhajir woman, Bushra Zaidi, (Aziz, 2015) by a Pashtun bus driver, set off ethnic rioting and brought the militantly Muhajir nationalist Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) into public consciousness. The fact that nowadays, people in Karachi are killed every few months by water tankers, with nary an eye batted remains shocking. The citizens of Karachi definitely deserve better than to have their water delivery system spew diesel fumes while putting their lives at risk as the tanker drivers rush water from one private customer to another. Outside South Asia, people are not commonly killed on the road by the source of their water supply.

Perween Rahman's spirit haunts the examination of this issue though. She was combatting against the across the board informalization that has been a hallmark of the Pakistani state and economy since the late seventies. Her work in the Orangi Pilot Project to provide basic services to residents of Asia's largest slum and to regularise the ownership of villagers living on Karachi's outskirts were campaigns of justice. To then find that the trail of suspects, who could have killed her, follow back to the men from the tanker and illegal hydrant mafia, is a blow to those she was trying to help. It is also the attempt to kill the idea of a better future, in a Karachi that is more normal, equitable and responsive, as opposed to being a mega-city dependent on cartels and mafias for its infrastructure. Her death was one consequence of the existence of this system, that she had tried to fight.

The political theorist Antonio Gramsci, said "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." The water tanker mafia of Karachi is one among many of Pakistan's morbid symptoms of this country's politics failing to build a new, as the old world fails and dies around it.

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