

There goes the neighbourhood: As Garden East declines, the Ismaili community looks to move elsewhere

In the first six months of the year, seven bodies were found from the area.

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By Zeenia Shaukat

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The apartment buildings and the Aga Khan Park, just a few metres away from the Jamaat Khana in Garden East, are covered with wall-chalking, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Zindabad (above). PHOTO: ZEENIA SHAUKAT

KARACHI: The debris of a demolished building obstructs pedestrians as they rush to make it to the Jamaat Khana on time. As an elderly couple tries to avoid the splash of the gutter water flowing on the street outside the Aga Khan Park, the man inadvertently runs into a motorcycle coming from the opposite direction. He is helped by the volunteers assisting people to get to the Jamaat Khana safely.

An hour later, on their way back, as commuters pick groceries from the shops located around the Britto Road, extortionists casually go about their business, quietly instructing the shopkeepers to handover the "Daily". Two more hours into the dark, shots of gunfire from Patel Para replace the now lowered down traffic noise.

This is the account of an evening of a large majority of the Ismaili community living in Garden East. Their troubles have just been compounded by an immense sense of insecurity following the attack on the Karimabad Jamaat Khana on August 13. The residents had, however, sensed such an attack long before from hints appearing all across the locality. The apartment buildings and the Aga Khan Park, just a few metres away from the Jamaat Khana, are covered with wall-chalkings which scream, "Jiye Taliban!", "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Zaindabad", and "Long Live Sipah-e-Sahaba". A professional painter Ali-Muawiya has also scrawled a message for the women of the community, "Pardey daar aurat haqeeqi aurat hoti hai [A veiled woman is a real woman]," on the park's wall. Community volunteers admit that they feel extremely vulnerable on duty in the evenings. "The female visitors are frequently harassed by young men coming from Patel Para. We have to tread very carefully to protect the community people as well as avoid any unnecessary confrontation," shared one volunteer.

In the grip of violence

The people of Garden East are among those who have witnessed Karachi's degeneration from a close range. The vertical spread of housing units has replaced 70- to 100-year-old colonial structures. The latest regressive building regulations rid builders of the obligation to keep space for car parking and playgrounds. The restricted space curbs more than just movement - young boys are forced to take to the streets for casual sports, battling the constant flow of vehicles. Due to the fear of harassment, girls are not allowed by their parents to step out of house "unnecessarily". Street crimes are common as criminals find their easy targets in people struggling to move between parked cars and flowing gutters.

Episodes of public violence have become a norm of the first six months of the year alone seven bodies were found from the Garden area, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal. Three traffic wardens were murdered close to the Jamaat Khana in the month of April.

A struggling community

The Ismaili community has mostly remained apolitical even though their late spiritual leader Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan III is known to be among the pioneers of the idea of Pakistan. The community, however, displayed a fair degree of interest in the democratic engagement.

The 2013 elections saw one of the highest voter turnouts in NA-252 constituency covering the Garden East area [321,191 registered voters with over 53% turnout compared to 277,553 with 42% turnout in the 2008 elections].

The community members also volunteered at the polling stations but the enthusiastic participation and the spirit of volunteerism, unaccompanied by citizen action or a movement to influence change, did little for the plight of the Garden East.

The writer is a resident of Garden East

Changing demographics, landscapes

The area's demography and landscape are changing rapidly. The Ismaili population, which originally moved here in the 1940s and later to live close to the world's biggest jamaat khana which can accommodate over 20,000 people, is emigrating to either Clifton/Defence or abroad, out of security fears. Though they are being replaced by the Ismailis from Karimabad and Kharadar, the area is now

quietly being taken over by a growing migration of non-Ismaili communities, especially Memons, Pashtun and Baloch.

The biggest mosque of the area, Pakola Masjid, is now surrounded by five other mosques within walking distance. Garden East's only park, Aga Khan Park, has been completely shut for any activity apart from occasional sports and Eid prayers. There is a section for women that opens only for certain hours in the day. Unlike other parks in the city, the AK Park has been walled rather than gridded. While drug addicts manage to sneak into the park, its locked gates make it inaccessible for the public of the area.

The changes in demographics have had a very deep impact on the community's living, sense of security and interaction with the society. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the community used to host weekly youth events that enjoyed packed attendance at the community ground next to the Jamaat Khana. Today, security concerns allow no such activity.

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