

Corridor echoes

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“THE great thing about the road is that we can go wherever we want. The problem is that others come here on it too,” said an old man in Islamkot in Thar desert, lamenting the intrusion of modernity. With the road came the coal developers, the land grabbers, madressahs and maulvis, divisive politicians, strangers with guns and too much money, outsiders who ogled at women, and NGOs who said everything they did was wrong. But it also brought mobile phone coverage, easier access to healthcare and labour markets, convenient transport and a sense of connection with the nation-state.

Like all other symbols of modernity from schools to vaccinations and from dams to television, initial scepticism and contestation gives way to grudging acceptance by most, as long as some version of initial purity can be preserved, usually through women’s bodies. Like the other symbols, roads have a power, maybe even a route beyond what was initially conceptualised.

The silk route, for instance, was born of the search for ‘heavenly horses’. The Chinese Han dynasty wanted horses from Ferghana valley, which they heard ran so fast they sweated blood and that could defeat the Huns against whom the Great Wall had been constructed. The blood sweat turned out to be parasites that burst equine capillaries. But in the search for horses, they found markets for silk.

And now the silk route is being revived. China’s ambition is staggering. The contiguous land route from China will cross Central Asian states through to Iran and Turkey, then via Ukraine to Moscow, onto Germany, Portugal and Italy. From there waterway connections will bridge to Greece, down Lebanon into Ethiopia and Kenya, crossing the oceans through Sri Lanka and Malaysia and looping back into China. Collectively known as the OBOR (One Belt One Road) Initiative, it would link two-thirds of the world’s population and two-thirds of known energy reserves. The Gwadar to Kashgar route is one of three corridors that will connect the land route with the sea route. All the current government here seems to have extracted from this proposed economic recalibration of the world is that transport is the new in thing.

CPEC is not only a road. It is seen as the cure for all national ills.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is coalescing tribal, local, ethnic, national and international regimes into specific GPS coordinates while throwing forward interesting anomalies. Roads are usually a public good and public works, but this one is a foreign investment with foreign contractors. It follows the narrative of economic development but the contestation around it is built on psycho-geography. It is being heralded as a trigger of growth but with little thought of what we will produce and send out through the corridor aside from it being a transit facility, a regional laari adda.

But it is not only a road. It is energy projects, industrial parks, exports, economic growth and the cure for all national ills. Like the honey that grandmothers say is the remedy for everything. Drawing from the Egyptians, maybe we think this honey can embalm ethnic grievances. So it is definitely not just a road.

But then, it never is. The women of Kaka Pir village, now known as Sandspit in Karachi, say the construction of the road that connected their village, Manora island and the city in the 1950s changed their lives. It opened up jobs, sure. But it changed the social fabric from a matrilineal village where women went on fishing expeditions, made nets and swam in the mangroves to one where they are confined to their homes because of the fear of outsiders. Instruments of modernity act upon existing social differences and exacerbate them. Including roads. Including, in fact, the state itself.

In Telangana in India, there is an infamous 'highway of death' that with its road accidents has created entire villages of widows along its route because no one thought of making ways for villager pedestrians to cross it. It could work as an analogy for what development can mean if it doesn't factor in the poor and disenfranchised. That's what the bypasses end up bypassing.

When cement structures became common, the Odh tribe in lower Sindh who made mud houses became redundant and ended up as bonded laborers. More recently, when their property became prime real estate, katchi abadi dwellers in Islamabad were recast first as Afghan Pakhtuns who threatened security, and then as Christians who threatened the Muslim credentials of the city and in either case required eviction. Development creates its own collateral damage.

The old man in Islamkot was among the crowd that stood on the road to receive the dead bodies of five labourers from his village who had gone to Turbat to work on Sohrab dam and were killed by Baloch militants. "You can decide what goes on the road," he said, "But you can't stop what comes on it."

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