

Kings of the Sea: What Oral Traditions From Ibrahim Hyderi Reveal about Karachi's Coastal Past

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Abstract:

Karachi's history is often narrated through the development of the colonial and postcolonial city. Earlier sources have similarly sought to reconstruct its deeper past by tracing a line from the Krokola of Alexander's campaigns to Kolachi and colonial Kurrachee. Such accounts rely heavily on colonial historiography and can produce a largely linear history of a single settlement while giving comparatively little attention to the multiple coastal communities, settlements and geographies eventually incorporated into the city. This project therefore asks: what account of Ibrahim Hyderi's origins, migrations and historical geography emerges from the oral traditions and participatory maps of its elderly fishermen, and how does this account complicate colonial and later narratives of Karachi's past?

Drawing on semi-structured oral-history interviews and participatory mapping, the project approaches these traditions emically, as a means of understanding how the community itself remembers its past. The account that emerges is shaped strongly by the community's identity as *Mir-Behar*, which is characterised by their Islamic faith and their maritime cultural geography. Interviewees locate their origins within a sacred and maritime history extending from Nuh and Sulaiman to Mororo Malah, while their spatial histories recall a network of mobile fishing settlements across the Phitti and Khaddi creeks. They remember migration to Sonmiani following conflict with political authority, a collective return to Korangi Creek, and subsequent settlement in a landscape shaped by freshwater flows, mangroves, fishing grounds and access to markets.

This account complicates conventional histories of Karachi in multiple ways. It replaces a linear history of a single settlement with one of multiple interconnected and highly mobile coastal communities. Moreover, it reveals a radically different approach to identity and history. For this community identity does not necessarily emerge from historical events like invasions, migrations or various forms of development. Instead, their accounts foregrounded maritime identity, faith and sacred genealogies. The findings therefore suggest that communal identity does not simply emerge from history; it also shapes which histories are remembered, valued and transmitted.

Introduction:

The perceived importance of Karachi in the broader South Asian context increased dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century following the East India Company's annexation of Sindh. It is perhaps for this reason, that popular narratives often conceive of the arrival of the British as the beginning of the city's formal history, mentioning only in passing the coastal communities that inhabited the area for centuries before. The narrative moves neatly from the British to partition and Karachi being designated as the capital of the nascent state of Pakistan.

This report challenges accounts that situate Karachi primarily within a modern history of colonial and postcolonial state-led development. It draws on oral traditions and participatory maps collected from older fishermen in Ibrahim Hyderi, a historic fishing settlement on Karachi's coast. These traditions reveal how members of the community understand their origins and identity, remember their relationship with the coast and its changing landscape, and narrate the effects of colonial and modern interventions upon it.

The report therefore asks: what account of Ibrahim Hyderi's origins, migrations and historical geography emerges from the oral traditions and participatory maps of its elderly fishermen, and how does this account complicate colonial and later narratives of Karachi's past?

Historiographical context:

There is a great wealth of literature on Karachi during the colonial period (Rustomji, 1952; Lari and Lari, 1996; Khuhro and Mooraj, 2010), but relatively little on community history before that. This gap was acknowledged by Khuhro and Mooraj (2010) in their seminal text *Karachi, Megacity Of Our Times*, who noted that the histories, customs and cultural practices of Karachi's constituent communities largely fell outside the scope of conventional histories of the city and warranted separate social and anthropological study. This may be explained by the focus on historical work during the colonial period as seen in texts such as Alexander F. Baillie's *Kurrachee: Past, Present and Future* (1890), by Major-General Sir F. J.'s *Karachi and its Future* (1888) as well as various other texts from the Raj era. Later historical works such as Lari and Lari (1996) often focus heavily on the period, which can be explained by a preference for archival and textual data, which was extensively collected and archived during the British Raj, over oral and community traditions.

Moreover, colonial narratives around the city's origin often begin with mention of Krokola (Goldsmid, 1888) a site 20 miles off the Indus said to have been mentioned by Pliny the Elder, the Roman naturalist. Others attempt to see Karachi in antiquity through accounts of Alexander arriving at the Indus Delta. Many subsequent narratives have sought to reconstruct Karachi's past by tracing a line from the ancient Krokola associated with Alexander's campaigns to the colonial city of Kurrachee via such appellations as Crochey, Krotchey Bay, Caranjee, Koratchey, Currachee, Kurrachtee, and Karachi (Baillie, 1890; Khan, 2017). Such efforts connect two strands of Western knowledge of the region separated by nearly two-thousand years of history, while often neglecting other traditions including those of the local inhabitants of the region. This encourages a linear history concerned with identifying successive iterations

of a single settlement culminating in modern Karachi rather than studying the histories of the multiple communities, settlements and coastal geographies that were eventually incorporated into the city.

Furthermore, there is a tendency in histories of the broader region to derive their chronology from changes in political authority, foregrounding narratives such as those of invasions, dynastic changes and annexations. When observed from the level of local communities however different historical processes are emphasised such as maritime networks, historic migrations and interactions with successive political authorities. This approach is particularly relevant to accounts of Islam's arrival on the Sindh coast. While conventional political histories foreground the eighth-century Umayyad conquest (Asif, 2016), oral traditions in Ibrahim Hyderi locate the community within earlier maritime connections with Arabia.

Methodology:

This research project uses oral traditions and participatory mapping as its primary methodological framework. Oral traditions allow us to access narratives about historical events such as maritime movement, migrations and conflicts that do not feature in written records but have been preserved in community memory. Moreover, by approaching the research emically, it allows us to approach the community's history the way they see it themselves; for this reason, the oral traditions have not been presented so as to test them against archival or written records. As these conversations reveal, such narratives are often a means through which community members perceive and strengthen their identity, traditions and beliefs.

Oral history interviews were conducted with two primary interlocutors: Mushtaq and Hussainy. Both were elderly members of the community who were respected for their knowledge of the community's history, fishing practices and ecology. Hussainy had worked as a fisherman, a fish and shellfish merchant and as a laborer but was also a director who had made and released several films locally. Mushtaq had not practiced fishing professionally but rather worked as a civil servant. That being said he had gone fishing in his youth and maintained knowledge of the technicalities of the profession including the various seasons, different types of nets and the role of coastal ecologies. Interviews were conducted in the form of semi-structured conversations ranging from half an hour to an hour and half. One interview was conducted in a group setting with six community members present. All interviewed participants gave verbal consent.

Participatory mapping was utilised to identify sites that the interlocutors mentioned in their accounts including Islands, migratory routes and the historic geography of the region. Community members were shown the most recent maps of Port Qasim and Khaddi and Phitti Creeks as prepared by the Pakistan Navy's Hydrographic Office. After a basic orientation they were asked to identify the various sites that they had mentioned. These were then digitised for publication. Although they disagreed on some locations, Mushtaq and Hussainy discussed amongst themselves to reach a conclusion.

Part 1 Questions of identity:

Kings of The Sea

When asked how they perceive their identity, almost all residents of Ibrahim Hyderi who were asked described themselves as being *Mir-Behar*. Hussainy explained what this means as such:

Behar is Arabic for sea, and Mir is Sindhi for king. So Mir-Behar means King of The Sea. We are all Mir-Behar, everyone all the way till Somiani in Balochistan, whoever is a fisherman is a Mir-Behar.

By characterising themselves as Mir-Behar, the community does not restrict them to their spatial belonging to Ibrahim Hyderi or a particular place but expand it broadly to the Sea and their relationship with it as fisherfolk. This may explain why the interviewees readily identified other communities along the coast of Sindh and Balochistan as Mir-Behar.

Mushtaq explained:

Mir-Behar means *Nakhwa* (Sindhi for fisherman)

He then used the two terms interchangeably:

They are the people who are on the sea and understand the waves, how they rise and fall, how the wind blows, when the seasons change. They understand the stars. The *Nakhwa* community refers to the original inhabitants here—the Mir-Behar people. We call them *Nakhwa*.

These accounts suggest that the Mir-Behar identity is grounded in participation in a historically transmitted maritime world that somewhat fluidly includes factors of ancestry, occupation and transmitted knowledge. This may be why later migrants from the Upper Indus Plain were dismissed as not being Mir-Behar. That being said one must not be a fisherman to be a Mir-Behar as one interviewee who introduced himself as Younas Mallah (Fisherman) informed:

Yes, we are fishermen. I do not fish myself, but our elders were fishermen, and that is why we call ourselves *mallah*. More properly, though, we are Mir-Behar, because we are seafarers of the sea.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Mir-Behar identity is not necessarily dependent upon personally working as a fisherman. Rather, it appears to rest upon a sustained historical and familial participation in a *maritime cultural landscape* (Westerdahl, 2013) created through factors such as socio-economic activity of fishing, the coastal geography and transmitted maritime knowledge. These

factors often overlap and are socially understood rather than functioning as a fixed qualification for membership.

Nuh and Sulaiman:

When asked about their identity Hussainy narrated a story about how a developmental worker from another part of the country once told him that his people have no foundations. He retold his response:

So first I said to him, ‘You said that I have no foundation, no origin.’ I took it back to Hazrat *Nuh* (Noah), peace be upon him. Allah Almighty sent a revelation to Hazrat Nuh, peace be upon him, saying, ‘Build a boat.’ Our foundation begins right there. Then, as you know, however many prophets and messengers Allah Almighty sent into the world, in every age there have been fishermen. Understand? And then I brought them to Hazrat *Suleiman* (Solomon), peace be upon him. I said, ‘We are sinners, but he is our son-in-law.’

Explaining his reference to Solomon he narrated a tradition of Solomon marrying a dark skinned fisherwoman and that this union would make the Prophet a son-in-law to his community. When asked if this woman was from their specific fishing community i.e. that of Ibrahim Hyderi, he replied that that was not necessarily the case but she was indeed a fisherwoman, again showing a broader identity as fisherfolk that extends beyond the community’s specific geography or genealogy.

Here we see a view of the community's foundations that draws on their religious beliefs as Muslims to place their identity as fisher-folk within a broader prophetic history, and through this to find a sacred genealogy of fishing .

Mororo Malah:

Hussainy also shared a tradition which connected their genealogy to that of Mororo Malah, a legendary fisherman who features abundantly in Sindh’s Sufi tradition (Shivdasani, 2025) including Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai’s epic *Risalo* (Sayed, 1984):

After that I came to Garha Singh. It was a city — an Indian city — and it is now submerged beneath the sea. Our fishermen have found traces of it in their nets while fishing near the Indian border.

So, you could say, the story that brings us to where we are sitting today begins there. When that city was about to be destroyed, there were two sisters there, both of whom were pregnant. They received an omen telling them, ‘Run away from here; this city is going to be submerged.’

So they fled. Then, I do not know exactly where, somewhere in the uninhabited areas around here, they gave birth to children. The two children were named Bachu and Barch. As the

generations continued, from them came Abayo; from Abayo came Mororo Malah; and from Mororo Malah come those of us sitting here before you — we are his descendants. You could say that this is our foundation, our origin.

This tradition adds a more particular ancestral dimension to Mir-Behar identity by tracing the community's descent to Mororo Malah, a prominent fisherman in Sindhi legend. Yet even this genealogical account is narrated through a familiar maritime geography: its point of origin is a coastal settlement destroyed by the sea, and its founding ancestors emerge through displacement and movement. The narrative therefore places ancestry itself within a coastal world shaped by the sea and mobility. The community members took great pride in their genealogical connection with Mororo, sometimes even referring to their community as Mororo-Mir-Behar.

The community members did at times share their surnames which followed the patronymic convention of having a male ancestor's name followed by the suffix 'ani' (Daswani, 1985) such as Umrani for someone descended from Umar. They insisted, however, that these various family trees returned to the common ancestor of Mororo and they were all Mir-Behar.

The Arrival of Islam:

On the subject of Islam both Mushtaq and Hussainy directly challenged narratives that recognise the Ummayyad Invasion led by Muhammad Bin Qasim as the advent of Islam in the region:

“Alhamdulillah, we are Muslims. But let me tell you something about Sindh. People often say that Muhammad bin Qasim brought Islam here, but he did not; Islam was already present in Sindh before his arrival. During the time of the Holy Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, some of our people travelled from Sindh to meet him. They pledged allegiance at his hands, accepted Islam and presented him with a gift of *ajrak* [A traditional shawl]

When they returned, five or ten of the Prophet's Companions accompanied them—there are no precise details. The Prophet had instructed them to preach so that the people of this region might become Muslims. These Companions subsequently settled here. Their graves remain in Sindh, and shrines have been built over the graves of some of them.”

Moreover, their oral accounts place communities in Sindh along the Arabian Sea Coast within a wider network with links to the Arab world which predates the Umayyad invasions in 712 CE, presenting an alternate oral tradition of Islam in the region that foregrounds maritime links, communal ties, and direct connection to the Prophet Muhammad.

History and Identity

When invited to narrate the community's origins without being supplied with historical reference points, interviewees repeatedly situated its past within maritime and Islamic traditions such as those of Nuh and Sulaiman. This may demonstrate that this community sees its points of origins not necessarily through the history of their specific geography, i.e. the Indus Delta or the Arabian Sea Coast, but more broadly through the transmitted traditions of how their current identity as Mir-Behars or fisherfolk came to be. This may explain why they point towards Nuh's ark, Sulaiman, Mororo and accounts of their community's interaction with the Prophet.

Comparing these traditions with written histories reveals that several episodes prominent in accounts of the region's past—such as the Greek invasions and archaeological evidence of Indus Valley Civilisation settlements (Kalmatti, 2022)—are absent from the transmitted accounts collected here. Instead, the traditions that are preserved in communal memory foreground two major themes: the community's identity as fisherfolk and its Islamic faith.

These traditions locate the Mir-Behar identity within a layered sacred and historical cosmology. Prophetic figures such as Nuh and Sulaiman connect fishing to the universal history of Islam, the account of their interaction with the Prophet places Sindh within a network of maritime exchange connecting them to the Arab world and early Islamic history, while the claimed descent from Mororo Malah situates the community within the later Sindhi Sufi world represented by Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*

It is also interesting to note that both the community history and the colonial reach for certain perennial figures, but there is an interesting contrast between them. While Alexander Burnes identified himself with Alexander the Great, his relation to him is, racial (i.e. that they are both Europeans) and secondly relates to the shared act of violent conquest (Albinia, 2008). Conversely, the community account connects them to Nuh and Sulaiman through a mode that is explicitly not racial or genealogical but through their shared relationship to a maritime world in addition to a spiritual identification with these Quranic figures.

Perhaps most importantly, these oral traditions suggest a different relationship between history and identity from that often found in modern nationalist historical projects (Aziz, 1993). In the latter, selected episodes of the past may be mobilised to construct a shared identity; in Ibrahim Hyderi, by contrast, the community's existing sense of itself as Mir-Behar, Muslim and maritime appears to shape which histories are preserved, emphasised and transmitted.

Part 2 Historical Account:

Early Migrations and Arrival:

When asked about the history of their village, all interviewees gave a remarkably similar account of migrations to the area. Note, that the account of their people's identity as a community is distinct from the spatial history of Ibrahim Hyderi as the village that this community inhabits.

All interviewees account that their community had once inhabited Islands in the Indus Delta. Mushtaq identified *Khand* and *Phitti* as the islands where their ancestors originated. Hussainy gave greater detail:

So there are these two creeks: Phitti and Khaddi. Within them, there were four settlements belonging to our fisherfolk. One settlement was at Khaddi, while three were within Phitti.

One of these was on what we call Bundaal—Bundaal in the Phitti area. Another place within Phitti is called Shun; there was also a settlement there. The third place was Quba. Quba is beside us—you see these mangroves here? It is alongside them. So there were three *goths* [villages] here, and one within Khaddi



Map 1. Creek settlements

Approximate locations of four Mir-Bihar fishing settlements remembered in the Phitti and Khaddi creeks: Bundaal, Quba, Shan and Khand. Locations were identified through participatory mapping.

Detailing the fishing network of their ancestors one fisherman explained:

When our ancestors lived on the Islands they would fish there, often they would go out on large boats into the sea for about a month. As there was no ice back then they would preserve the fish with salt. Then they would bring the fish here where it was bought by merchants who would then take it abroad to places like Burma and parts of India, which as you know are right next door.

These accounts paint a picture of a network of highly mobile fishing villages as opposed to a single settlement. The next few narratives will, however, show that these separate settlements had some degree of a shared identity and communal links.

Leaving the Islands

They record their arrival from the Islands to Ibrahim Hyderi through the following account:

This was in the time of the Mirs, during the rule of Mir Kalhoro Ghulam Akbar. His soldiers would come here and, in those days, demand what they called *phang* or *makada*. In today's terms you could call it a tax, although for the fishermen it was like extortion money.

Naturally, there were some *Mawalis* [rebels] like us in those days as well. They said, "Every day the Mir's policemen come, threaten and intimidate our poor fishermen, and take two or five rupees from them. When they come today, we are going to beat them." So the *mawalis* made their plan. In those days people travelled on horseback. When the soldiers arrived on their horses, these men had already planned everything and gave them a beating. They beat them badly, and the soldiers fled.

Word spread through all four villages that the people of such-and-such village had beaten the Mir's soldiers. Everyone became frightened and fled. They said, "The Mir is a very cruel ruler. He will have all of us killed." So what did all these people do? They packed their belongings into boats. Their homes were

only huts or tents; there were no permanent houses. They loaded everything up and fled straight to Balochistan.

It is fascinating to note here that despite living in different Islands separated by the sea there was enough of a network between them that allowed this information to travel across. Moreover, it is significant that they were not only able to make a coordinated effort to flee to Balochistan but that all of them collectively felt the threat of repercussions from the Mir. Hussainy continued to narrate their arrival in Sonmiani:

When they arrived there, they went to the local *sardar* [tribal leader], who was Baloch, explained what had happened, and asked him for refuge. He said, “They are rulers, and I cannot fight or quarrel with them. But on the basis of humanity, I will give you land so that you can settle here until your problem is resolved.”

So these fisherfolk settled there. There were fisherfolk there as well. A long time passed and they did not return.



Map 2. Flight to Sonmiani

Approximate reconstruction of the community's remembered migration from the creek settlements to Sonmiani, Balochistan, following conflict with the Mir's officials over taxation.

The Mir's fort was in Hyderabad—it is still there today—and the Mir would hold his court there. One day, when the court was in session, the Mir asked his minister, “Those fisherfolk who left their area and fled—have they returned yet?”

“No, sir, they have not returned.”

So he said, “Go and persuade them to come back. They belong to this area; they are its residents. We used to visit them for fishing and for vacationing in their area. Now those places are deserted. Go and bring them back.”

When the Mir's men came to our community and presented his offer they decided to hold a *jirga* within the community.

Mushtaq gave an account of this deliberation process:

In those days, all the villages had one person [who was the leader] we would call him a *wadera*. Our *wadera*'s name was Salo.

He was the one who organised everyone. So they held another *jirga* there and said, “The Mir is calling us back now; we should return.” They held the *jirga* and decided, “All of us will not go.”

Salo, and his brother went to speak to them, because they were the bravest people and when he arrived, there is a very famous story about what happened. When he sat down, the sword that was hanging here at his side came out of its sheath. When it came out, the king—the ruler of those days—said to him, “Salo, why has your sword come out? Why has it come out of its sheath?”

And Salo replied, “It has seen the faces of its enemies.”

Because, you see, he was a brave man—to sit there in their court and say such a thing to the Mir.

They replied, “We are not your enemies. We want you to return and settle in your own place again.”

New beginnings:

So when they called them back, this brings us again to that part of the history: they said, “Now we will no longer live separately on those islands, such as Khand or Phitti. We will all settle here together so that our strength remains united.” So then they came and settled here at the mouth of the Korangi Creek.



Map 3. Return to Korangi Creek

Approximate reconstruction of the remembered return from Sonmiani after the Mir invited the community back. Oral tradition recalls a collective decision to abandon dispersed island settlement and resettle together near Korangi Creek.

These incidents provide a picture of the social organisation of the Mir-Behars, in which the *jirga* operated as a process of communal deliberation while the *wadera* acted as a recognised leader and representative of the community. These structures appear particularly important in moments of interaction with external political authority. In this narrative, the initial confrontation is undertaken by individual fishermen, but the subsequent decisions to flee, negotiate with the ruler and eventually return are remembered as collective decisions mediated through the *jirga* and the *wadera*. The account therefore presents the Mir-Behar community not simply as a dispersed collection of fishing settlements, but as possessing shared institutions through which those settlements could act collectively.

Moreover, it also presents the decision to move from what was earlier a scattered network of villages to greater geographic concentration as a response to political vulnerability and may have served to strengthen the communities' position when negotiating resources with political authority.

Part 3 Historical geography:

Hussainy painted a picture of the historical geography of the area when the Mir-Behar's first created their settlement here:

So this place is what we call Korangi. A river of fresh water used to flow there. All these creeks that you see were formed from that river. The fresh water used to pass through here, cutting through the land as it flowed out. That is how all these creeks were formed from it. So this place here is what we call Korangi. From here, they came further inland to where the Pakistan Air Force Base is today. A little further ahead from that is a place we call Bhaat. They went there and established what we call a goth—we call a settlement a goth. One was *Mathariyan Goth*, meaning the settlement on the east, and the other was *Pyariyan Goth* meaning west. So they established two goths, two settlements. They were close to one another, but they were two separate settlements.



Map 4. Mathariyan and Pyariyan Goth

Approximate locations of Mathariyan Goth and Pyariyan Goth, remembered as two early settlements established near the area of the present-day PAF Base.

He described the process by which the name Ibrahim Hyderi came to be:

In those days, there were also two *Sayyids* [Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad] among us: one was Ibrahim Shah and the other was Haider Shah. When they passed away, shrines were built for both of them. Haider Shah is buried inside this PAF Base with the graves of our ancestors, and the other is in KESC. During the British Era our people realised that our settlement has no name, so after a Jirga was held they came to the conclusion that it should be named Ibrahim Hyderi after those two saints.

Hussainy also commented on why this community chose this area specifically for their settlement:

So understand it like this: the Indus River used to flow through here. There was fresh water and of course there was salt water as well. We could easily get fresh water here, and we could also easily earn our livelihood [by fishing in the sea]. So what would have been the point of going and settling in *Lalukhet*? Naturally, we would choose this area, where else would we go.”

Hussainy’s characterisation places Ibrahim Hyderi’s geography at the confluence of two interconnected natural systems: that of the Indus Delta and that of the Arabian Sea coast. By explicitly comparing it to *Lalukhet*, an urban area in Karachi which was populated primarily by migrants after Partition, he draws attention to the natural habitability of the coast as one that provides both drinking water and potential for maritime livelihood and business.

Mushtaq, while re-emphasising the political importance of having a single unified community, also stressed the commercial opportunities of this location:

From there, our fish used to be sold at Khadda Market, so this gave them easier access. They would transport the fish and other goods by camel, and from here it was much easier to carry them there, because from the islands it was somewhat more difficult. But their main purpose was security: if we lived together, then we would have greater strength

Mushtaq described Khadda Market as a trading hub from where fish could then be exported to a network that included parts of ‘India and Burma’. This places this part of the Indus Delta in the wider Indian Ocean world and beyond. This description of a port at Khadda Market directly challenges some Colonial accounts which argue that

the inhabitants of this region “ had no ocean-shipping interests...they attached but little value to imports and exports...they lent very slight encouragement to the opening up of seaports, and gave no assistance towards their advancement, but rather opposed their creation and development.” (Baillie, 1890 p 5).

In addition to the confluence of fresh water and salt water, they also discussed the importance of Mangrove forests to the landscape of the area. Hussainy explained:

The greatest benefit of this is that, as God knows, whenever a storm arises, it is the mangroves that stop it, by breaking its force. Another is that, in those days, the fodder for our livestock came from here as well as fuel and firewood, we would cut timber from here and use it to cook our food. So for us this timar was something very beneficial. It was an asset.

Mushtaq emphasised the importance of the mangroves to fishing:

The breeding of fish and shrimp takes place in their roots — in the roots of the timar.

If you see during the season, in June and July, the big shrimp come inside to lay their young. They come into the creeks and leave them there, and their growth takes place in these roots of the timar. Much fish, and also crabs, breed in these roots as well. In that sense, they are nurseries — nurseries for fish — and that is why they are very important for us.

While appreciating the historic role of mangroves as a source of maritime protection, natural resources and a breeding ground for fish they also expressed fear for mangrove forests in the future:

Earlier, when fresh water still used to reach this area, there were extensive *Timar* (Mangroves) forests throughout the region. Timar grows at the meeting points of salt water and fresh water.

But when, further upstream, islands and dams and other such structures were built, the fresh water stopped reaching here. Once the fresh water stopped coming, the Timar forests disappeared from many places.

The above discussion shows how the community members see nature not only as an abstract setting but also as an active participant in their wider social structure enabling the life that they live. It is also interesting that the geography they value is not necessarily that of a specific location but rather extends to any location that sustains their social structure. This can be seen in the movements between the four creek settlements to Sonmiani and then back to the Korangi Creek, but can also be seen in a later movement to accommodate for colonial developments in the region:

When the British period began, they looked at the place that you now call PAF Base ,where the shrine of Haider Shah is, and said, “This is a very good location for a base.” In those days their airplanes used to land directly on the sea. They asked the people of the goth, “If you give us a little land here so that we can establish our base, and you move slightly further back...” The villagers agreed. Because this was empty land at the time;

When asked if there was any conflict at the time they replied that there was none and that the community cooperated and even supported the British who were described as being ‘merciful’ to the community in opposition to the Mir’s whose tax policies had frustrated the community.

The community’s readiness to give up their land to the British and move to another similar location emphasises that even when the specific geography changes what matters most to the community is the sustained cultural and social fabric that that geography creates. This builds upon the extensive archaeological and anthropological work on maritime cultural landscapes (Westerdahl, 2013). A relevant example of this is that of ice in the Bothninan Sea where the ice outwardly changed from year to year but the community’s *human* utilisation of it remained the same (Westerdahl, 2013). This allows us to approach nature not only as a physical phenomena but rather as one that gains meaning through human interactions with it and through the social bonds that form around it.

The community at Ibrahim Hyderi did not limit the importance of the Indus Creek to their local community but also described a wider national value. Mushtaq described how the creeks and the fishing industry associated with it allowed the community to be self reliant:

Now, because of the creeks, fish production in Sindh is higher, and shrimp production is also higher. Compared with Balochistan, production in Sindh is greater because of the creeks. So if production is higher, and we export it, then the revenue that comes from it goes to the country.

Another point is that there are so many people — hundreds of thousands — whom the government does not have to provide jobs for. They have their own work; nature has given it to them. They are not a burden on the government. We earn for ourselves and feed ourselves. We do not go to the government and say, ‘Give us jobs.’ If all these people went to a minister asking for work, where would they find all those jobs? So, from the point of view of nature, this is a major benefit to the country: we are not a burden on it. We earn for ourselves and feed ourselves.”

Hussainy explained that this industry did not affect the Mir-Behars alone but had positive effects on a much wider population:

And it is not only us. There are all those who are connected to us. Say we are fishermen: we bring fish from here and sell it in the market. The buyer might be *Sheedi, Mohajir, Punjabi, Pakhtun* — whoever. He buys it, and then there may be four labourers who also earn a daily wage. Then the goods are loaded onto vehicles, so the transporter earns as well. Ice is bought from a shopkeeper, so the shopkeeper benefits too. Then it goes to auction at the large fishery, where there are thousands of workers. One company might employ a hundred people, another a hundred and fifty. Their salaries all come from this.”

Taken together, the interviewees accounts show the important social role that nature played for this community. The confluence of the Indus River and the Arabian sea created the environment that provided them with fresh water, protection from mangroves and the open sea that allowed them to sustain their maritime livelihoods and trade. Moreover, the interviewees present fishing as a valuable and self-sustaining profession, one that benefits not only the Mir-Behar community itself but also a much wider network of traders, labourers, transporters, market workers and exporters connected to the fishing industry.

Conclusion:

These accounts present a view of Ibrahim Hyderi’s origins, history and historical geography that foregrounds the identity of its residents as Mir-Behars. This identity is rooted both in their Islamic faith and in a deep historical relationship with the sea as fisherfolk. It shapes how community members understand their origins through prophetic figures and Mororo Malah, while also providing a lens through which they interpret their relationship with the changing coastal geography they inhabit. In this sense, the oral traditions collected here suggest that communal identity does not simply emerge from the past, but in fact identity itself also shapes which elements of the past are remembered, transmitted and cherished.

This study of a community within Karachi complicates conventional narratives of the city by recovering alternative points of historical reference to those foregrounded in colonial accounts, such as Krokola. It also challenges a linear history of a single settlement gradually developing into modern Karachi by showing how community memory preserves the history of several interconnected and highly mobile settlements across a wider coastal landscape that was eventually incorporated into the city.

The community’s understanding of coastal geography as integral to its social and economic life also provides a valuable lens through which to understand the loss of mangrove forests and freshwater flows. These perspectives open further avenues for research into how the community understands industrialisation and development in adjoining areas, and how such transformations have affected coastal ecology and fishing as a way of life. Moreover, the community’s own argument for their role in the wider national context provides a roadmap for community centred developmental planning in the Indus Delta and its coastal regions.

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List of Maps

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