A South Asian strives for Social Justice and Environmental Justice

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Abstract:

A woman of great knowledge and virtue sets aside the prominent years of her life to help the underprivileged living in impermanent settlements of Karachi, Pakistan. The devastating reality is that she was murdered for her noteworthy initiative. By mapping with the residents, she helped them gain land title, as she proved their case to the city and government officials. It was through her unique manner of involving the residents solve their issues that made her pro-poor model a success. This is Perween Rahman's journey in questioning planning regimes of Karachi to define the need of local planning.

Introduction:

Perween Rahman known as the "rebel optimist" was an architect, urban planner, and an exemplary woman who devoted most of her life to serve the underprivileged in Karachi, Pakistan. The sad reality is that she was murdered for this humanitarian cause. A revolutionary turn in her life was when she was appointed the director of the Orangi Pilot Project - Research Teaching Institute (OPP-RTI), "one of Pakistan's most successful non-profit programmes, which helps local communities escape from poverty" (BBC News, 2013). The leading questions of this paper are: what strategies did Rahman implement to help residents attain land title and what can urban planners learn from this to avoid future predicaments?

The Issue:

It is important to understand Rahman's perspective about the issues in Karachi. There are 15 million people, and about 60% of them live in "katchi abadis," (impermanent settlements/squatter settlements) which is a part of the unofficial sector (OPP). These lands are purchased from a land supplier who "subdivides government and some private lands" to sell it to the poor, where bribes are given to government officials during this process (OPP). More than 50% of these houses have attained land title but have not been accepted by the government (OPP). There is not enough housing to meet growth in Karachi, as the dwellers in impermanent settlements live in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. For planners and state officials, these impermanent settlements are unacceptable forms of the urban fabric, but these inhabitants also have the "right to the city," according to Henri Lefebvre. Perween Rahman's bridging role between these residents and government officials strengthens community relations, empowers the impoverished residents and utilizes national capital to demonstrate the benefits of local leadership in Karachi, Pakistan.

As most impermanent settlements are not legalized, the residents have to form their own way of living. The disparities visible in the urban fabric of Karachi represent that most developers are interested in profit, yet not in the need of legalizing and bettering the

conditions of these areas. This is where Rahman came to help legitimize the residents' claims. By performing the surgical work needed, such as mapping, she made the government acknowledge the existence of these areas. Gramsci explains that the residents of these areas need to create their own sets of intellectuals to critique the elite ways of planning (Green, 2013). The residents of impermanent settlements in Karachi had created their own ways to access water and sanitation equipment; nevertheless, Rahman wanted to improve their lifestyles and health by legalizing their systems. In order to provide residents with legal title, Rahman worked with them and demonstrated the success of local planning with the community focusing on Karachi's needs.

Positive Effects of Mapping:

One of Rahman's main discoveries is the importance of mapping. She said that "Just like an x-ray is important for doctors, maps were necessary for planning" (Masood, 2016). In her last presentation in Bangkok for Asian Coalition for Human Rights (ACHR), Rahman explained that there are 113 settlements in Orangi town, Karachi and 1.5 million inhabitants. As these people receive insufficient government aid, they have to "self-help" themselves, in which they have to build their own sewerage lines, water lines, and their own house. This is evident in the urban form of impermanent settlements in Orangi Town. Yiftachel presented the concept of "'planning citizenship' as a useful tool with which to conceptualize the impact of urban regimes on people materialities and identities" (2009, 97). In Karachi, there is a concept of the "land mafia," who steal the impermanent settlements' residents land. However, Rahman disagreed with this concept, and said that the government is the land mafia (*Trailer – Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist*). Many presume that her research on the land mafia must have been the cause for her murder. Despite the fact that Rahman is a woman and had a marginalized position in society, she spoke for the residents and worked beyond her capacity. As a result, Rahman emphasized that the practices of authoritative regimes affected the residents' identities who had a right to land title, and therefore, they should present their case to achieve land ownership.

Furthermore, it was important to note everyone's role in building these areas, and especially to what extent the government assisted these inhabitants. Rahman explicated that these areas were known as "rural villages," but now that these areas are mapped, they learned that these are "urban" areas. This illustrates that the map made the government grant land titles to the residents of impermanent settlements and learn about the urban fabric. Rahman's key philosophy is evident in this scenario, which is the importance of mapping these settlements, because acknowledging that these areas exist will result in planning for them. The elders living in impermanent settlements expressed that the maps made them "visible" (ACHR). The government's mapping indicated that there were only 400 such settlements, but Rahman and her team's work showed that there were 2000 such settlements (ACHR). Therefore, Rahman's mapping filled the missing gaps in the data to

strengthen the case of these residents. She proved her case that there are way too many people to evict and the government should provide land title.

Moreover, Rahman was strengthening community ties to create better living conditions for the impermanent settlements' residents. Rahman mapped with the residents to involve them in the process of gaining land title from the government. She explicated that for mapping purposes, research on these settlements was taken while talking to the residents in the settlements. "Relationship building was the key to help advocacy and city-wide upgrading," expressed Rahman (ACHR). Moreover, she mentioned that the youth played a prominent role in mapping, as they were involved since 1981. The youth had time to talk, Rahman noted, which helped in building a relationship with the community (ACHR). Rahman did not use GIS, because she found that it was a barrier in community building. Consequently, the accomplishments of participatory planning are evident in this project. Involving community members through a common ground, such as mapping helped the residents realize their expertise, which assisted in attaining their rights.

This also relates to Arjun Appadurai's concept of deep democracy, because as the residents of impoverished areas work with social activists it turns

> "illegal from the point of view of the state – into legitimate knowledge about surviving poverty, and furthermore, marketing that knowledge to the state – into legitimate knowledge to the state and other agencies concerned with the amelioration of their situations as *precedents* in the elimination of poverty" (Rao, 2006, 229).

A local resident expressed that, "She was a great help for us. She was just like an elder sister to whom we would go whenever a problem struck us" (BBC, 2013). The residents felt that Rahman always had answers and guidance to their problems. She did not want to impose her ideologies on the residents, but rather learn from them and with them to help them gain land title. One of Rahman's colleagues, Rabia Siddiqui expressed that "It was Perween's rule to recognise the feel of the problem first before coming up with a solution" (Khan, 2015). Through this relationship building, she instilled practices of deep democracy within the residents, which empowered them in achieving their rights. In 2006, Rahman started mapping impermanent settlements and by 2010, 1063 settlements were announced to attain land title. This fulfills the purpose of deep democracy, as the residents work with Rahman through mapping and turn their "illegal" way of living into legitimate forms of knowledge. The government had to announce that they will provide land title, which shows that deep democracy opened pathways to success for these residents.

Rahman's Model:

Rahman created a pro-poor model "where a liaison could be created with the government by letting the people do part of the work such as putting in lines for water and

sanitation and the government to give them connections" (Hasan, 2017). The residents practiced "quiet encroachment," and in many ways, it benefits "Third World governments. For it is a mechanism through which the poor come to help themselves" (Bayat, 2000, 550). The residents' "sheer cumulative scores turn them into an eventual social force" (Bayat, 2000, 548), which is another form of quiet encroachment. As a result, Rahman strengthened the residents as a collective force to enable them to deal with their problems. She only provided residents with the resources and guidance to aid them in attaining their rights.

For instance, in the sanitation model, OPP-RTI created an "internal-external" concept, which had the following four components: sanitary latrine in the house, underground sewer in the lane, neighbourhood collector sewer and trunk sewers and treatment plans (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hasan, 58). In this list, the first three components are a part of "internal" development, while the fourth component is a part of "external" development. This is because with the guidance of OPP-RTI, "low-income communities can finance, manage, build and maintain these components when technical support and managerial guidance based on participatory research is provided to them" (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hasan, 58). The fourth component "can only be carried out by government agencies or NGOs" (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hasan, 58). Based on this model, Rahman and her colleagues strengthened community relations by giving these residents a sense of ownership. The residents had to help themselves because the government did not provide them with many resources. OPP-RTI used the resources of the residents to improve their sanitation model and to ultimately provide them with ownership of their lands. Appadurai also mentions

> "the poor need to claim, refine, and define certain ways of doing things in spaces they already control and then use these practices to show donors, city officials, and other activists that their "precedents" are good ones and encourage such actors to invest further in them. This is a politics of show-and-tell, but is also a philosophy of do first, talk later" (2002, 34).

Rahman and her team in OPP-RTI followed this concept and believed that "local communities are repositories of knowledge about existing conditions and circumstances in their area, which they have gained from their everyday experiences. They can therefore become 'experts' in improvisation and innovation" (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hasan, 58). Through this form of participatory planning, the residents gain land title and the basic rights they were not receiving in the city.

Empowering Residents:

Throughout Rahman's work in OPP-RTI, she believed "her great achievement was to get involved and empower communities in development work" (OPP). This is similar to

Ananya Roy's anti-essentialist view, where she believes that masses are agents of political and social change (2011). Rahman was in charge of improving sanitation in Orangi town. However, the point to note is that she did not take charge, because she maintained her linking role between the impermanent settlements' residents and planning officials. Arif Hasan, a member of OPP, expressed that Rahman understood her role as providing "technical advice" and "social guidance," in order to link the inhabitants with official planning authorities. This enabled the residents to "make use of government plans for the physical improvement of their settlements" (Archi Times, 2). In turn, Rahman's help empowered these inhabitants, where society can hear the voices of the subaltern.

Rahman also empowered the residents with their common identity. As Yiftachel notes, "marginalized gray spaces and populations are never merely passive victims in the process of urbanization. They often use their territorial and/or political exclusion to develop a strong sense of identity and mobilize persistent struggles" (2009, 96). This relates to Rahman's emphasis on building strong community relations to work progressively towards a common goal: gaining secure housing by obtaining land title. The OPP-RTI is aware of its role of "providing motivation, technical inputs (surveys, plans and cost estimates), and the loan of construction equipment. OPP-RTI consciously avoids creating any notion of dependence on it by the community" (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hassan, 59). This further accentuates Yiftachel's concept of marginalized communities, as Rahman made the residents powerful enough as a team to prevent them from relying on external sources.

The impermanent settlements' residents perform insurgent forms of citizenship and Rahman's role helps them claim their rights. "These insurgent forms are found both in organized grassroots mobilizations and in everyday practices that, in different ways, empower, parody, derail, or subvert state agendas" (Holston, 1999, 47). Rahman guides the residents to claim their rights by empowering them and turns their lived experiences into insurgent citizenship. As planning and government officials have to provide land titles to these residents, the concept of bottom-up planning is further emphasized. Most residents in impermanent settlements are the oldest settlers of Karachi, and they critiqued that the rich, who came after them have land title, while they still do not (ACHR). Hence, Rahman emancipated these residents to perform insurgent citizenship, which assisted them to acquire land title.

Mobilizing Pakistani Capital:

Another principle Rahman believed in was mobilizing Pakistani capital as she explained, "We believe in a partnership between government and their people. . . If the World Bank says something can be done with $10, with a little guidance we say it can be done with $1" (Walsh, 2013). Bayat also says that

> "Indeed, some view the upsurge of the (NGOs) in the South since the 1980s as a manifestation of organized activism and grassroots institutions for social development. However, granting that the development NGOs vary considerably, their potential for independent and democratic organization of development for the poor has generally been overestimated" (2000, 535).

Hence, Rahman applied this concept in her work, as she wanted to use local capital for developing impermanent settlements. In another interview Rahman mentioned, "The key to sustainability is partnerships with people instead of the USAID or the World Bank" (The Express Tribune, 2016). Human development is fundamental in Rahman's work, as she found that improving humans' way of thinking creates better developments. The OPP-RTI "advocates accepting donor assistance when it is needed, for the right activities -that is, those determined by the organisation itself and not by the donors" (Pervaiz, Rahman & Hasan, 22). Clearly, empowering these residents through their own local resources is essential in critiquing planners for their work, as the residents realize the power they have with their lived experiences, which supports them in the process of legalization.

Conclusion:

Rahman's exemplary work in the field of architecture, planning and social activism validates her uniting role between the residents and city officials (Figure 1). Above all, she was a great human being who cared for these residents. She empowered residents by learning from them and making them a strong team to perform insurgent citizenship. Rahman understood that by hearing the voices of the subaltern, dominant planning processes can be negotiated. Instead of looking at global cities of the north as Karachi's role model, Rahman treated Karachi based on its own rich history and resources. She wanted to use local capital in order to create steps for residents to obtain ownership rights, which was possible through deep democracy. It was also necessary for her to build strong community ties that can work together to attain their rights. Overall, it can be seen that Rahman worked with these concepts to provide the inhabitants with ownership to the lands they found and lived on for ages. This forced planning officials and the government to legalize these gray spaces where impermanent settlements' inhabitants have been living strategically yet deserve legalization just like other citizens of the city. Being poor should not be the cause for their deprived state in the city. Rahman's social activism is a model of this theme in subaltern studies of the global south. However, it is now time to move beyond the assistance of social movements to legalize impermanent settlements. Otherwise, there will only be more deaths, because certain people cannot see the "poor" progress. As Rahman analyzed these areas, she found that these residents are considered "impermanent" even in city plans, although more than half of such residents live in impermanent settlements of Karachi. Her critiques and analyses, which supported a bottom-up planning system, are a major cause for her death. In turn, there should be more

legalized forms of participatory planning, where the citizens of impermanent settlements have the right to suggest what suits their needs. This will begin by stepping away from colonial and neoliberal ideologies of planning and accepting to whom certain lands belong. Through such implementations, the residents will attain the right to the city from the state level, which provides them with power to practice their rights in the city. There needs to be a greater emphasis on local planning in Karachi to provide residents with their right to the city. In the words of Perween Rahman, "human development" constructs impartial urban developments that fulfill social needs rather than economic motives of becoming a competing global city, which inevitably opens gateways for Karachi to turn into an inclusive city.
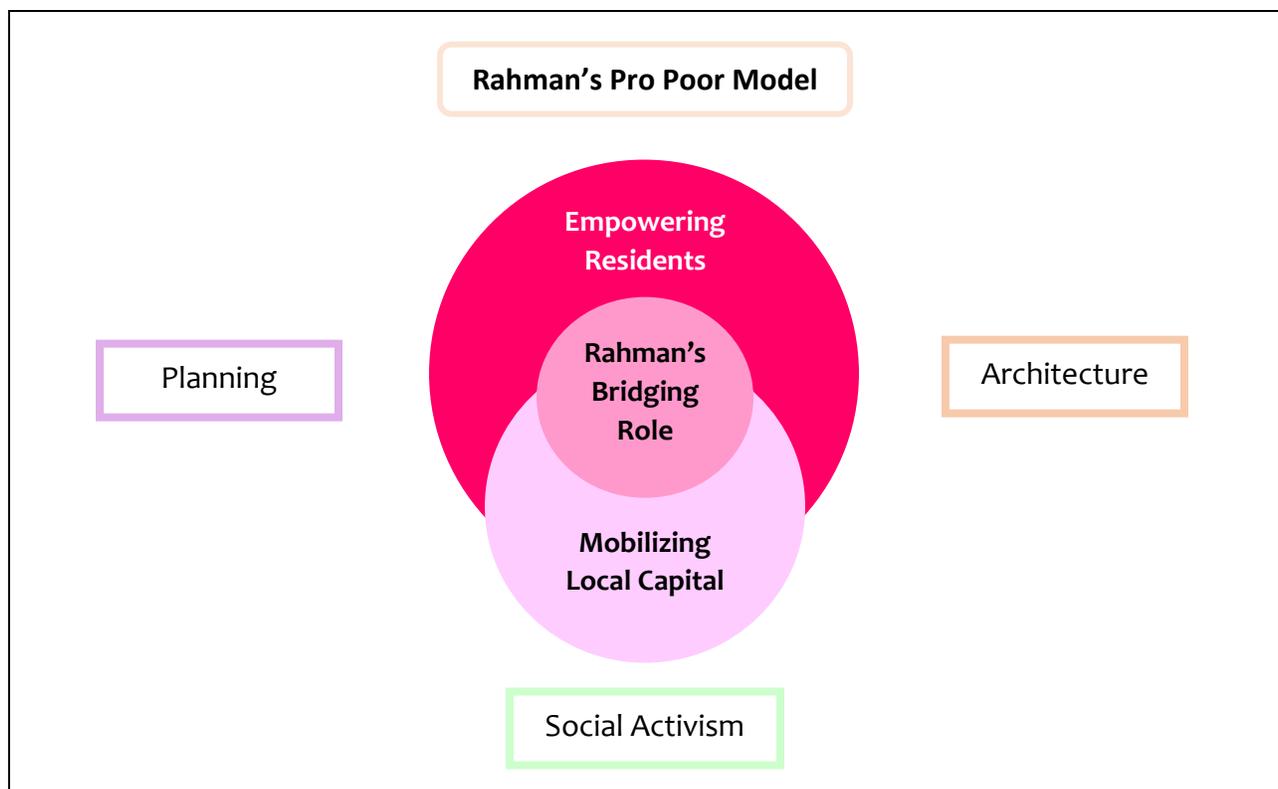
Figure 1: Rahman's Pro Poor Model

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