Pakistan is a country of contrasts. Karachi, the main port and commercial center and the largest city (by far) is on the southern coast. Inland lie the poor agricultural districts and the older northern cities such as Lahore, the center of the historic Mughal Empire. Pakistan is a poor country, but many wealthy people live there, with the highest proportion in Karachi. The contrasts between rich and poor affect many aspects of life in the country.

Ali and his family live in Karachi. Following partition in 1947, his Muslim parents moved from what is India today to be in the new country of Pakistan. Ali is a banker whose education has been in the United States and United Kingdom. He works for an international bank, which has its Pakistan headquarters in Karachi - like most international banks and finance houses. This makes Karachi a very cosmopolitan city, one that most resembles Western cities in its metropolitan characteristics. Ali calls Karachi the country's "melting pot" where rich and poor meet.

The rich in Pakistan are very rich and the poor are very poor. Around 10 percent of the population owns 90 percent of the country's wealth. Despite high import duties on cars and other goods, they are much in evidence. A particular favorite is the Toyota Landcruiser that costs £40,000 in the U.K. ($65,000 in U.S.) but £80,000 in Pakistan. And yet, everything has to be paid for in cash, including such goods and houses: there is no system of credit.

The poor in Pakistan find it difficult to gain any income. Most still work in the fields of large landowners for tiny wages. They employ their children to work alongside them so that it is difficult for the children to gain an education. Some migrate into towns. In smaller towns many children also work in the carpet and sportswear factories. In the cities, such as Karachi, there are many poor, attracted by the perception of job opportunities and better access to education and healthcare. But there is not sufficient housing or other facilities to maintain them. Many live in shantytowns, which spring up wherever there is a space and without legal land title. Many of these are built of cement and blocks with asbestos sheeting roofs. A family of 8 or more live in the space of a one-auto garage. Such shantytowns have no sanitation, water may come from a communal tube well with a tap that is opened for a short time each day, and electricity is stolen by plugging into the local power line. From time to time a government edict leads to the clearing of a shantytown area of several hundred homes.
Environmental Case Study
Living in Pakistan

For the poor there are government schools and hospitals, but neither provides a thorough service and both are short of funds. The government of Pakistan spends over half its income on servicing debts and another one-third on its military. That leaves 10 percent to be spent on government, health, education, and other needs. Health and education each receive just over 1 percent of the national budget, which is small itself since most business owners avoid paying taxes.

All sections of society are united in their devotion to consumerism. From the poorest to the richest, people save to purchase radios, TV sets, washing machines, refrigerators, hi-fis, cars, jewelry, and houses. There is an ascending order of purchases. Combined with the rich-poor differences, the consumerism results in high levels of crime. The wealthy live in houses enclosed by concrete walls and employ guards. Ali and his family live in one that his parents and brother's family also used to occupy, but now has it to himself. He regrets the separation of the wider family and thinks it important for older family members to pass on traditional ways to the young.

The rich-poor divide is perpetuated by the access to better education and healthcare that the middle and wealthy classes can afford. Private schools teach all lessons in English (apart from those teaching Urdu, the main local language) and students continue to sit British examinations at 16+ and 18+ years old, facilitated by the British Council. Pakistani universities have a strong reputation and it is often as difficult to secure a place there as in the U.S. and U.K. institutions that many students opt for.

Good healthcare is available, but expensive. For example, the Aga Khan Foundation hospital in Karachi has modern facilities and specialist medical staff that rival the best hospitals in the United States. Aftercare and nursing education, however, are not of such a high standard.

Many aspects of living in Pakistan reflect the continuing influence of the British colonial occupation, although it is over 50 years since the "Raj" ended. Karachi itself was a fishing village that the British made into a major port and city. Its purpose was to export the cotton grown on the fields irrigated by British engineers in the late 1800s. As well as the taking of British school examinations and the wider continued use of English, especially in the commercial community, other features include the legal calendar and the popularity of clubs. Ali is the member of one club where he plays squash and swims. It is very exclusive. Founded in the 1850s as a British officers’ club, new members have to wait up to 10 years for entry following a series of taxing interviews with committee members. The British also left behind what has become the national game, cricket. It is not overstating the case to say that the mood of the country depends on wins or losses by the Pakistan team.

Pakistan is also becoming increasingly cosmopolitan in terms of the global economy. Some 90 percent of the goods available in Western supermarkets and stores can be brought in the shops - although there are no supermarkets and most shops are family owned. They remain open from 9am to 9pm (or sometimes later). An increasing range of food is available in restaurants. The McDonalds, Wendys, and Pizza Huts are now joined by a range of Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and Middle Eastern specialities. Going out to eat and the accompanying socialization has become a major pastime for the growing middle and upper
classes in Karachi. When visiting Pakistan, however, it is wise to remember that informal parties - even wedding receptions - do not begin until well after the stated invitation time. Dinner is often served at 1am. Business meals are prompt.

Ali and other Pakistanis link many of the recent problems of their country to a combination of huge debts that cannot be repaid and the U.S. influences stemming from the wars in Afghanistan. The United States resisted the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to 1989 by getting Pakistan to arm and train groups to fight in Afghanistan. Many attracted to this role came out of Muslim fundamentalist schools that themselves were supported by U.S. funds. These funds also provided massive loans to the Pakistan government, mostly spent on the military. Since the Russian withdrawal, Pakistan has been affected by a multiplication of arms available in the community, with each home having 2 or 3 guns, and by an increase in political unrest stimulated by the fundamentalist groups. Ali sees the future as one of a particularly nasty form of bloody revolution.