

Comment

A Burgeoning Society and its Challenges

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While celebrating seventy years of country's independence, it can be interesting to look at the state of our society and to find out how it looks as compared to the point where Pakistan started its independent journey. There exists a view that Pakistani society by and large has remained static, that except for a few big cities the rest of the country is frozen in medieval times. The poverty as found in almost all of the regions of the country is also quite often viewed as reflecting the existence of an old social order. This view is held without realizing that poverty can be, and is, an attribute of the modern states as well. The fact of the matter is that Pakistani society has transformed quite significantly in the last seventy years. Of course, there are regions and sectors where this transformation has been slow yet, by and large, the society has changed both in terms of its quantitative growth as well as in terms of socio-cultural norms, practices and values. It can also be said that the social change has been all-encompassing, including biological (demographic), cultural and technological changes.

Embarking on a survey of Pakistani society, as it has grown in the last seven decades, needs to be qualified by two points: one, the social change can be looked at with respect to certain variables and indicators but this should be done while refraining from passing moral judgments, since change can be seen from diverse perspectives and points of view. Two, in the analysis of the society reference to the role of the state—effective, ineffective or none— is inevitable. One is bound to bring in the state in the study of society, both for connectivity of, or disconnect between, the two. Apart from these two points, it is also important to understand that the story of the society cannot be conclusive without identifying the challenges it has faced at different stages.

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The first important aspect of the society has been the demographic changes it has witnessed. Apart from the natural growth of population, the migration from outside contributed immensely to the demographic profile of Pakistan. In fact, there have been waves of migration to Pakistan. In 1941, the region now comprising Pakistan, had a population of a little above 28 million. The census of 1951 showed its population at 33.7 million, so it can be said that the first wave of migration witnessed as the result of partition, brought about a big population growth right after independence. As a result of partition, 4.7 million Sikhs and Hindus migrated to India, whereas 6.5 million Muslims migrated to Pakistan. That means, within a few months of partition, Pakistan's population grew by 1.8 million that is about 6.36 per cent. The second wave of migration came as a result of 1970-71 crisis of former East Pakistan. This migration was relatively smaller but those who came to Pakistan, mostly settled in Karachi. Today Pakistan's population has come to over 200 million.

The third wave came with the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet Union, which resulted in the migration of 3.7 million Afghan refugees to the territories of Pakistan. While the migrants of 1947 mainly settled in urban Sindh and the urban and rural areas of Punjab, Afghan refugees took shelter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, drastically altering the sociocultural and even economic profile of these provinces. Though not so massive to be called a wave, there has been a migration of Bengalis and Burmese in the 1970s and 1980s, and even after. These migrants have settled mostly in the slums and low-income areas of Karachi.

The demographic profile of Pakistan has another dimension that deals with internal migration. Caused by socio-economic factors, the internal migration, too, had far-reaching social and cultural implications. In the early 1960s, as a result of introduction of mechanization in the agrarian economy, a big volume of people got up-rooted from the rural areas and migrated to the urban centres. Ever since then internal migration has been a regular feature of Pakistan. The major pressure of this migration has been taken by the province of Sindh.

As a result of external and internal migration and due to other socio-economic factors, urbanization has emerged as a major aspect of Pakistani society. In the course of decades, due to both push and pull factors, the villages have turned into small towns, small towns into bigger ones, big towns into cities, and cities into mega-cities. The attractions in the cities have been in the form of job expectations and prospects of better education, health, recreation and social life, as compared with rural areas, yet the influx of migrants to urban areas put

excessive pressure on the urban infrastructure, which is persistently suffering due to mal-governance, lack of resources and absence of political commitment at the level of successive governments. The perpetual shortage and need for expansion in urban housing, sanitation, schools, healthcare, safe drinking water, roads, transport, and above all jobs, present a worrisome picture. The urban unemployment, now at 8.8 per cent, is much higher than rural unemployment (5.1%). The industrial growth has not been adequate, urban planning has been either absent or faulty, and urban centres were not prepared to respond favourably to the need of the hour, that is to settle the migrants, who started living in slum areas thus causing a big issue of human settlement and urban governance. Resultantly, in Karachi particularly, the ethnic diversity cultivated ethnicity-based politics, which suited certain politicians, who constructed ethnic discourses employing the real or imaginary deprivation of their ethnic groups. The cities have developed ethnic pockets, ethnic parties and class-based residential patterns, which reinforce the class and ethnic-based confrontation.

On the other end, rural areas have not been developed as much to keep their aspiring people within their fold, so today a large number of Pakistanis live in cities for earning, and they come to their villages or small towns periodically, since their families live back home. Karachi, to some extent, is an exception to this pattern. Due to its long distance from the regions from which people come here, and also because the city has had large unpopulated and un-inhabited areas in its periphery, migrants to Karachi settle here for longer duration, and contribute to the urban social and political processes in a mix-pattern, depicting shades of their ethnic affiliation as well as urban socialization, simultaneously.

Another indicator of social transformation has been the weakening of traditional institutions of control, which used to operate in the form of *jirga*, *panchayat*, clan or caste/kinship networks. Religious and sectarian networks have also helped and patronized people in many ways. Landownership has traditionally remained a source of pride and power, but in a fast urbanizing society this standard is also facing diminution. Traditional occupational structure of rural society has almost broken down, and the service-providers have either abolished ancestral occupations or shifted to urban style of new occupations using similar or new skills. This process has emancipated them from the submissive and lower-caste status of the traditional rural society. Their children have now risen up the social hierarchy after getting education and modern skills, which put them in powerful status as well in public institutions where the children of old powerful landed sections are under their influence and control. Economic independence and dignity of labour is,

therefore, enhanced. Earlier the traditional social hierarchy felt a blow due to partition related shuffling, and now economic modernization has altered it altogether. Cash economy and contract relations have promoted freedom of mobility, thought, association and life-choice. New power-brokers have emerged from such newly created professional and economic sections.

Another shattering effect has been felt by the patriarchy, though it is very strong even today, but it is now being challenged, and its atrocities cannot be hidden in most cases. The obvious higher degree of women's emancipation observed nowadays is a composite result of modernization, urbanization, migration, education, media, mobility, public sector reforms and legislations as well as civil society organisations. Its significant impact has been on fertility behavior, family size, visibility of women in public spaces, and their enhanced economic and political participation. Their being more assertive, self-controlling and cultivating the same qualities in the new generations is an undeniable fact of Pakistani society of today.

Demographically a very potent factor is today's bulging youth population, which is in real sense a great gift with immense potential to be trained and engaged in country's development. In the coming decades this bulge will shrink, but what is imperative today is to realize that this youth, both in rural and urban set-ups, is highly assertive, nontraditional, adventurous, keen to experiment with life, and exposed to multiple opportunities at home and abroad. The planners have to be wary of the fact that unsatisfied youth can be problematic and destructive, too. Political unrest, crimes and terrorism will soar, and psychological health of the society can be affected to a large extent if valuable youth are not acknowledged in a genuine manner. Today more than 60 per cent population is under 30 years of age. This volume of youth means exemplary potential but also extraordinary challenges.

Technically, the factors which have been impacting the social system and social order quite strongly include transport, electronic media and new means of communication. The pace, strength and implications of such factors for change have not been understood properly. Access to jobs, healthcare, education, skills, market, modern products, and urban facilities have become possible due to new means of transportation thus a huge multi-dimensional process has engulfed the urban periphery and especially the rural areas which could hardly afford reading morning newspapers before noon few decades ago. Now the whole country is turned into one market. Now, quick flow of food, technology, industrial products, and inevitably the 'culture' across the country, is possible within 48 hours. An enormous and unfathomable effect of electronic

media and information technology needs to be highlighted today, which seems 'magical', if one compares society today with that of seven decades ago. Now Pakistan has more mobile connections than the number of people. The present volume of digital transaction was unthinkable even in 1970s. The technical capacity of human resources have multiplied manifold due to enormous size of connectivity. Pakistanis, now in a global village are well connected. The outmigration has sent millions of Pakistanis to each and every 'lane' of the global village and the virtual connections are alive responding to the people's needs at both ends of communication.

Demographic, economic, and social transformation, which has not been handled in adept manner by the political institutions, has given way to civil unrest and political instability. One indicator of its inadequate performance is the overall low ranking of Pakistan in human development and gender indices. Poverty, deprivation, unemployment, denial of human rights and reinforcement of outdated medieval ideologies of oppression and exploitation is going on along information highways, economic corridors, IT parks, lap-top schemes for bright students, and women's one-third presence in national legislature.

Over the years, education has expanded but not to the point it should have. The literacy rate is still miserably low at less than 60 per cent. As compared to 1947, the number of educational institutions multiplied but the standard of education is quite poor. Except for a few elite institutions or their chains, rests of the educational institutions are simply providing degrees which generally do not accompany knowledge and skills. The educational system is seriously marred with multiple distortions as well. The elite institutions, the mushroomed English medium schools, Urdu medium public sector schools, primary to university level institutions run by three branches of military, and the *madaris*, together present a picture of disjointed and hierarchically assembled 'nation'. The failure in the area of education is in fact the failure of the state whose priorities have put education at the lowest ebb.

But the failure of state is not confined to education alone. In fact most of the wrongs found in the society have something to do with the policies of the state. For instance, in the last more than three and a half decades, Pakistani society has been overly weaponized. It is quite understandable why instead of a culture of dialogue, recourse to violent means has become the only guarantee to accrue one's objectives and to let one's adversary down. What started as a result of our involvement in Afghan *jihad*, has brought us to this point that it has now become necessary to conduct a campaign of *Raddul Fasad* (rejection of mischief). This mischief has by now torn our social fabric and has

permeated all walks of life in the form of religious frenzy and violent extremism. The state that encouraged and used religious outfits for its foreign policy objectives is facing immense difficulties in subduing the same outfits, many of whom have become autonomous and are challenging the writ of the state itself.

If, despite all failures and shortcomings of the state, one finds hopeful signs in the ever growing society it is more because of the people of the country. It is this people who have demonstrated extraordinary capacity of defying all odds, finding out their ways, and exercising their initiative. They reconstruct their houses and businesses demolished by horrendous earthquake, within years. They refurbish their residences and markets after fleeing them due to devastating floods. They can begin their economic life from scratches and from a slum area. The ordinary people of the country have demonstrated an extraordinary power of resilience.

It is for the state to come to match the aspirations of the society and to connect itself to the burgeoning society if it wants to be relevant any more, lest the state-society dichotomy ends up in a chaos.