

# **Pakistan: Underdeveloped at 60!**

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FREEDOM, even when limited and facile, is a thousand times preferable to bondage, and there can be no reservation on thanksgiving by the Pakistani people on their state's 60<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary. The feeling of jubilation could, however, have been infinitely stronger if it were possible to dismiss the thought of Pakistan's being an under-developed collectivity even at the age of 60.

Statisticians, especially those who cook up figures for official reports, will disagree and protest. They have for long maintained that Pakistan is a rapidly developing country and should soon join the developed elite. This claim is based on the rate of GDP growth, the burgeoning numbers of cell phones and automobiles in the country, the mushrooming of high-rise plazas and the presence of rich and powerful rulers. Perhaps Islamabad's role in fighting terrorists by subduing large parts of the country's population will also be cited as evidence of success in achieving development goals.

Regardless of the value one may put on these indicators of development, we are concerned here with three main indicators of under-development. These are: a lack of maturity in the collective's thinking, a high level of poverty in the country, and the people's exclusion from decision-making.

The assumption here is that besides computation of material progress, development must be measured by a country's ability to take decisions, especially on critical issues, that prove to be wise, timely, and in public interest; by guarantees of a decent and fulsome standard of living for all citizens, especially the poorest and the weakest among them; and by the opportunities the people have of contributing to decisions affecting their lives, both individually and collectively. Pakistan tests positive on all three of the indicators of under-development.

The grievous setbacks and debilitating crises Pakistan has had to face over the past six decades make a pretty long list. The more consequential are: failure to realise for nine years the most vital need for a constitution for the new state and the compulsions of a democratic, federal and equitable constitution till today; use of unfair means to escape democratic obligations and frequent resort to force to suppress the aspirations of the federating units, especially of the majority population in East Bengal; deliberate and hypocritical exploitation of belief for narrow political interests; neglect of permanent neighbours for the sake of distant, temporary and fickle-minded patrons; reliance on profitless borrowing and disregard for national human capital; and, finally, an incredibly strong devotion to a praetorian polity.

Throughout the years of independence the people have paid heavily for the collective's lack of capacity to wisely deal with critical issues, to address crises before they become irresolvable. The most frightening aspect of reality today is our apparently firm resolve to prove that the mindset governing Pakistan's actions and behaviour betrays not only a state of under-development but also suicidal traits of a most dangerous variety.

Nearly 40 per cent of the population of Pakistan lives in abject poverty. What makes the situation more unbearable is that while efforts to enable the poor to move out of the abyss of dehumanized existence have had limited effect, attempts continue to be made to inflate success in fighting poverty by debating and controverting the size of the wretched population. As it is, the criteria used to determine the number of the absolute poor seems quite inadequate.

If lack of opportunity to realise oneself and denial of basic freedoms and fundamental rights are taken into account as determinants of poverty, and there is no earthly reason why these matters should be ignored, an overwhelming majority of the population is likely to be classified as poor. That is under-development writ large and bold.

The least controversial fact about Pakistan is a progressive reduction over the decades of the

people's say in the management of the collective. We began with rule by representatives elected on a narrow franchise and in a pre-Pakistan context. They were inherently incapable of respecting the aspirations of the people, of acting as a responsible outfit. Adult franchise came in 1951 and with it the tradition of avoiding elections or fudging them if they had to be held.

Either way the people's sovereign rights came under the axe. A decade after the people had created Pakistan by their democratic choice, they were told they were incapable of democratic management of their affairs. For seven years the country suffered the ignominy of living under a constitution 'given' by a single man at his discretion. What has followed, except for a short interlude, is autocracy under different masks.

A little deliberation will reveal that the third factor of under-development mentioned above, namely, the exclusion of the people from decision-making, has been the most decisive cause of Pakistan's unending travail. In almost all crises the state's destiny was in the hands of small groups whose claims to represent the people could convince their members only or in the hands of individuals who could not even make such claims.

The collective mind's lack of maturity in the face of crises could possibly have been overcome if larger bodies of citizens had been taken into confidence. In that event a search for strategies to fight poverty might have begun in the 1950's and not forty years later. An enquiry into the people's exclusion from decision-making is necessary because Pakistan's future will not be any better than its past unless matters begin to be decided by the will of the people.

The myth relied upon by the advocates and apologists of autocracy is that the people have no understanding and tradition of democratic politics and therefore the maximum concession to them can be guided/controlled democracy. But the statement that Pakistan did not have an indigenous tradition of parliamentary democracy that was sought to be implanted here is more true about the traditional ruling elite, both of its civilian and military wings included, than about the masses.

It is this ruling elite that has consistently been found wanting in ability to base decisions on public consensus, partly because of its incapacity to appreciate the dynamics of a democratic process and partly out of fear of losing not only its material possessions and privileges but also, and more importantly, its monopoly over power.

A common reason advanced by the country's permanent establishment for curtailing and shutting off the process of reference to the people is that they lack formal education. Statements to this effect are quite shamelessly made by the establishment's theorists without any hint of remorse at its own culpability in the matter.

Nobody will deny the part education can play in helping a society manage its affairs. From measuring land and collection of taxes to building of roads and dams and generation of electricity, to running of hospitals and parliament's secretariat you need adequately educated and trained professionals. But politics, especially democratic politics, is a matter of making choices on the basis of people's needs so as to ensure the greatest good of the greatest number. No formal education is required for making such choices, as we shall presently see.

The franchise for the elections of 1945-46 that clinched the argument in favour of Pakistan was extremely limited. All the voters had not had the benefit of formal education. Many among them - owners of property, tax-payers, ex-servicemen - were illiterate. Yet they were considered sufficiently qualified to join the most momentous consultative process in the history of British India.

Much before these elections the Quaid-i-Azam had been demanding a plebiscite to determine Indian Muslims' support for the demand for Pakistan on the basis of a broader franchise, that is, he wanted more uneducated people to be brought into decision-making (because all the 'educated' were voters already).

After partition, plebiscite was demanded to decide Kashmir's future, although a vast majority of the people to be consulted was uneducated.

Above all, none among Pakistan's rulers whose decisions over six decades have been held to lack maturity of mind was uneducated. No, Pakistan's trials as a consequence of the exclusion of the masses from decision-making cannot be ascribed to their low educational achievements..

Instead, the people have been unable to participate in decision-making, thus condemning the state to be governed by an immature elite and condemning themselves to poverty, because the social structures established before independence were not conducive to democratic governance. And all governments have been guilty of failing to demolish the socio-economic barriers to the people's empowerment, though a few of them did try to tinker with them. The largest groups of people barred from decision-making councils are: peasants (including their womenfolk), women (outside the agriculture sector), and working people (industrial and trade employees, workers in the informal sector, and self-employed hordes).

Taken together they constitute an overwhelming majority of the people. They are not incapable of contributing positively to decision-making institutions and processes, but they have been prevented from doing so by socio-economic-cultural constraints. Where do these large chunks of population stand 60 years after independence?

\* Pakistan was an agricultural country to begin with. The share of agriculture to GDP may have fallen sharply but a majority of the population still depends on it. The state has largely been concerned with raising agricultural output and to some extent with marketing. The rights of the tillers were half-heartedly addressed via three inadequate and insincerely implemented land reform packages. Despite the fact that the ILO Convention on farm workers' right to form trade unions was ratified before independence, the state has not encouraged peasant mobilisation.

The bonded haris in Sindh and at some places in Punjab and the Frontier may present extreme instances of exploitation but tillers of the soil by and large are not free anywhere in the country in social and political terms. All women in peasant families are exploited even more than their men. To a large extent, the nature of

tenant-landowner relationship and the social resourcelessness of the small proprietor bar the peasantry from entering the area of decision-making.

\* Pakistan's women outside the farming sector have an impressive record of struggle and success but the beneficiaries of their achievements in the political (seats in elective bodies) and the service sectors (jobs in government and private establishments) constitute a small percentage of their total number. The feudal, male patriarchs continue to decide whether a girl can go to school or an adult woman can choose her spouse.

Their right to inheritance is disputed, to say nothing of their broader right to economic independence. Across a large part of the country they are not allowed freedom of vote and many of those elected to local councils are not permitted to perform their functions. It can safely be asserted that a vast majority of women continue to be excluded from decision-making.

\* The plight of Pakistan's working people is particularly pathetic because theoretically they are supposed to be freer agents than peasants and women. They are not. Since 1959, when the Ayub regime began the series of anti-labour policies, and right upto the Industrial Relations Ordinance of 2002, labour has been progressively stripped of the rights it had won after nearly two centuries of struggle.

The right to unionise and the rights of organised workers both have been curtailed. Partly under pressure of economic needs and partly because of union leaders' short-sightedness, the working people have opted out or have been pushed out of decision-making processes.

What has been discussed here is not Pakistan's past, the subject is future. The issue is major obstacles to genuine development. Pakistan will remain an underdeveloped nation with an immature mindset in command so long as its peasants remain bonded to absentee landlords (or corporate barons), its women remain in the clutches of male feudal tormentors, and its working people are left to rot as galley-slaves of merciless exploiters.

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