Lost in space – Islamisation in Pakistan

Pakistanis have lost the capability to separate the religious from the secular?

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Nadeem F. Paracha asks whether Pakistanis have lost the capability to separate the religious from the secular.

When there is talk of Islamisation, we are not just discussing Islamic laws being implemented by the state and government. What we should also study in this respect is the Islamisation of public space, or space that was historically and inherently secular in nature.

For example, the growth in the numbers of mosques and madrassas in the last 25 years or so also saw this trend's physical and symbolic extension into the secular space of society.

Ever since the early 1980s, there has been a three-fold growth in the formation of 'praying areas' in offices in both private and government institutions, and the toleration of laxities at the workplace regarding timings - especially for office hours during Ramadan - have been unconditionally allowed.

Of course, as can be observed from the facts and figures of assorted sociological studies in Pakistan of the last 20 years or so, all this has not helped in making society any more law-abiding and constructive than what it already was before the 1980s.

In fact, the rate of crime has increased dramatically; especially sexual and financial, and social commentators have continued to bemoan the 'institutionalisation of the notion of social hypocrisy.'

But this trend of the supposed Islamisation of social space soon seeped into other areas as well. For instance, beginning in the 1980s, there are more religious programs on the television and radio than ever before.

Also, more and more lawns and drawing-rooms are becoming venues for religious lectures and dars. In fact, even in modern, posh shopping malls, the central sound system is used to broadcast the azaan and naats while recitations from the Holy Qu'ran are played during holy months and days.

Other peripheral trends such as the change of traditional Islamic greetings – replacing Khuda Hafiz with Allah Hafiz – is also a case in point.

Secular space is rapidly shrinking and the sociology of Pakistan today is strikingly different from what it was between 1947 and 1976.

Apologists and defenders of these trends would rightly suggest that social Islamisation could not have taken place without the consent of the majority of the people. However, one need not be a professional sociologist to determine the resounding failure of these trends to convert the quasi-secular state of Jinnah's Pakistan into a 'truly Islamic' and morally sound community of people.

On the contrary, all social, cultural and economic indicators of the last 25 years suggest a society

disintegrating into a chaotic mixture of new-found rituals and exhibition of Islamic piety convolutedly trying to reach a synthesis with modern material want and ambition. [1]

Interestingly, the general discourse in this context has repeatedly buried the inherent dichotomy between religious piety and the desire to taste the fruits of amoral materialism. Instead, this discourse has turned into a collective attempt to emerge as a workable synthesis.

For instance, a synthesis will be turned into a top-of-mind argument offered by, say, Junaid Jamshed fans, when asked about the obvious dichotomy between Jamshed's exhibitions of Islamic piety with his more material goals emitting from an equally passionate exhibition of amoral materialism and financial profiteering in the form of his top-of-line fashion boutique business.

The argument is that being spiritual doesn't mean one can't be materialistic as well, even though in a number of ways this argument can be challenged, especially when the spirituality that is being exhibited is supposedly following the dictates of a dyed-in-the-wool brand of spirituality that the former pop star is displaying: a strain of religion in which music becomes 'haram', but getting paid to endorse a western brand of chips as 'halaal' is fine?

Addressing such questions has become the work of televangelists and preachers who have become popular amongst the country's urban middle classes. In a nutshell, their role can be defined as helping mould a workable (albeit long-winded) model that is synthesised from certain Qu'ranic verses and assorted hadidhs and then offered to their audience as an Islamic rationale to survive in the modern material world as a practicing Muslim without feeling guilt or angst.

Not only is the dichotomy converted into a religiously rationalised normality, but the duality emerging from the social exhibitionism of religious piety and personal materialistic ambitions is turned into a matter-of-fact and unquestioned state of mind and existence.

The recent appearance of former bubble-gum pop poster boy, Ali Haider on a popular religious TV show to announced his reborn status is a case in point. The question arises, why did he have to announce this on mainstream television? Why couldn't it remain his personal business? And more so, why announce his reborn status on a show that was alleged to have triggered violence against minorities in Lahore in 2008?

Of course, this duality of action and thought can be minimised if the Islamisation of secular spaces is checked, but the question is, who will check it and, more so, who is behind this trend?

The state and the government now seem incapable of checking this trend. The power and initiative to do so was lost when in 1974 when the government of Z. A. Bhutto ceded to the demands of Islamist parties like the Jamat Islami and constitutionally turned Ahmadis into a shunned minority, consequently emboldening his Islamist opponents.

In 1976, Bhutto once again buckled in the face of pressure of the Islamists and closed down 'unIslamic' activities in public. Zia's Islamic regime only added two-fold to what the Islamists had already succeeded in making Bhutto do.

As Zia's political Islam failed to address the utopian expectations of the people for the 'ideal Islamic state,' and political and economic corruption further eroded Zia's regime, the Islamists and various fundamentalist groups that had risen in the 1980s, decided to 'Islamise society from below.'

The idea was to Islamise all aspects of society so that people will 'turn from being just Muslims into becoming Islamic' and subsequently set the scene themselves for a spontaneous Islamic revolution and the imposition of the shariah.

Interestingly, the state and the government even after Zia's demise allowed this brand of social Islamisation to continue taking place, as long as it didn't exhibit any overt political ambitions.

The Islamists and the fundamentalists were free to carry on Islamising social space, so much so that today it has become impossible to escape Islamic symbolism and rhetoric in even the most traditionally secular spaces and surroundings.

The socialisation of a theologically puritan but theoretically contradictory strain of Islam has been an all-encompassing event. Its symbols and rhetoric abound on billboards, in shopping malls, parks, on cars, in buses, drawing rooms, on TV screens, in offices and in everyday lingo – it seems Pakistanis have lost the capability to separate the religious from the secular.

This trend has consequently moulded a common mind-set and a social and cultural ground that has become almost voluntarily vulnerable to Islamist exploitation.

This might answer the question as to why society at large goes up in arms after a drone attack whereas it remains awkwardly quiet every time a terrorist murders scores of common people in a suicide blast.

And perhaps that's why after being mowed down by so many years of extremist propaganda, Pakistani society has a ready consensus on the dangers of, say, pornography and alcohol abuse, but still can't seem to reconcile to a common consensus on whom or what counts an extremist.

References

[1] The Economic Impact of Islamic Fundamentalism: Timur Kuran

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P.S.

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