

Pakistan: Hegemony of Islamic discourse - Transformation under oppression

Language that is generally perceived to be 'neutral' and 'impartial' is imbued with biased perceptions and expressions of power

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Traversing every walk of life right from symbolism and values to social customs and mores, Islam has now turned up to be the only 'real' and 'natural' phenomenon. Rest of everything is a myth, misunderstanding, Western conspiracy or fiction. Trespassing democratic values of free thinking, action, assembly, expression, argument and dialogue most social, political and legal institutions appear to be subservient to the prejudiced narrowest version of Islam.

Social transformation is a complex political-historical process. It is like taking care of every tree to take care of the whole forest and nourishing the whole forest for the proper growth of each tree. Unfortunately, retrogressive trends dominate the landscape of Pakistan's history and politics.

Right from its early years, hegemony of Islamic discourse was developed and reinforced by Islamist forces that were either opposed to or not part of Pakistan movement. Except Talu-e-Islam group, Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, now Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Jamat-e-Islami (JI) and Majlis-e-Ahrar, all were vehemently opposed to Pakistan movement and the person of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, spearheading the struggle for independence.

Post independence, exclusivist version of Islam was superimposed as unified nationalizing force and collective identity, sheerly overlooking its religious and ethnic diversity and secular vision of its founding father. Islam, therefore, became a prism to see through all ideologies and functions of society and the state. Sanctified language and discursivity of Islam and Islamic order gradually crept into every sphere of life and no surprise that now it dominates politics, economy, academics and all and sundry. Circumventing, its' spiritual role, religion was made to overpower every aspect of socio-political thinking and policy consideration. State was then, obviously, its major object to monopolize and manipulate. With Islamic leaning Objective Resolution (1949) and Islamization of the Constitution (1973, 1982, 1984, 1992) and subsequent legislations, almost every move contributed in Islamizing the state and society.

Traversing every walk of life right from symbolism and values to social customs and mores, Islam has now turned up to be the only 'real' and 'natural' phenomenon. Rest of everything is a myth, misunderstanding, Western conspiracy or fiction. Trespassing democratic values of free thinking, action, assembly, expression, argument and dialogue most social, political and legal institutions appear to be subservient to the prejudiced narrowest version of Islam. Pakistan, now, runs the risk of becoming a theocracy or is stormed by the Taliban's fascist and totalitarian brand of Islam suffocating every breath of art, literature, music, philosophy and culture. Triggered by 9/11, intolerance, extremism and Talibanization found a fertile ground here in the presence of entrenched

tendencies of religious intolerance and divisionism. Discriminatory laws and institutionalized oppression, beguiled extremist dispositions and faith-based violence that we observe around.

Hegemony of Islam and authoritarian political tradition can be most appropriately understood from Critical Discourse Perspective. Social realities, meanings and ideologies of power, as argued by theorists like Wodak, Halliday, Foucault and Fairclough, are constituted, communicated and naturalised through a powerful discourse that dominates society. The “discourse is an ideological systems of meaning that obfuscate and naturalize uneven distribution of power and resources,” defines Howard. To post-structuralist thinkers reality is not self-evident but a social construct - including religious beliefs and perceptions. Reality does not exist on its own but is created through language and its particular use. Meanings are generated in the social, historical and cultural context.

Monopolizing discourse - Islamic and political discourse in the case of Pakistan - certain groups of people monopolize public mind. Therefore scrutinizing dominant elites and their discourses is important. Social myths and political identities call for a special attention. By manipulating attitudes and values, ideologically dominant groups manipulate social knowledge and strengthen their position in society. The discourse is mainly controlled and commanded by the powerful to ward-off their interests.

Michael Foucault illustrates that ‘discourse’ is the product of historical-social processes. In his views discourse is the dominant ideological-force, quite difficult to change. Be it social perceptions, beliefs, political institutions and ideologies, it governs everything. As a system of social relations and practices, discourses are inherently political and create insiders and outsiders, draw political contours, make protagonists and antagonists and involve the exercise and relations of power.

Islam has configured its superiority under dominant discourse practices of ‘identity’ and ‘power’. That is why, every other form of resistance to the ideological structures, reinforced by dominance and power, is seen as deviation from Islamic and social conventions. Dialectical relationship of ‘thought’ and ‘action’ expose the way in which ‘language’ and ‘meaning’ - say the sanctified language of Islam and Arabic - are used by the religious and political elites to ‘deceive’ and ‘oppress’ the common citizens. Texts, talk, speeches and sermons widely demonstrate it.

Language that is generally perceived to be ‘neutral’ and ‘impartial’ is imbued with biased perceptions and expressions of power. Urdu, Arabic and English languages are the markers of identity and power, particularly the way and by whom they are used. These languages in Pakistan are ‘practiced’ and ‘articulated’ for meanings, and expressions of power, itself shaping a ‘discourse’ against ‘Sindhi, Balochi, Saraiki, Punjabi and Pashtune discourses striving to rearticulate and transform ‘identities’ and ‘relations of power’ in their own social context. Social relations and consciousness are dialectically related elements of social-practice widely manifested in language. Sophisticated use of Urdu or Arabic by Ulema and English by the affluent elites manifest the differences of ‘class’ and ‘power’. Choice and preference of words, phrases and expressions constitute and manipulate ideologies in their favour. Simultaneously, society and social relations are not an exchange of free-floating interactions; rather they reflect a complicated web of power-relations.

“Language and meaning are used by the powerful to deceive and oppose the dominated” and Van Dijk demonstrates that “power and abuses of power take birth simultaneously when dominant group (read religious and political elites) take their dominance as ‘legitimate’ and ‘natural’”. Signs and symbols are developed to communicate their supremacy. Negative attitudes, ideologies and rhetoric about ‘the powerless,’ and hyperbolic myths and euphemism about ‘powerful’ are deliberately infiltrated in the popular discourse.

Marginalization and exclusion to disagree and dialogue systematically expel 'the poor' and 'underclass' from the processes of power. Historically significant documents, political statements and policy documents are employed to form certain attitudes in relation to power. The 'position' or 'attitude' towards minorities and underdogs influences and reinforces the already dominant religio-political ideology. Even the street conversations, news-reports and textbooks, produce, reproduce and naturalize subordinate-superordinate relationship.

Political dynasties right from Sindhi Waderas, Baloch Sardars, Punjab's Chauhdhris and Pakhtunehuah's Maliks and Khans have monopolized their hegemony on the political landscape of Pakistan. Coming from middle class, Mullahs, particularly in Punjab and Pakhtunehuah instrumentalize Islam to challenge their power and bargain for political space or support largely for their personal gains. Serving as ideological and coercive apparatuses of the state both civil and military bureaucracies keep manufacturing and maintaining unequal structures of power. Therefore, political transformation always stumbled in the country.

Pakistan's poor and excluded masses are not in a position to shift discourse or rearticulate its elements to transform the situation for being powerless, dependent and marginalized. Gender, class, religious, sectarian and ethnic discriminations and divides also limit the possibility of an all out transformation. Socially created structural-constraints are not easier to dissolve. Therefore the given social order holds several social-wrongs and injustices. Abusing the rights of women, children, peasants and working classes is a day to day matter in the country.

Nonetheless, as argued by Fairclough, discourses are constructed, contested and changed, subject to circumstances that might help transforming social stagnancy. Everything that is socially constructed can also be changed through social strategies and processes be it the monopoly of an 'ideology,' 'class,' politics and/or power. Oppression and injustices can end only if the state, civil society and intelligentsia join hands to transform discourses. Ideological dialectics can facilitate change for the larger common good if religio-political dissidence is not only tolerated but encouraged.

What is most important is new ideological and discourse legitimacy for socio-political shift that asks for different conceptualization and categorization of people, politics and religion. Such political strategies can be actualized through 'discourse shifting strategies'. People in general do see things critically but they may not see it with reference to discourse-dialectical-processes constituting socio and political realities of life. Therefore, shifting discourses is a must to shift social realities and eliminate oppression and injustices. Shifting discourse is capable of shifting social identities, relations of power, inequalities and oppression. What is ideologically unacceptable can be changed with the power of new discourses mainly from the perspectives of the oppressed and marginalized people. Holding authority and power accountable and accurate 'political action' is also part of it.

Though our legislative gurus, policy pundits and omniscient ulema have tried their best to paint everything green but it is not possible in the age of flooding information, overwhelming media, sprawling internet, widening trade and floating technology. Rifts and shifts in societal perceptions and response constituted by more or less a free media, civil society's struggle, social networking, migration, commutation and corporate influences within and from abroad. Free-market economy, neo-liberal Western democratic influences, broadening social media, satellite channels and corporate globalization create new avenues for peoples' action, thoughts and expressions, though this all might have its own problems.

Internal unrest and resistances and individual choice and interests also have a lot to do with shifting trends and transformations. One can find atheists and agnostics to pagans and staunch believers in the country. Likewise the entertainment scene is studded with westernized cat-walk models and rock

and roll bands to the artists immersed in traditional Balochi, Saraiki, Pashune, Sindhi and northern cultures. Diversified trends might reflect the beauty and strength of a culture but only if the violent and self-appointed religious police and hegemonic state institutions extend equal freedom of thought and cultural practices to all the citizens of Pakistan.

Pre-eminence and respect for human and minority rights as measure for democracy, peace and social justice, the most important of our concerns, also confront and challenge the exploitative ideologies, however failing to create a respectable space so far. Being a client state and dependent economy it is even hard for Pakistan to pick and choose or resist and receive influences as and if the political elites will to. As an outcome Pakistan has become a blend of polarised and contradictory thoughts, ideologies, behaviours and practices.

Multiple discourses simultaneously exist here to constitute multiple realities and social practices. In a competitive complex, each discourse struggles to dominate and define society and social reality in its own way. From a critical discourse perspective, we observe several discourses challenging Islamic supremacy, authoritarian political tendencies and traditional hegemonies.

The problem cannot be solved in bits and pieces here and there unless we put an end to legal and political instrumentalism to monopolize power and shift entire discourse in favour of human rights, peace, equality of citizenship and freedom of thought and creativity. Restructuring power-asymmetries and structural-inequalities is imperative for the purpose.

It is a prolonged and painful process but a sure way to create new subjectivities, identities and institutionalization of democracy, peace and human-rights in Pakistan. The new order of discourse will empower the powerless to impart their ideological voice and eliminate social wrongs.

Epistemological shift in societal perceptions of 'reality,' 'truth' and 'fairness' can be orchestrated by opening up new avenues of thought and exposure to arts, science, technologies and creativity in every sphere of life. Commencing that, new social, economic and political possibilities will start coming to life. Epistemological diversity - one of the best means of discourse-shifting - will give birth to the objective and critical tendencies. Leaving religion to people's conscience, de-minoritization, de-sectarianism and integration, at least in political respect, will guarantee the much desired social transformation in the country.

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