

Pakistan: Culture & poverty factors

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It seems that impediments, created by poverty and popular (ie Muslim and indigenous) culture, to the efforts to fight the coronavirus epidemic are not being taken into consideration. This could prove to be a costly omission.

Take the case of the difference of opinion on the question of regulating the number of people in Friday prayer congregations last week. A large number of people accepted the advice to offer prayers at home, but the number of the faithful who joined prayers at mosques and stood shoulder to shoulder with one another was not insignificant. They probably believed they did not have to bother about falling sick as they would die only at the time appointed for them. But there were other reasons too for their behaviour.

First, the precedents were perhaps not adequately conveyed to them. According to Falsafa Shariat-i-Islam, one precedent involved the second caliph. He cancelled his visit to a distant town on learning that an epidemic had broken out there. Some citizens of Madina asked what kind of an amirul momineen Umar was that he was afraid of death. The caliph called upon the people of Madina to recall whether a similar situation had arisen in the past. A Companion came forward and declared that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) had advised Muslims to refrain from going to a place where an epidemic was raging. That settled the matter. Any Muslim scholar will now tell you of the prohibition against visiting epidemic areas.

Poverty, poor housing and lifestyles reduce a people's capacity to fight a new viral epidemic.

The other day I read in a travelogue by the great 11th-century Persian poet-philosopher Nasir Khusraw — and what an outstanding travelogue it is — that in 1048 no outsider came to perform Haj because there was a famine in Makkah and many of its residents had left the town in search of food elsewhere.

Thus, Pakistani Muslims must not consider themselves the first and only ones to decide about prayers, and that too while fighting against a new and easily communicable virus. They may have learnt of the Saudis' advice to Pakistan to put Haj preparations on hold.

Perhaps the advice for prayers to be offered at home was flawed on two counts. Firstly, it ignored the huge number of people who were away from their homes at prayer time or resided in hovels where no spot was clean enough for offering prayers. A better message could have been that those who could not pray at home were free to go to the nearest mosque and pray alone and at an appropriate distance from another namazi.

Secondly, the ulema had said that it was the duty of the citizens to follow the instructions of the government. Now, defying the instructions of the government is the norm in Pakistan, and taking orders from the authorities in matters of belief is unthinkable. It would have been better if the advice about restrictions on congregations had come from the ulema themselves.

Since the question of regulating Friday prayers is likely to arise week after week, it is necessary to address the people's culturally determined resistance to observing anti-epidemic rules.

Further, the refusal of a large number of people in locked-down cities to stay a metre or so away from one another is rooted in our popular culture, which makes it obligatory for us to visit or stay close to our relations and friends whatever their ailment or however serious their condition may be.

This requirement of maintaining a distance of at least a metre from one another even within homes can be fulfilled only by a minority that have homes large enough to make segregation possible. How can the social distance precaution be observed in a single-room tenement occupied by five to 10 or more members of a family?

We find that the precautions to escape the contagion can be taken only by individuals and families that maintain a certain level of cleanliness and personal hygiene; they use tissue papers to wipe their nose whenever they sneeze. But the situation on the ground is that a very large number of people do not have proper toilets in their dwellings and they drink water contaminated by toxic waste.

The direction to wash one's hands with soap, and preferably with hot water, presumes that even the poorest households enjoy the facility of running hot and cold water, or can keep a vessel on the stove for boiling water all the time. There are men who wash their hands and faces only while performing ablutions at mosques at prayer times. Their women don't have this facility and are often short of water for drinking, cooking and washing themselves or utensils. That poverty, poor housing and lifestyles reduce a people's capacity to fight a new viral epidemic cannot be denied.

Then we are told to do essential shopping and discharge our financial obligations through online banking or by using credit/debit cards. And if you have a fat account the bank will collect cheques at your doorstep. What kind of people and what percentage of the population are we talking about?

Is this situation due to the fact that those who make policies and decisions have little idea of the resources, living conditions and customs followed by the disadvantaged majority?

The administration is now facing problems in supplying essential foodstuffs to the poor who have been deprived of their livelihoods. Haven't we realised how much easily this work could have been done by local government institutions? Now a Corona Relief Tiger Force (can't we think of a humane name for life-saving missionaries?) is to be recruited. That members of assemblies are to be mobilised for relief work is a good idea provided that members belonging to all the parties in the assemblies are equally trusted. But relief work demands organisers responsible for small pockets of the population, and they should preferably be drawn from the local communities.

What all this means is that epidemics cannot be fought with the help of borrowed textbooks alone. The methods used by other societies are important, but their adaption to Pakistan's physical and social environment also requires imaginative answers to constraints imposed by culture and poverty.

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