**The Afghanistan debate**

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The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has elicited strong reactions. At one end, Islamists the world over are celebrating.; at the other end, secularists and liberals the world over are in mourning.

At one end, there are powers relishing their triumph; at the other end, there are powers dressing their wounds. Establishment and Islamist Pakistan is celebrating; Establishment and Hindutva India is woeful. The US is smarting after its defeat – which Russia finds rather sweet; the Chinese are weighing profitable opportunities that are opening up.

Ironies abound. The defeated United States and Nato are dictating terms to the victorious Taliban. The most vocal demand is for the Taliban to grant women rights to education and work. Even the World Bank and the IMF have joined the fray. Ironic because the Western powers and financial institutions have never had any qualms about abuse of women’s rights elsewhere – a la denial of the right to work, drive or travel without male escort in some allied countries.

The ‘angst’ among world powers about the welfare and rights of Afghan women is only a cover. The real agenda is political and economic interests. For Pakistan, the prize is strategic depth; for India, it is about a foothold to encircle Pakistan and advance its strategic interests in central Asia. For the US, Russia and China, it is access to trade and oil routes and to mineral exploitation rights in Afghanistan.

The political and diplomatic mayhem surrounding Afghanistan is likely to subside in due course. The clash of strategic and economic interests will, however, continue – couched, of course, in lofty moral and ideological semantics. One set of the debate is between the religious right-wing, on the one hand, and secularists and liberals, on the other; with the latter divided into the right wing and left-of-centre.

For the religious right-wing and right-wing secularists and liberals, the real divide is not about the political order, but of cultural values. The debate is about a way of life – dress, socialising, etc. For them, the dominant questions are: will girls be allowed to go to school; will co-education be tolerated; will women be permitted to work; will men be required to sport beards, and so on.

There are so many single mother families in Afghanistan, the men having been killed in the long war. For these women, denial of the opportunity to work amounts to a slow-motion death sentence for them and their families. Yet, there are not even passing references to how they will be supported.

The religious right-wing thunders about women and girls covering their heads and faces in public, but is unconcerned about the intra-family, inter-personal moral impact of poverty and poor housing. Documented evidence in Pakistan shows hundreds of thousands of urban families living in cramped one-room houses – even 10 to 20 to a room. There are tens of thousands of cases of married couples sharing the same room with their parents and male and female siblings – and procreating as well. For right-wing secularists and liberals, the situation is merely collateral damage of a robust market economy.

If the issues were political, the ‘angst’ between the two camps would be about what kind of socioeconomic order the Afghan Taliban will install in Afghanistan as opposed to what the secularists and liberals have been working with over the last two decades. In the event, the questions would be: will there be land reforms? Will there be progressive taxation? Will the rights of peasants and labour be enforced? And so on.

None of the above questions are under debate. And that is because the religious right-wing and right-wing secularists and liberals are on the same page on these issues. Both are comfortable with the unequal socioeconomic order that prevails and intend to let it prevail. Video images of the ousted Afghan vice-president’s palatial house and of the abject privation of the people is a telling comment on the political agenda of right-wing secularists and liberals.

Poverty, unemployment, poor housing, illiteracy, lack of healthcare, maternal and infant mortality, etc, are not subjects that concern the two sides materially. If the Taliban were to shave off their beards and put on Western clothing and the right-wing secularists and liberals were to grow beards and wear turbans, they would still be talking the same bland policy language.

In the event, the poor in Afghanistan are likely to remain saddled with their deprivation and misery. The women among the poor have never ever had access to education, healthcare or decent work opportunities. They have never ever had to face questions about co-education or treatment by male doctors or working in mixed office environments. Their plight will continue as before and continue to be used as a bogey for different stakeholders feeding off the suffering of the Afghan people.

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