

Rise of mediocrity in Pakistan

By Tasneem Siddiqui

TO MOST analysts, political instability, a worsening law and order situation, dismal social indicators, rampant unemployment and rising inflation are some of the major problems Pakistan faces today. The causes of these problems can be debated ad infinitum, but almost everyone accepts that these challenges exist and have to be met one way or the other.

Political instability, even after 58 years of an independent existence, together with other problems, no doubt is cause for concern, but what is more worrying is the rise of mediocrity and the resultant incompetence at all levels of Pakistani society.

Whether it is the public or the private sector, a university or a primary school, journalism or law, civil service or politics, mediocrity remains the hallmark of Pakistani society. In the not too distant past we were a reasonably well-organized society run by competent people. Our university teachers, judges newspaper editors enjoyed a good reputation but no more.

Bureaucracy has now become a pejorative term. In spite of its arrogance, abrasiveness and inaccessibility, the civil service of Pakistan was one of the best in the region and could deliver the goods. Similarly, not very long ago our engineers could make barrages, dams and could run a very intricate canal system by themselves. Now, most of them do not know even the basics of their profession.

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mean. Even apex institutions like the Federation of Chambers of Commerce & Industry, which have huge resources at their disposal, have very little to show as achievements.

The army is one institution which has maintained its colonial tradition of recruitment, training and promotions. There has hardly been any political interference in top appointments and postings. (Some people can say, and rightly so, that it is the army, which has interfered in almost everything and destroyed most of the national institutions). But can you say with confidence that today the officer corps of the army is any brighter than their predecessors? Aren't top slots being manned by mediocre and lacklustre people?

What about political leaders? Civil and military bureaucrats and the middle class intelligentsia have always labelled them as rabble-rousers, bereft of

that in social sciences there is not a single university or institute in the country that is world class.

What about writers, poets, critics and researchers? Do we see any upsurge in this field? We can see that there are very few short story and fiction writers too the standard of Manto, Bedi, Krishan Chander and Ismat Chughtai. No doubt we have poets in abundance, but what is their standard? Apart from half a dozen of them with some originality the rest are below average repeat themselves ad nauseam. Similarly, how many people are there who have the capability and desire to carry out research on serious literacy issues?

Some people may say that things are not that bad and that we have our centres of excellence which produce world class professionals. Some of our young doctors, engineers, architects, finance managers, bankers and

economists have made a name for themselves here and abroad. Certainly, but what about the general level of competence of people who form the bulk of the population? And more importantly, what about the calibre of the people occupying important positions in the public and private sectors?

In a country, where the state dominates almost everything, and its presence is all-pervasive, bureaucrats also play a leadership role. It, therefore, becomes all the more important that pivotal positions should be occupied by people of high calibre and intelligence who can perform their duties with dignity and commitment. This is what is lacking in Pakistan.

Readers may ask why this general deterioration exists and what can be done about it. The basic

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basics of their profession.

It is true that in developing countries, visionaries are few and the freshness of ideas rare but what distinguishes Pakistan from other societies is that we started off well. We gradually destroyed our institutions whereas most other countries did not have even the basic infrastructure but built on whatever little they had. Another distinction is that in other countries pivotal positions are generally occupied by bright people, who know their subject well. But here the situation is moving in the reverse direction. In the initial days, we gave the right people the right jobs, and rewarded new ideas, but today creativity is at a discount, while mediocrity is at high premium.

We have chief secretaries who can't put up a cogent argument for 15 minutes, nor conduct themselves in a dignified manner. We have secretaries to the government who cannot prepare a well argued summary on an important issue. We have lower functionaries who can neither unite a small note nor organize an official meeting properly. Even at the highest level, meetings are held without proper papers and minutes are frequently not kept. What about the judiciary? What about the police? What about highly paid technocrats? It is the same story everywhere.

Mediocrity and incompetence in police ranks have assumed legendary proportions. The investigation and preparation of criminal cases is so poor that hardly 10 per cent of cases end in convictions. Intelligence gathering has also met the same fate. We have seen senior police officers of the rank of IG and DIG not knowing their job at all. To add insult to injury, they behave in the most undignified and obsequious way just to please their bosses.

This is also true of the private sector. Mediocrity reigns supreme here too. In some ways, it may be slightly better than the public sector but in most cases there too, is an absence of fresh ideas. This is the main reason why those working in this sector cannot go beyond a limit. If you compare the performance of our private sector with their counterparts belonging to countries of the Pacific Rim or even India, you will understand what we

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all discipline and etiquette. This no doubt smacks of prejudice and contempt on the part of their detractors. But look at the people who are heading various political parties (mainstream and small) or the stature of our prime ministers, governors and chief ministers during the last 20 years, and one comes to the conclusion that mediocrity is the hallmark of our politics too. Not that the politicians of the last generation were any visionaries, but at least they commanded respect had above-average intelligence. It is another thing that most of them were spineless and didn't have the courage to take a stand at critical moments of Pakistan history.

Look at the education scene. Three decades ago, our universities had vice chancellors and professors who were men of great learning and made contributions to their field of specialization. They were scholarly people greatly respected by both students and their peers. What do we see today? We have vice chancellors who have never been to any university. There are others who got their Ph.Ds through spurious means. With a few exceptions, the level of university and college teachers is so poor that it can put anyone to shame.

Pakistan is a nuclear power and we are proud of it. To an outsider, this status would mean that Pakistan is an advanced country in science and technology and has a very good base for research and its application to agriculture, industry and other fields. Is it not horrifying that apart from some exceptions, we have no scientist community worth the name? Scientific education at school, college and university level is extremely.

What about historians, philosophers and social scientists? Apart from half a dozen people, can one name any Pakistani historian or philosopher, who is internationally recognized and continues to make important contributions to their field? We have stopped teaching history and philosophy at school and college level. Very soon there will be no people left in this field. Is it not unfortunate

this general deterioration exists and what can be done about it. The basic

reason for the rise of mediocrity, most people would argue, is the poor standard of education. This is largely true. The conceived nationalization of private schools and colleges and the low priority accorded to education have no doubt played havoc with the education system in Pakistan. But is this the only reason?

Is it not a fact that our feudals as well as most of our urban middle classes are the product of a *darbari* culture where success is largely achieved through *sifarish*, sycophancy, intrigue, duplicity and total obedience? It was the British who organized different services, and introduced the concept of open competition based on merit in public service. They codified all laws and also created strong institutions to run the affairs of state. Perhaps these things went against our ethos. We accepted the changes, but did not internalize them.

After independence, the momentum could not have been sustained but on the one hand tribal, clannish, linguistic and regional affiliations returned with great vengeance, and other long periods of military rule weakened the existing institutions. The process of change was completely stifled. Not only representative governments, but people who are loyal, obedient, spineless and do not raise awkward questions. Autocratic rule is antithetical to the culture of meritocracy where the most suitable persons are identified and given jobs they can do well.

One can conclude that the rise of mediocrity is directly proportional to the neglect of merit. No organization can work properly or make progress if it does not reward merit or put a proper person on to the job. Our problem is that we are rhetorical about merit but in practice do just the opposite. Mediocrity will keep on touching new heights unless we, as a nation decide that it is time that we evolved a new system of governance which is merit-based, accountable, transparent and responsive to peoples' needs.

The writer is a recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award