



# Expressions of culture

HAFIZUR RAHMAN says that it is the duty of the government to nurture cultural activity

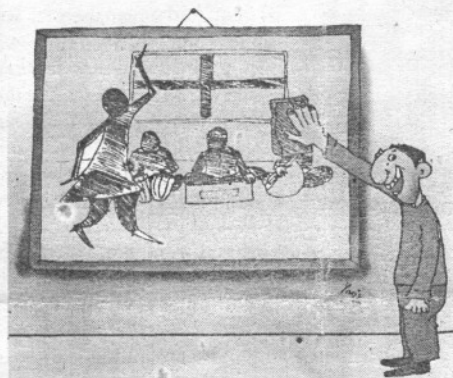
**W**hy is culture usually associated with the rich and the well-placed in the society?

Of course the modern concept of culture (which has taken over from the previous word civilisation) includes everything that the people do and believe in. It actually means a people's entire way of life and not merely the fine arts, music and dance. But somehow when the word is mentioned nowadays it evokes a picture of the enlightened and the elite practising or indulging in its various manifestations.

Perhaps this is a throwback to the olden times when the arts, as also the finer crafts, flourished with royal patronage or were encouraged by the feudal aristocracy. Culture was a luxury enjoyed only by the rich and the influential, while the poor, that is the artists, craftsmen and performers, simply provided the instruments and occasions for this enjoyment.

Whether it was painting, architecture, music or dance, calligraphy and craftsmanship, or any of the artistic talents, even poetry, drama and acrobatics, the practitioners of these skills could not exist or make a living by depending on the cultural yearnings of the common man. It was the rich, presiding over big or small courts, and indulging their tastes and whims, who doled out the money to keep the show going.

Thankfully it is no longer so. The concept of democracy and of a government elected by the people have changed everything. The fact that education is now widespread, and even the poor can be said to have an aesthetic sense as much as the privileged rich, has done a lot to upset the old notions about culture. This is because appreciation of the finer arts depends much on how knowledgeable and well-informed a person is.



Now, in the under-developed countries of the world, it is considered to be one of the foremost duties of the governments to nurture, support and encourage cultural activity so that the people can have a conscious feeling of pride in their heritage. In fact these governments are even expected to create culture where there is none around, and experts are invited from Europe to unearth and locate it.

This is what has been happening in the Gulf countries in particular which are awash with wealth from oil and gas. Materially their big cities have developed and advanced like those of the industrialised nations of the West and Japan and China, but they found they had very little to offer by way of indigenous culture. So, experts actually came from Europe to pinpoint examples of arts and handicrafts, and even ancient architecture and archaeology, and made them flourish.

I believe this lesson was learnt from the socialist countries where there had always been a pronounced stress on culture of the people by the people and for the people. Also it was one of the aims of socialism to break the monopoly of the elite over everything,

including culture amid its various manifestations, and make them available in their highest form for the common man who had only heard of them and never seen them.

In non-Muslim countries, since the people had no inhibitions about the arts, not even about nude sculpture, their monarchs and presidents

patronised men and women of the artistic professions and the world of show business. They made much of them, gave them coveted awards, invited them to the highest state ceremonies, showed them off to distinguished visitors with pride, and generally treated them like VIPs.

When the head of state or the prime minister of any of these countries met a famous painter, singer or dancer, it was he who felt honoured and not the painter, singer or dancer who probably considered it a bore to be thus put on display, and went through the drill merely for the sake of national prestige.

Let us look at Pakistan in the above context. In recent years the one cultural personality to bring honour and fame to this country was the late Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. There have been others too but he put Pakistan on the cultural map of the world as far as the music is concerned. And yet the cultural bureaucrats in our radio and television refer to professional music-makers as *mirasis*, and the latter too, poor fellows, kow-tow before them with folded hands.

This has been one bare of our cultural scene. The most talented singer, the instrumentalist of the greatest renown, the *qawwal* who can move audiences to a frenzy, are all given short shrift by the government officials. On visits to India prominent public figures may touch their feet before talking to them and become ecstatic at the very thought of sitting by their side, but to the cultural bureaucrat and the elected leaders in Pakistan they are not worthy of being associated with.

Let me give you a telling example. When Haneef Ramay was the chief minister of Punjab, he commissioned the late Ustad Allah Bakhsh to make a painting for the committee room of the secretariat. The large painting, a rural scene, is still there. When Mr Ramay fell from power the usual witch-hunt began, and a *thandadar* interrogated the hapless Ustad, then in his eighties, about how much he had paid to the chief minister out of the Rs 25,000 that he had received for the work!

The ignorant and coarse minion of the law could not understated why the old painter was paid so much (25,000 rupees was a very large sum in 1975) when, on his own admission, his input on the canvas and paints had not amounted to more than 4,000 rupees. Can you believe that happening in Lahore the so-called cultural capital of Pakistan?

Another reason why culture and the arts never received due importance in Pakistan has been the long periods taken up by martial law. Since these extra-legal intrusions into democracy were not inspired by the people, military regimes cared little, and understood even less, of the people's innate need for cultural nourishment.

So much for the elements that, in my view, have served as a brake on cultural activity in this country. I may add, however, that there is increasing awareness among the non-elite that the various expressions of culture are a thing of beauty, and that beauty is a need of the human being, be the rich or poor, educated or illiterate. That is a change that has come about with the march of time and world influences and not through any effort on the part of successive elected regimes ■

Photo Culture The Nation 23.03