

# Civilization and <sup>culture</sup> knowledge

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SOME industrialized Western countries have virtually taken over charge of the entire world. They possess unchallenged military might, tremendous economic power and political clout. Increasingly, they have been deciding the fate of the developing countries by using international financial and legal institutions.

Now, they have started dictating to the developing countries which commodity should be taxed, what type of political system they need and how should they treat their wives and daughters. The question is: what are the bases of their power and sources of their strength vis-a-vis developing countries?

The basic cause — the cause of all causes — behind the strength and power of industrialized developed countries is their marvellous capability to produce innovative scientific knowledge (both social and natural sciences). This knowledge provides them with superiority in the domain of military, economics and information control systems. Their unchallenged monopoly over the electronic media have made them capable of controlling and interfering into the developing countries' cultures and politics.

Now, the pertinent question is: why do developing countries lag behind in the domain of knowledge, despite the fact they have their own universities and research institutions. Admittedly, developing countries' universities are not producing updated knowledge sufficient to meet the needs of their social and technological development. Where lies the prob-

ideas provide conducive environment for scientific inquiry. Bigotry, be it religious, social or scholastic, deeply undercuts the evolutionary course of development and accumulation of empirical knowledge.

Fourth, corruption, chaos and absence of the rule of law are also detrimental to research activities and the creativity of the scientists in many ways. Injustice and favouritism uproot the system capable of producing fresh knowledge. Scientists and scholars are tender species; they cannot work and survive in impure and socially polluted environment. They fly away if they are not treated with care. Massive migration of competent scientists from developing countries to North America may be an evidence of this fact.

Fifth, the growth of knowledge is also linked with society's attitude towards knowledge itself. Closed and rigid societies tend to classify knowledge in various categories; for example, religious knowledge, secular knowledge, etc. By putting limits on knowledge or classifying it as desirable or undesirable, tend to clip the wings of the scientists which lead to social stagnation and cultural decay. Sadly, forty thousands Madressahs in Pakistan still insist to stick to the knowledge produced by the jurists and scholars of the eleventh century. Such type of knowledge, instead of providing strength, tear apart the very fabric of society by proliferating sectarian frenzy and growth of intolerant religious outfits. Unfortunately, developing countries are not taking stock of the situation seriously. Creation and proliferation of knowledge is considered an exclusive responsibility of university or research institutions. And, if a university fails to come up to the expecta-

them: probably in the society. After all, university as an institution is a part of the larger social system.

What type of social system and political order is required to create an environment which is congenial for the production of knowledge. Here it would be pertinent to mention some social conditions which obstruct and undercut the growth of knowledge in the developing countries.

First, production of scientific knowledge needs a culture of 'telling the truth'. It requires normative structures based on the principles of justice and meritocracy. Scientific community, irrespective of its skin colour, caste or creed, needs to be truthful, open and objective. If falsehood, cheating and lying is the norm, scientific knowledge would never develop. So society's commitment with truth is a *sine qua non* for the establishment of 'the culture of science'.

Second, for the promotion of science it is important to what extent the society and its institutions (e.g. family, industry, government etc.) rely on empirical knowledge. If people depend on valid and research based knowledge, science would flourish automatically. If the masses are engulfed in superstitions and fatalism while diagnosing and solving their problems, priests and magicians would compete with doctors and other scientists. Sadly, in Pakistan, most of the times, a quack is more popular than a qualified doctor.

Hence, development of science is linked with societal tendency to subscribe to science and research. Westerners turn to university for solving their problems especially at the time of trouble. For instance, after September 11, the Americans rushed to buy books about Taliban and Islam. But, in developing countries, at the time of trouble, people block roads, burn tires and destroy cultural monuments.

Third, a country's legal and political systems have far-reaching implications on the establishment of research and scientific culture. A scientist essentially needs constitutional guarantees and civil liberties to write freely without the fear of political persecution, losing job or being booked under dogmatic laws. Freedom of expression is particularly important in this regard. If a researcher has to 'think twice' before writing, the cause of science would grievously suffer.

At social level, culture of tolerance, pluralism, accommodation and assimilation of new

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tions of society, it is blamed for its sluggishness. However, a readymade excuse of "lack of funds" is invented to justify all the ills. But it may not be the whole story. After all, universities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are not poorly funded, but the problem of productivity of knowledge persists there, too.

In western civilization, university is under tremendous pressure from society to meet the ever increasing need of innovative knowledge. Correspondingly, society immensely rewards the university for its gigantic task. For instance, in the UK, the USA and Germany to be a university professor is far more prestigious and rewarding than being in any other position available in the civil service. Conversely, in developing countries, especially in Pakistan, a university professor is clearly at a disadvantage in terms of rewards and social prestige if he/she is compared with the mighty 'civil servants'.

✓ The crux of the above discussion is that scientific knowledge is a product of entire social and cultural systems. Its quality, amount and strength reflect the strength of the civilization. History is witness to the fact that corrupt, demoralized and despotic societies never produced fresh and competitive knowledge. Nor has they been able to host and retain best scientists and scholars. Such nations depend on the knowledge produced by others and, in exchange, they surrender their national sovereignty and economic independence.

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