**Teaching labour**

BY Z E E N A T H I S A M 2022-02-01

RECENTLY, I had a brief but interesting conversation with a Karachi bookseller who deals in old books and manuscripts. He is a mine of information on current trends. For instance, nowadays most of the orders he receives are from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province which has also shown a fresh interest in Persian manuscripts due to the situation in Afghanistan; the Urdu-speaking population has lost interest in books; in Sindh`s smaller cities and towns, people ask for Sindhi books and manuscripts; and, of course, Punjab is where Urdu grew and most Urdu books and magazines were, and are, published.  
  
When he asked me about my vocation I told him I write on labour issues. He remarked, `Labour, that`s a lef t wing issue...  
  
.` I replied, `Labour is as much of concern for the right wing as it is for the lef t! Over the years, I have had similar remarks made to me: `Labour? You mean trade unions? Trade unions are no good, they destroy industry.` This shot was from a young HR person. Or, `Employment? It is so hard to get jobs these days. Why is that so?` There are some who want me to write on the problems of the sector they work in: `People think we bank officers are having one hell of a time. Come and talk to me and my colleagues and listen to the issues we have... .  
  
The gist of this preamble: there is little understanding of labour as a holistic subject on its own, as an area of study. In popular consciousness, whatever little idea we have of the word `labour` is only associated with `trade unions`, which is partly correct, and it could be a positive association, for the word `trade union` denotes coming together for rights at a workplace.  
  
The problem is that in our society trade unions are painte d black and the members of trade unions are coloured `red`, part of the narrative developed back in the 1960s. Also, the word `labour` is associated with people doing low-paid jobs and placed on the fringes of society.  
  
For this misunderstanding, people are not to be blamed. It is our educational system that has failed to provide a basic, holistic perspective on the world of work to our young population of 15-29 years that constitutes a significant proportion (38.41 per cent) of our civilian force. Neither at the higher-secondary school level nor at college and university level are students provided with programmes that would give them an understanding of the factors that impact them as workers or employees. Labour studies has not yet found its place in our academia.  
  
L abour studies is an interdisciplinary subject related to the world of work drawing from a wide range of fields economics, political economy, law, industrial relations,social policy, women`s studies, sociology and history. Degree programmes inform students of theoretical approaches and policy debates related to the world of work and workers.  
  
Work is studied as an important component of life experience impacted by government policies and regulations, technological changes, global politics and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, caste or gender.  
  
Students learn how robust policies enable social justice and inclusive growth in society.  
  
The programmes equip the young with skills as future managers, administrators, mediators, teachers and professors, policy analysts, journalists, researchers and social activists.  
  
In developed countries with a strong presence of trade unions, graduates in labour studies can also join trade unions and federations as paid professionals (educators, facilitators and researchers).  
  
Sadly, we do not have a single institute of labour studies for training and research. Nor is it taughtin any university through a degree programme, though several business administration schools have been established overthe decades. Even those institutes which are considered the best in the country, ie IBA, Lums, PIDE, do not teach labour studies which is the most important component of businessadministration and economics as a field in itself. Only sometimes do they of fer a related course or two as electives. Certain institutes (such as PIM and EFP) provide only diploma and training certificates on industrial relations, labour laws and human resource management.  
  
Many countries value the role of labour studies as an academic discipline. More are becoming aware of its significance in preparing a critical mass of young minds who understand how work shapes people`s lives, and how it is not just economic growth but inclusive growth that makes societies just and fair.  
  
In India, there are more than 20 universities and institutes that offer graduate programmes in labour studies. Pakistan does have a cadre of young professionals economists, sociologists, historians, lawyers, policy analysts who can teach courses in labour studies. It is high time that at least three institutions IBA, Lums and PIDE launched degree programmes in labour studies.  The writer is a researcher in the development sector.  
  
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