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**The curse of deregulation**

It is true that regulations can be used to prolong processes and lead to red-tape culture, but they are actually meant to provide protection to the marginalised sections of society besides preventing the degradation of the environment and the world we live in. They are not only meant to keep an eye on ruthless business practices but also hold accountable those who violate environmental and other laws.

Many believe that conventions about rights are also a form of regulation. National and international bodies that ensure implementation on such conventions are in a way regulatory bodies. Similarly, a number of trade agreements and business relaxation frameworks that offer incentives with strings obliging manufacturers to protect employees’ rights also fall in the same category. For instance, a number of European Union agreements force manufacturers not to hire children for labour. Their inspection teams also ensure that working conditions are not pathetic and unions are allowed to work in accordance with laws. Such agreements also offer conditions that go some way in preventing the exploitation of working people besides discouraging gender-based bias. A number of Pakistani companies that export to the EU have to abide by these conditions.

It is widely believed that this is an age of liberalization, privatization and deregulation. During the cold war regulations were strictly implemented owing to fear of worker resentment that could escalate into revolutionary action, which could then disturb the status quo that the manufacturers wanted to be intact. So such regulations were especially enforced in advanced capitalist countries where the fear of a red revolution was haunting the capitalists, who wanted to avoid it at all cost. Consequently, workers in the developed world were provided with a number of facilities like bonuses, health insurance, unemployment allowances and a number of other privileges. Even the poor and working classes in the developing states were extended some of these perks.

Pakistani workers also benefited from these facilities and if you look at the old industrial areas, you will notice that they were much better than the ones that we have today. Most of the manufacturers were bound to build schools, dispensaries and residential colonies for the workers. A large number of industrial concerns were unionized and this right could not be snatched away. The working conditions were comparatively decent. Labour inspectors would regularly visit industrial concerns.

With the advent of neo-liberalism in the late 1970s, not only did the power of workers and unions start dwindling but that of regulations went down as well. Margaret Thatcher took a hard stance on unions, destroying a number of achievements they had obtained after a long struggle. In the US, the Reagan administration introduced a ruthless deregulated system that not only destroyed the powers of workers but also did great damage to the environment.

Today, we are ruthlessly exploiting natural gifts, from Africa to the Amazon. Unsustainable ways of fishing are causing depletion of marine life. The senseless race for profit is ruining the fertility of land, leading to hunger and food insecurity for future generations. The superrich of the world are making useless trips to space, squandering public money on their personal pleasure. Many believe that such trips as well as the race to control space for military and commercial purposes is a recipe for disaster.

Deregulation in the health sector is playing havoc with the lives of millions of people. In the US alone, pharmaceutical companies in collusion with insurance firms are busy encouraging doctors towards over-prescription. Thousands of people lose their lives because of this. Executives of some companies that bribed doctors to achieve their market targets have been arrested as well. Such unethical practices are not confined to the developed world only. In countries like Pakistan, pharmaceutical companies are allegedly bribing doctors to achieve their sale targets. The recent efforts of the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan asking doctors to prescribe generic form of medicine saw a huge backlash from the medical fraternity. Similarly, surgeons at private hospitals in several parts of Pakistan are charging an exorbitant amount for an operation that is done for peanuts at government hospitals.

The rates of medical tests also greatly vary, with no mechanism to control them. In some state-run hospitals, newly bought machines stop working and poor patients are advised to get tests from private laboratories. No probe is ordered to investigate the malfunction in newly imported machines that are purchased from public money.

The murder of Noor Muqaddam and the alleged affiliation of the murderer with Therapy Works also reflects the height of the deregulation. Such institutes that have been in existence for years are not regulated. It is not clear whether any site inspection was carried out in this particular institute and if the inspection team found satisfactory answers to its questions.

Such deregulation is not confined to the health sector only. For instance, there is no mechanism to control the high fee that is being charged by private schools. A number of schools have been established on 120 or 80 yards plots, endangering the lives of students and staff. Most teachers are being paid a paltry amount of Rs1000 to Rs5000 a month as a salary. While the teaching staff at such schools struggles to meet both ends, school owners have grown immensely rich over the years, shifting to posh areas but refusing to improve facilities at learning places. The transport system is also in a bad state, with many cases of gas cylinders explosion claiming the lives of students and poor teachers.

In formal and informal sectors, the rights of workers are also being openly violated. Most of the workers in the industrial cities of Faisalabad, Karachi and Lahore are forced to work a 12-hour shift. Less than 10 percent of workers of the country are unionized. Labour tribunals or courts take years to decide a simple dispute, costing a lot of money to the aggrieved. When the workers resort to protest, they are booked under terrorism charges.

During the last 20 years, a number of fires have taken place in various industrial concerns, exposing the glaring safety hazards; but no concrete action has been taken. The owners of such factories have never been booked or if the cases were registered against them they were never convicted. Those who were killed or wounded in such terrible fires were never adequately compensated or extended quality treatment.

The incumbent government claims to be a champion of workers and people’s rights. Therefore, it is important for Prime Minister Imran Khan to take immediate action aimed at ensuring strict implementation on the regulations regarding workers’ rights. It is time we put an end to the curse of deregulation that is not only harming our workers’ lives but destroying our environment as well for the sake of profit.

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