**Culture policy**

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The Punjab government has announced its first-ever Punjab Culture Policy of 2021 to revive and protect the province’s cultural heritage to promote cultural activities for economic, social and spiritual as well as personal wellbeing of the people of Punjab.

The much-awaited step should necessarily be translated to extremely tangible and long-lasting measures. The policy explicitly defines and owns the importance of culture in the development of society and in creating economic opportunities. It encompasses culture as a set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society, in addition to art and literature, lifestyle, ways of living together, values, traditions and beliefs.

The culture policy is more of a visionary statement. For instance, it will work towards behavioural transformation; strengthening institutions; developing sector-specific associated councils, business plans and attract private investment; introducing cultural entrepreneurship, taking tax reduction incentives, etc. It also throws light on conducting festivals, celebrating days and promoting folk dance and music.

Mere intangible measures cannot bring factual changes in society. The process should be palpable. The benefits of the culture policy can only be incurred if the policy is correctly understood, rightly directed and amalgamated with economic factors to incur monetary and communal returns. It is now time to carve out a comprehensive strategic plan by clearly devising the responsibilities of the state, its actors and their respective actions.

In this connection, it is suggested that heritage buildings that are scattered all over Punjab should be made the basis to accrue economic benefits of the policy, otherwise its sustainability shall be questioned. This calls for converting the heritage buildings of respective small- and medium-sized towns into state-of-the-art food points, restaurants or hotels, depending upon their size and scale.

These heritage buildings remain one of the million assets Pakistan is endowed with. If the government provides financial assistance and other perks to local entrepreneurs for the transformation and renovation of these buildings, it could be a grassroots-level measure to generate economic activities of small- and medium-sized towns. Employment opportunities for local workers will increase through the development of the service sector and increased demand for local food production, handicraft manufacturing, and other cultural industries.

This will be a great leap ahead for the revival of small-scale and cottage industries. The incentive of the public sector for smaller cities in Punjab with a strong basis for heritage development shall attract the private sector in the first place and may invite foreign investors who see opportunities in developing hotels and other tourist-related activities.

Strategically moving ahead, we have to concentrate on ‘doable tasks’ that can catch investors’ interest. The goal for investors – both private and public – is to enjoy greater output and return on a meagre amount of investment.

Heritage assets like old monumental neglected buildings if utilised as a tool for creating economic opportunities may make small towns more ‘attractive and interesting’. The connectivity of these heritage sites with larger conurbations is quite important. Initially, only those towns may be selected that are accessible through motorways like Bhera, Chiniot or Choa Saidan Shah, etc. People from big conurbations or metropolitan cities usually set out on short day trips to nearby places for recreation and leisure. For this, they usually spend money at their destinations too. If the destination is a heritage site with state-of-the-art facilities, where cultural vibes are brilliantly manifested and excellent food is served, such places become most-favoured for people, especially the affluent class.

It is an interesting phenomenon that anything that has a cultural makeover becomes ‘super expensive’. People don’t hesitate to pay more at a place that is related to history. We have to make this phenomenon the basis of our policy to generate economic opportunities and then replicate the success story in other small towns.

Small food streets, converted hotels with complementary facilities, cultural attractions, souvenir shops, handicraft items, etc will act as a magnet for the flow of demand from cities to the supply of services in small towns. This will start a demand and supply cycle that will help generate incomes for people living in small towns.

Investment on heritage assets will always have broad-based and highly responsive effects on the economy. Cultural heritage is an essential constituent of economic development. The possibility to generate income from cultural assets creates employment, reduces poverty, stimulates enterprise development, fosters private investment and generates resources for environmental and cultural conservation. These heritage assets of small towns should be utilised as engines of growth potentials.

Cultural endowments such as traditional architecture, unique streetscapes, and historic sites are increasingly recognised as important economic resources in both developed and developing countries. Improving the conservation and management of urban heritage is not only important for preserving its historic significance, but also for its potential to increase income-earning opportunities, city liveability, and competitiveness.

Previously, preferences of the public sector rested upon investing in municipal service delivery or servicing of debts. But the promulgation of the latest culture policy has opened the window for exploring the benefits of cultural heritage. But it is apprehended that the policy should not limit itself to dance festivals and Sufi song concerts. Mostly short-term political objectives dominate long-term motives.

Punjab is confronted with rapidly urbanising cities, with uncontrolled growth and informal expansion that pose a significant threat to irreplaceable cultural and natural resources. For instance, developers exert pressure to demolish low-rise traditional/historical buildings in favour of high-density commercial plazas, and municipalities install infrastructure in a manner that has negative impacts on traditional cityscapes. It has been observed that some decision makers randomly approve infrastructure action plans as a part of their election campaign or to gain public confidence.

We should make a coherent plan to come out of this vicious circle of demand and need-based abrupt investment decision making. Conversion of heritage sites into attractive places for visitors will have a direct effect on growing labour-intensive employment opportunities; therefore, its benefits will quickly trickle down at the grassroots level. Such incentives are the lifeline for the cottage industry and small-scale entrepreneurs due to their modest capital and meagre infrastructure requirements.

As per the recently announced culture policy, if the state gives incentives, tax rebates and facilitates to private investors, there is no denying that economic activities can be triggered in the near future.

Cultural heritage not only determines the image of the city, but also reflects the soul of the city. In the current scenario, it is so unfortunate that many of our precious heritage buildings are on the verge of destruction. These magnificent architectural pieces are scattered across Punjab, unknown to people as they exist in small towns. This dormant resource shall be dealt as an integral part of the current cultural policy and transformed to gain monetary and socio-economic returns in the collective fabric of Punjab.

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