

Public spheres were the platforms where public opinion was formed which would in turn influence national policies and socio-political scenarios. No more!

Lahoris and their interactive nature

By Faryal Shahzad

bearer of public opinion'. The public sphere comes into being when people gather to discuss issues of politics. Most would term this shift and monopolization of Lahore's public sphere as a nation-wide phenomenon, as economic disparity trivializes the underprivileged all over the country. Its degeneration in Lahore is felt and lamented more, not only because of Lahore's role as a seat of learning, but also because Lahorites have always been known for their interactive nature, their vociferous verbalism, and their fine sense of appraisal and evaluation. From the vegetable vendor, to the car mechanic, to the prompt business executive, everyone here has something to say on every conceivable topic under the sun. Marginalizing the Lahori masses and depriving them of an accessible public sphere on the basis of economic and other disparities is, therefore, unfair.

Culture, as termed by Michael Fischer as 'distributed cognition', has an undeviating link with tradition and cognitive values, both of which are firmly rooted in Lahore. Lahore's culture has always been diverse without being a victim of multiculturalism. It is for this reason that public spheres here have been so uncultural and lucid. More so in the post-partition days. However, lately, the dominance of private spheres and the birth of, what is termed as 'public arenas' as opposed to public spheres, has resulted in the inaccessibility of members of marginalized groups to forums of public opinion, and hence their exclusion from the aorta of national thought, including the media. As a corollary to this inability to adequately reflect economic multiplicity, the present public sphere has been defined and dominated by the values and norms of the economic and political elite and their elitist private spheres.

According to Habermas, in any consideration of the public sphere its relation to the private sphere cannot be neglect-

ed for it is in its relation to the private sphere that the public is itself defined and given shape. An attempt to look at means to actually recreate the public sphere will be made, to allow it to adequately reflect the diver-

influence of British colonial rule. For the purposes of understanding the present day so-called public sphere of Lahore, the distinction that Sandria Freitag makes between the public sphere of western

major religion. This reluctance to be governed by Muslim law, which dealt with family relations, property and

THE gradual disintegration of the public sphere in Lahore, the country's capital of culture and learning, has been a cause of concern for intellectuals and egalitarian opinion leaders alike. Gone are the days when tea stalls, pan kiosks, the barber's, the literary get-togethers and the brewing at institutions of learning, used to be the hub of interactive platforms for public opinion in Lahore. Opinions were not only wrought at these platforms but also aired to eventually influence the socio-economic and socio-political scenarios, acting as guiding principles for national policies and guidelines. These pedestals of public opinion, hence, acted as a effective mediums for conveying the aspirations of a varied section of society. The positive aspects of such public spaces/spheres was that all segments of the society, whether divided on economic or intellectual basis, got a chance to contribute their viewpoints which would cumulatively blend to form public opinion. Then the economic divisions were few and narrower, and there were no schism like the digital divide of the present. Such opinion was truly representative of the will of the masses.

Habermas develops the normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life where citizens can exchange views on matters of importance for the common good, so that public opinion could be formed. The Public sphere mediates between the 'society and state', and within its embrace, the public organises itself as the



CULTURE: Whatever a Lahori does, he is never too busy to pass some socio-political

society of public opinion. There is also a simultaneous need to initiate a parallel effort to reform the private sphere as well, as the two are interlinked and the thought process that begins in the private sphere eventually influences the public sphere. The underlying principle that needs to guide the efforts to reformulate the two spheres is increased democratization. One cannot conceive of a democratic public sphere coexisting with an oppressive and undemocratic private sphere.

The consequences of an undemocratic and oppressive private sphere, where structures of patriarchy, aristocracy and authoritarianism, remain intact are obvious in the manner in which minority rights pertaining to the private sphere of community and religious practices have had perverse effects on the actual creation of the public sphere under the

Europe as conceptualised by Habermas, and what she terms, as the 'public arena' in the colonial and contemporary India, should be closely followed. The particular manner in which the public sphere has evolved in India today, and its nature has made it susceptible to the advances of Hindu nationalism whose aim is to create a public sphere that is completely defined by the symbols cherished by it.

British colonial rule in the sub-continent created a public sphere but left the private sphere free for the native elites. There was thus a very sharp distinction between the two spheres. The public sphere was to be governed by British laws pertaining to areas of life like land relations, criminal law, laws of contract and of evidence, while the colonial state was reluctant to encroach upon the private spheres of the two

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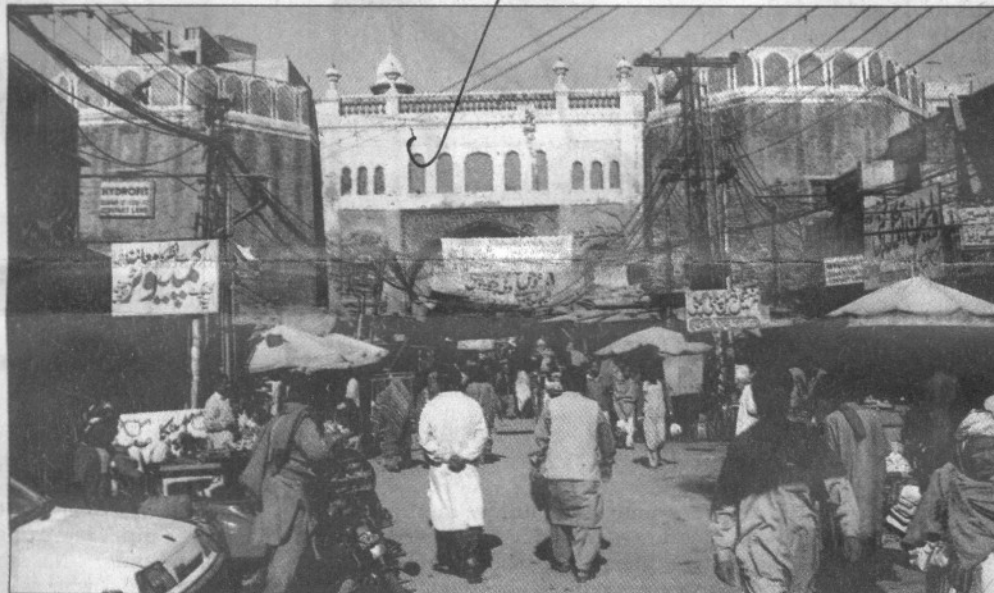
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influence of British colonial rule. For the purposes of understanding the present day so-called public sphere of Lahore, the distinction that Sandra Freitag makes between the public sphere of western

major religious communities. This reluctance can be seen in its policy of allowing this sphere to be governed by Hindu and Muslim laws which were defined as personal law and which dealt with areas of life that were more intimate like family relationships, family property and religious life. It is



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in this dichotomy between the public and private spheres and the political jockeying that took place among native elites for control and domination over the private sphere that one can understand the particular institutionalization of the two spheres in the Indian polity.

It would perhaps be useful to also analyze the influence of British colonial policies. One of the more significant of these is the precise manner in which the British imperial state in India chose to interact with the population at large. Freitag has noted that the very nature of the imperial 'intruding state' ruled out the possibility of a direct relationship between the individual and the state. The British state chose instead to rely on a representational mode of governance that was based sociologically on discrete communities, with particular individuals representing those

interests. Thus, certain individuals would invariably be chosen as the representatives of the discrete communities identified by the colonial state and they would then represent the interests of the community, which acted as their political constituency. More importantly, this representational mode of governance ensured that the native elites, the ones privileged by the British state as the legitimate representatives of their particular communities, had an important stake in this form of governance. Freitag observes that this pattern of state intrusions differed dramatically from the pattern of state intrusions in England and France in the 19th century. This particular manner of interaction between the imperial state and individuals, with communities mediating the relationship, has had important consequences, especially the manner in which the public sphere is related to the private sphere. The differences in the nature of the public sphere as it is to be found in colonial India and the public sphere in England and France have been traced to the different ways in which the community was linked to the individual and the state. In the case of India, it has already been noted, that the very nature of the imperial state ruled out the possibility of a direct relationship between the individual and the state. While national rituals in Europe emphasized common values and traditions, stressing a history that defined participants as alike in their relationship to the state, imperial rituals in British India stressed the diversity of British imperial rule.

The public sphere of Lahore today, is being dominated by a similar imperialism of a slightly different nature: the 'capitalist imperialism', and it would not be incorrect to call it a public arena, just as it has been termed in the pre-partition India.

The voices of the resourceful and the powerful have taken over the views of the weaker, dispossessed and destitute majority. The person in the street today has no say in affairs of regional and national significance. Opinion leaders term this trend of exclusion of the hoi polloi from the mainstream thought disappointing.

Dr. Amjad Raza, a renowned philosopher, had a major contribution in shaping the Muslim mind-set of the pre-partition India. In his words keeping the masses out of mainstream thought is a great national loss that would have long-term and long-standing repercussions. ■