**A ray of hope**

Kamila Hyat

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There is no doubt we live in dismal times. Almost everyone with any knowledge of the economy despairs over its situation and the question of whether we will ever recover from the disasters we have faced and continue to confront.

For the moment, we have no real recourse but to turn to the IMF. But at the same time, we should remember that the institution has been responsible for a great deal of harm in terms of employment and quality of life in countries like Argentina in 2001, South East Asia including Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1990s and other countries before and after this date. We cannot therefore depend on the IMF.

What we need to depend on is our own youth and their very commendable skills. Though we often ignore reality, stating either in casual conversation or more serious debate, that our youth is somehow useless, the fact is there are a huge number of young people doing work which they do not need to. We have a horde of lawyers who are not only activists but work pro-bono cases because they feel people deserve justice. We have movements like the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement, which has among its leaders Ammar Ali Jan, that has mobilised students in particular on campuses across the country. We have young doctors who volunteer to donate blood and set up systems for it to be obtained. We have girls who work to spare other girls from harassment over the Internet or in person and we have people who have set up forums to work against child sexual abuse. Of course, there are many other examples.

Perhaps most commendable of all are the efforts to deliver food and prevent wastage by offering leftovers from restaurants, wedding halls and even private homes to communities in desperate need. The number of people who require help is badly underestimated at this time. We simply do not think of those who can barely hold families together. Even in other sectors such as journalism up to 50 per cent of the staff for most media organizations have been rendered unemployed. Most belong to the administrative sector or are the lowest paid staff and their plight is now still more desperate. Without a salary to bring home, they work in factories, hoping that each day will offer them some chance of a return to the already dismal life many of them led in their organisations. There does not appear to be much hope of this.

Startups of all kinds have been initiated and because they exist it is possible to obtain almost everything from a donut to a piece of antique jewellery at your own doorstep. Shopping in person, notably for the more technology equipped, is becoming rarer and rarer. The days of Bano Bazaar and Tollington Market for those who remember them have long gone. Indeed in Lahore only a few shops remain to remind us of a not-so-distant past. The rest belong to the future, with old city shops moving into posh areas to offer better delivery services and draw in new customers.

Other young people have opted to try and promote their own culture in various ways. The accusation that the youth is entirely Westernized is a myth. There are meetings of young poets who write in both Urdu and Punjabi as well as, almost certainly, Pashto, Sindhi and Balochi. There are people who have deliberately tried to promote their particular language through street theatre and other means. There are those who have tried to revive crafts that have been long forgotten and in some cases modernize them for evolving markets. They include young women who have retrained craftsmen who produce silver jewellery or traditional embroidery and shirts which are now designed to meet a new niche in a changed world.

Yes, the criticism over the rave-like concerts held in Hunza and other parts of the North have created controversy – with some valid reasons. Local people have complained that the electronic music, the drugs, the dancing and the presence of young women in jeans somehow destroyed their own traditions. But surely these traditions are not so weak.

There are also young scientists who try their best to overcome a third rate education from which much has been eliminated and stagnant material added; these scientists do all they can to develop technology that can help deprived persons. Projects involving solar panels have been put up in Tharparkar and other initiatives continue elsewhere in the country. Abia Akram, born with a genetic form of rickets and bound to a wheelchair, founded the National Forum of Women with Disabilities and was named one of BBC’s 100 Women in 2021. There are many others like them. And of course there are also young Pakistani artists, writers, poets, designers and other people with immense creative abilities who have made their mark around the world. It is true most belong to relatively elite classes but some have risen along harder paths and shown enterprise which has turned their ventures into global successes.

We should not then be so quick to deride our youth and condemn it as a group of hooligans and people who refuse to accept any view other than their own. There are many who are also silent.They are the majority. Many of them are good people, working on their jobs or struggling to gain education even when their families cannot afford their fees. Some have proved to be remarkably talented despite the lack of help they have received from their homes. This is something we should be proud of. We should also be attempting to take our youth forward through all the means we can find.

Iceland removed drugs and alcohol from its increasingly destructive culture which ranked it as the country with the highest number of teenage alcohol and drug use; the country increased activities for school age and older children by offering after-school music, dance, sport and art activities under the supervision of school teachers and volunteers. The change came slowly but visibly. Today, Iceland has no drug or alcohol problems and a productive youth culture. In an age when drugs are according to some reports penetrating places of education, we should endeavour to do the same and turn our country into a place where led by younger people we can create a truly progressive and vibrant Pakistan, taking advantage of all its benefits which include a diverse culture, a vast scope for tourism and culinary genius which has been used by some in the north to offer essentially traditional experiences along with food to visitors from across the world.

It is also no small feat that the children of Sattar and Bilquis Edhi are bravely carrying through their tradition, keeping their shelter homes and ambulances alive even after the problems which came following Edhi’s death. Their contribution is enormous in a country where more people need to think of others and especially of those who literally eat nothing of substance through the day and who struggle to acquire a job even after attempts that take them through months or even years. Yes, Pakistan is an unhappy country in many ways. It has been poorly governed and poorly managed almost since its inception. But there is still hope alive and a younger generation eager to contribute to the growth of the nation.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor. She can be reached at:

kamilahyat@hotmail.com