[**Extent of our backwardness**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758913/extent-of-our-backwardness)

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HOW much have we progressed in our 76-year history, and to what extent are we a backward nation compared to our former colonial masters? Some readers may find this comparison unfair — in contrast to a comparison with other developing countries. But the purpose here is to highlight the differences in the development trajectory, in terms of a few socioeconomic indicators, between Pakistan and the UK which ruled the subcontinent for two centuries. Take, for example, the literacy rate.

The UK achieved an adult literacy rate (15 years and above) of 54 per cent at the beginning of the 18th century (1701). We attained a literacy rate of 54pc (10 years and above) in 2006. This means that we were 305 years behind in literacy in 2006 compared to the UK.

We have progressed to increase our literacy rate in FY22 to about 63pc. This level was attained by the UK around 1850. It means that we have reduced our backwardness in literacy from 305 to 172 years in a span of 16 years.

Why aren’t we trying to catch up with our former masters more quickly? After all, we adopted a ruling mindset identical to our colonial masters 76 years ago, which is in full display even today. Isn’t this itself one of the many reasons for our backwardness?

The UK wouldn’t have attained an almost 100pc literacy rate at the beginning of the 20th century had it ruled its own country with a colonial mindset. Before our independence, our enemies were our masters.

With them gone, we are trying (successfully) to find enemies within. This seems to be the main effort of our current masters. Perhaps I asked the wrong questions at the beginning. But let me continue to indulge in my naïve probing.

Had I chosen female literacy, instead of overall literacy, in the first paragraph, the emerging backwardness would have been much bleaker. But let me find solace (if possible) in some other indicators.

Our average life expectancy was around 35 years in 1950 — a level achieved by the UK in the mid-16th century (1550). At independence, we were 400 years behind our colonial masters.

Since then, we have progressed to attain an average life expectancy of 67 years (FY20), which was achieved by our former colonial masters in 1947. Therefore, we were only 75 years behind the UK in terms of life expectancy in FY22. The UK’s life expectancy in 2021 was 81 years. How long will we take to attain this level?

Why aren’t we trying to catch up with our former masters more quickly?

The infant mortality rate (the number of infants dying, per 1,000 live births, before their first birthday) in 1950 was around 278. In the UK, it was 150 in 1861, a level Pakistan reached in 1968.

This implies that we were 107 years behind England in 1968 in terms of infant mortality. We have since progressed to witness an infant mortality rate of 56 in 2023. This level was achieved by Britain around 1940, meaning we are 83 years behind in terms of infant mortality.

The child mortality rate (the number of children dying, per 1,000 live births, before their fifth birthday) in Pakistan was 377 in 1950, according to the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation. Such a high rate was never seen in Britain in the last 200 years.

The child mortality rate was only 37 in 1950 in the UK (10 times lower than Pakistan’s). The estimated rate in 2021 was around four in the UK, and 63 in Pakistan. While Pakistan is dozens of years behind the UK, our progress in terms of reducing child mortality from 377 in 1950 to 63 in 2021 nevertheless seems remarkable.

The youth mortality rate (between five and 14 years) was close to 27 in our country in 1964. It has been reduced to around seven in 2021. This rate has seen a reduction in the UK from only 3.6 to 0.7 in 2021. This rate in Pakistan in 2021 was 10 times higher than in Britain.

According to World Bank data, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR is the number of childbirth-related deaths of women per 100,000 births) in Pakistan was 154 in 2020. However, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey, 2022,this ratio was 186 in 2020.

MMR was only 10 in the UK in 2020. Our country was able to reduce it from 387 in 2000 to 154 in 2020, according to the World Bank. MMR in the UK was 11 in 2000. Some reasons for the high MMR in Pakistan are lack of health facilities, especially in the rural areas, violence against women, poverty, poor hygiene and a low level of education.

The incidence of tuberculosis in Pakistan was around 250 to 275 per 100,000 persons in 2020. This rate has been moving very slowly downward for the last 20 years within this range.

The World Health Organisation has classified Pakistan as a high-burden country (along with India and Bangladesh and 27 other countries). The numbers are lower in both India and Bangladesh compared to Pakistan. In the UK, the incidence of TB came down from the 250-275 range in 1914 to only 10 per 100,000 persons in 2020. We are over a century behind the UK in containing TB.

There is one important aspect of development in which our country has done remarkably well. It has succeeded in reducing extreme poverty, measured by the ‘dollar a day’ benchmark which is actually $2.15 a day at 2017 purchasing power parity prices. Pakistan was able to reduce its poverty headcount ratio from 67.3pc in 1987 to 3.9pc in 2022, according to the World Bank.

The incidence of extreme poverty in the UK was only 1pc in 1987, reducing to 0.3pc in 2021. While our country is behind the UK, it has done better than both India and Bangladesh in terms of poverty. In terms of all the other indicators described here, it has done worse compared to other countries in the subcontinent.

It is almost impossible to find solace in our socioeconomic indicators. Should we find comfort in the fact that we detonated nuclear devices in May 1998?

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