**Building back the broken road**

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Thursday, Aug 31, 2023

We were once on a road that could have led us to a promising future. That future now seems bleak, and hopelessness has overtaken a country from which people in large numbers are attempting to migrate.

Until the 1970s (or a few years beyond this), Pakistan was seen as a country with huge potential and one that could stand firm on the development scale. That is no longer the case today.

In southern Punjab, people — in some places they were standing in knee-high flood waters from River Sutlej which was flooded after India released water into the river - took to the streets, holding their electricity bills and asking how they were to pay these inflated bills within the deadline.

In Karachi too, there have been protests over the same issue; the latest electricity bills have sent numerous households into shock. The same is true for Islamabad and other places across the country. People have no means to pay the high bills they are receiving. Households whose power consumption includes barely a few light bulbs and maybe one deep freezer have also been slapped with enormously high bills.

Elsewhere, forming a part of a jigsaw puzzle that has pieces which are torn or have gone missing, we have an increase in hatred against minority communities resulting in attacks against these communities. There is something very wrong in this; something that can perhaps even be called evil. And yet for years we have failed to do anything to alter the situation or bring about anything resembling real change. We cannot wait any longer. The time to build bridges and bring people together has come. If we fail to do so now, we will be doomed forever.

There are other examples of a society falling apart as well. In some households, young girls working as domestic help have been killed — in some cases after rape. In other places, domestic workers have reported extremely poor treatment by their employees. These workers are teenagers who work for a few thousand rupees in this era of hyperinflation. This is simply not sustainable. We wonder where this will lead in a time of growing desperation and at a time when people seem willing to raise their voices, at least to some degree. The problem is that there appears to be no central entity to bring these voices together and unite them. The mainstream political parties appear indifferent to what is happening to the people they should be representing. None of them has come up with an agenda which can solve the country’s multiple problems, including the issue of inflation and the fall of the rupee against the dollar. Rupee depreciation, to some extent, is driving inflation along with multiple other

factors.

We do have political and social groups which are working for change. In Tarnol, on the outskirts of Islamabad, a civil rights movement led by a fierce Pakhtun leader held a rally, once again raising issues that have so far been completely ignored in our society. In the rally, several civil rights leaders and legal activities spoke about human rights violations. Some of them were later arrested presumably because of their speechess. This is then what we call our democracy.

There are also other groups who are struggling for the much-needed change. They include the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement of Ammar Ali Jan, the Students Collective, the Awami Workers Party, farmers in Okara and others who put forward their agendas. But individually, none of them can make a difference. They are too far apart and tiny to have a real impact.

To be effective, they must unite and raise one voice, which represents people on a much larger scale.

Of course, this does not mean that they have to unite completely in terms of their views and the road they suggest as a solution as we walk towards the future. There have been plenty of examples of coalition between groups which lean in one direction — in this case the Left — but disagree on precisely what should be done or what is to happen. In our case, a simple agreement that people need to be protected and represented would be enough.

The question is what they should do from this point onwards. The answers are difficult to find. At the current time, there are few visible solutions, but ideas can be built upon and then implemented in the future. The demand that defence expenditure be cut is not realistic and perhaps not advisable either given the geopolitical landscape we live in. But tax collection and taxes imposed on landowners will certainly help put money into the national exchequer.

Besides this, there is absolutely no reason why every minister should have a large number of vehicles to escort him/her to every destination s/he visit, or why other measures cannot be put in place to bring down government expenditures. This, after all, has been the route taken by other countries.

At the same time, we need to focus on key issues such as education. This is true for the long run, as it may be difficult to achieve the kind of change we need in the short term. What we need to do is build a strong curriculum. It does not have to be single or uniform, but it should be able to meet the needs of children everywhere and improve their ability to think and learn. The effort must start at the primary level, but we need it in secondary schools and places of higher learning as well. The failure to bring about a system that allows education to citizens makes Pakistan the least educated country in South Asia, with Bangladesh moving ahead of it. In fact, the number of out-of-school girls at the secondary level is the highest amongst all nations.

We need to understand that schooling is embedded and that higher education cannot consist of putting together, one after another, badly written and badly researched PhD, some of them published in journals of extremely poor standard, some of which are set up outside the country for this purpose. We need genuine research and scholarship which can take people forward towards a new understanding of their country and their culture.

We have lost this understanding. We no longer know what it means to be Pakistani. The focus on religion has to some extent been a factor in altering this. But there are also other realities. We do not know what our past is in its whole and what the future is to be. Children are not taught history which explains how Bangladesh appeared on the map of the world. There are very few lessons on Partition as well or about the events that created the need for the division which led to one of the biggest genocides in history.

Change is needed at many levels. We also need political parties and groups leaning towards one side of the fence to come together and create change. Without that, the puzzle will never be completed and the future will never be constructed for us or for our future generations.

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