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**Fleeting moments**

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**Politicising the public**

Politics have touched a feverish pitch in the last many months. Political developments and news, more than any other important subject, have dominated media headlines. Open the newspapers to scan the leading headlines and one notices politicians of one party lambasting their opponents for the sake of point-scoring. As a result, people everywhere seem to discuss nothing but politics. We have become a highly politicised nation.

While the political wrangling among the politicos is a usual affair, what’s lost in the din are the basic and most important issues of public welfare such as creating job opportunities and controlling the rising prices. Especially when democracy is touted as: government of the people, by the people, for the people. Most worrisome is the escalating poverty line in the country.

In the 2018 Borgen Project report about Pakistan, those under the poverty line were at 31.3 percent or 69 million out of the total population of 212.2 million. By the end of 2020, the ratio increased to 40 percent or 87 million by proportion. As reported recently, the cost of goods and services jumped to 8.7 percent in the last month according to the Bureau of Statistics.

One of the serious problems is the exodus of people from rural areas to urban centres in search of employment. Why should young men from Districts Dera Ghazi Khan, Muzaffargarh, Rajanpur and the rest of the Seraiki belt head to Lahore to find menial jobs at gas stations and bakeries or sell seasonal fruits on the roadside. Usually these youngsters can read and write and have spent time in schools and call themselves under-matric. They could be absorbed in various jobs if the country's backward areas were industrialised. If the government offered tax incentives and reduced power rates to set up industrial units in such areas, it could generate employment opportunities and discourage people from shifting to big cities.

However, a large segment of people who remain unnoticed are those who never had a chance to go to schools. For instance, the mass movement of people from the mountain range to which CM Usman Buzdar belongs to Taunsa city is a case in point. Essentially, Baloch people descend from the mountains to the nearest cities in the plains to earn their livelihood. The shanty towns that have sprung up in Taunsa present a scene of neglect.

The lopsided policy of urbanisation of cities at the cost of ignoring rural areas by various governments is mainly responsible for the mass scale movement of population from rural to urban centres. Hence the cities are expanding haphazardly in all directions. In the sixties and seventies, Lahore and Gujranwala seemed a large distance apart but now the two are joined by a contiguous bazaar.

Adding further to the existing haphazard urbanisation of large cities, the prime minister announced the Ravi City project on the right bank of River Ravi. A huge chunk of 100,000 acres of irrigated land has been allocated for the project. The famers whose lands are marked for acquisition are staging protests. The concept of adding a city to the already overpopulated metropolis makes little sense. A political leader would carve his/her name in history if s/he established new cities on arid lands. Many such areas exist along the motorway where only thorny shrubs and Muskeets grow.

Politicians who conceive new ideas and turn them into reality on the ground are not only remembered by the people but also leave their name in posterity. Ayub Khan may have been a dictator but the mega hydroelectric projects – the Mangla and Tarbela dams – built for the nation will always keep him in public memory. Without the two, the country would have plunged into darkness. Comparatively, generals Zia and Musharraf ruled for years but they didn’t leave any landmarks behind to show for their performance.

Whether a dictator or a democrat rules, people living below the poverty line only remember those who alleviate their miseries. Lofty ideas and hollow political slogans never fill empty stomachs.

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