**How to challenge a dogma: Part - I**

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A few weeks ago, former finance minister Dr Miftah Ismail created a small political and social storm in the country by speaking out about the elite of the country, claiming that most of the key positions in the country are held by a tiny minority of the privileged, who have been dominating various sections of Pakistani society.

He especially pointed out the number of judges of the Supreme Court having graduated from an elite school of Lahore. Ismail also bemoaned the lack of opportunities for people belonging to the bottom layer of the social stratification. The former finance minister appeared to be saying that people grew rich in other states as well but those countries also provided opportunities to other sections of society to excel in their fields instead of showering favours on the privileged alone.

We have seen how from time to time people criticize various aspects of capitalism but they do not want to down too hard on a system that seems to be based on the gargantuan appetite for accumulating wealth and a voracious greed for maximizing profit. They shy away from questioning the dogmas of this economic system that has been wrecking lives and destroying the environment.

Just a year or so back when travellers were stuck in Murree, millions of Pakistani unleashed a torrent of criticism towards the ‘greedy' drivers, hotel owners, shopkeepers and other residents of the scenic valley who were allegedly capitalizing on the plight of the stranded people but all of these critics stopped short of calling for the condemnation of the inhuman economic system that advocates such blind and insatiable profit.

This is what the former finance minister has done as well. He criticized a few aspects of the laissez faire system only. This is not the first time that someone has revealed the monstrous aspect of an economic system that is meant to benefit the rich only. A number of authors and intellectuals also made such startling revelations, pointing out the dark side of the gospel of free market. For instance John Perkins in his famous book, 'The Confessions of an Economic Hitman' discussed how this system of global oligarchy has been wreaking havoc across the world by imposing a new liberal agenda that wants to leave everything at the mercy of the market and which puts profit over human lives. But Perkins too is reluctant to challenge the economic dogmas of the free market, asserting that it can be reformed.

In Pakistan our economic pundits, no matter which party they belong to, will always ardently support this system of greed and corporate rapaciousness; all of them seem to have a blind faith in the gospel of the free market. And it is not only our political elite with an understanding of economy that wants to preach the sacred teaching of an unbridled market, our intelligentsia has also been fascinated by the mesmerizing principles propounded by Adam Smith. They naively believe that the free trade ideology has helped the West accumulate wealth, hitting the height of prosperity. Therefore, it is no surprise that all of them came up with the panacea advocated by US president Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher during the decade of the 1980s.

Such approaches of our finance ministers and economic gurus create an impression that we can also touch the heights of prosperity if we follow the doctrine of the Bretton Woods System, listen to global monetary institutions and implement a new liberal agenda. None of them would like to tell us as to how the West carried out primitive accumulation of wealth. No pundit from our intelligentsia would like to highlight the loot, plunder and genocide carried out by the so-called industrialized societies in the past. None of them point to the outright rapaciousness Western capitalist countries demonstrated while exploiting the Global South.

It is important to understand the historical factors that led to the rise of the West and other capitalist countries. For instance, 1492 Europe was by and large an impoverished overcrowded continent that was not just plagued by hunger and starvation but also by sporadic outbreak of diseases. It was the Portuguese first who heard about the extravagant pilgrimage of Mansi Musa, a king of Mali. Musa lavishly distributed gold on his way to Makkah. The trip popularized him, prompting the Portuguese to venture out from their impoverished continent in search of gold in the 14th century.

The Spaniards undertook journeys across the Atlantic, discovering the Americas and wreaking havoc with the lives of South, Central and North American people. The Portuguese were not lagging behind, capturing Brazil and making arduous efforts to subjugate people in other parts of the world. The two global powers of the late 15th and early 16th centuries plundered the Incan, Aztec, Mayan empires, bringing gold and silver to Europe. On their way home, they were greeted by Dutch, English, French and other European pirates who would loot these ships. One of the famous pirates was Francis Drake, who was knighted for his campaigns of plunder. So, Portugal and Spain – the first imperialist powers of modern-day Europe – were also the first superpowers of that continent in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The Netherlands also emerged as a major power in Europe, followed by France and the UK. Other European powers also scrambled to capture the territories of other nations.

Is it merely a coincidence that four of the seven G7 countries have also been large or small colonial powers? Even before the Industrial Revolution, 35 per cent of the world was under the occupation of Western colonial powers and by 1945 around 85 per cent of the globe’s landmass was under the subjugation of the West and other colonial powers. Although the Philippines remained under American control, many argue that the US has not been a typical colonial power. It is true that the US did not militarily capture territories like the French and the British but the Monroe doctrine clearly indicated that the most powerful country in North America intended to monopolize the Western hemisphere, letting no other power get firm roots on that soil. The US military intervened more than 223 times across the world, and a number of such interventions were carried out in the Western hemisphere.

So, let’s begin with the prosperity of various countries. If the US is the richest country on earth then one should not assume that it was the miracle of the free market economy that enabled that; one needs to look into the import of 12 million to 50 million African slaves that offered free labour not for days, months and years but for decades and centuries. Trace the rise of plantation and acceleration of the slave trade. Connect the rise of stock exchanges in London, Paris and other parts with the ruthless exploitation of African people. Find out a link between the huge production of cotton and other agricultural goods to the immiserations of the slaves.

The story does not end here. When Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas, the population of indigenous people was believed to be around 120 million. The Americas was said to be as populous as Europe at that time but within a few decades their population reduced drastically, thanks to the genocidal policies of the Western ruling elites. Over 90 per cent of the indigenous people were wiped out, their lands captured and their abodes destroyed.

To be continued

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