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**A necessary initiative**

On Friday January 17, yet another Ehsaas Saylani Langar was inaugurated on the premises of PIMS Islamabad by Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Social Protection and Poverty Alleviation Dr Sania Nishtar and Dr Zafar Mirza, advisor on health.

The facility will serve two meals per day to one thousand persons including patients and their attendants who come from far off places and are not in a position to buy food. The ‘langar’ (soup kitchen), a joint undertaking by the government and the Saylani Trust, is in conformity with the best traditions of an Islamic welfare state and reflects the commitment of the government to take care of the deprived segments of society.

Article 38(d) of the constitution says “the state shall provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing. housing, education and medical relief, for all such citizens, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race, as are permanently or temporarily unable to earn their livelihood on account of infirmity, sickness or unemployment”.

Prime Minister Imran Khan had launched the Ehsaas Saylani Langar Scheme in Islamabad in October, 2019.The scheme is part of the Ehsaas Programme of the government under which 112 such langars will be set up throughout the country to combat hunger. Each soup kitchen will have the capacity to provide hygienic food to 6oo people. Hunger, poverty and economic inequalities in a society can have serious social and political repercussions – to the extent of destabilizing the state itself. That provides the rationale for most of the modern states laying more emphasis on poverty alleviation and providing safety nets for the poorer sections of society.

The social safety and poverty alleviation programme launched by the PTI government in the name of ‘ Ehsaas’ is the first ever all-encompassing effort to mitigate the suffering of the vulnerable sections of society. The programme envisages providing saving accounts and mobile phones to 5.7 million women which will enable them to access their bank accounts. It also aims for increase in cash transfers to women from Rs5000 to Rs5500; and creation of 500 digital hubs at the tehsil level from where poor people can access their bank accounts as well as look for jobs.

Moreover, the programme is looking to arrange legal assistance for the poor; setting up call centres to provide legal assistance to the people as well as grants to children who want to study; organizing money by the Tahafaz programme office for people needing medical help who do not already possess Insaf health cards; and building shelter homes for the homeless. It also aims to assist street children through public-private partnership as well as help transgender persons who suffer maltreatment; facilitate daily wage workers and initiate a movement against forced work from children under bonded labour. There are also plans to build homes for one hundred orphanages through Baitul Mal in the next four years.

The programme further envisages initiation of policies to address nutrition problems; the creation of a multi-sectoral nutrition coordination body at the PM’s Office for the purpose; provision of goats to women in rural areas as well as organic chicken; provision of seeds to rural women for growing vegetables to eat and sell; help for disabled persons; setting up 20 centers for disabled persons in less developed areas and earmarking Rs5 billion as interest-free loans to the poor.

The programme will also look into an increase in EOBI pensions; homes for the elderly; awareness among students from the underdeveloped areas about their constitutional right to receive education and provision of vouchers to students in areas where there are no government schools so that they can attend private schools. There is lots more the programme aims to do.

An incisive glance at the envisaged programme reveals that it is not only designed to help the poorer sections of society but is also meant to elevate people above cash payments and enable them to acquire skills and sources of incomes for themselves. The government envisages enhancing the allocation for the programme from Rs60 billion to Rs120 billion by the year 2020.

With a view to make it a one-window operation and to coordinate the implementation of the programme, a separate ministry for social protection and poverty alleviation is being set up. The move is designed to bring all the organizations working on helping the poor under one umbrella. To ensure transparency and efficiency the government is collecting required data through the help of already conducted surveys as well as new ones, making use of the available modern technology.

Ostensibly, it looks like a very ambitious undertaking but as they say where there’s a will there’s a way. The concept propounded by the government is beyond reproach. The programme is unprecedented as far as its envisaged wholesome impact and reach is concerned.

It also assumes uniqueness in the sense that, as revealed at the time of its launch by the prime minister, the government is going to include these activities in the chapter of fundamental rights of the constitution by amending Article 38(d) which confers only recommendatory responsibility on the government.

Once it becomes part of the constitutional fundamental rights, it would become obligatory for every government to shoulder that responsibility. Ehsaas is indeed a revolutionary initiative for poverty alleviation and to enable vulnerable sections of society to earn their own living.

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