**Poverty in Pakistan**

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Poverty is globally acknowledged as a curse due to its destructive potential for societies. It has been rightly said that islands of affluence cannot exist in oceans of poverty. This implies that if wealth is concentrated in a few hands within a society and the rest of the people lack the means to ensure reasonable living, or if a governance system is decidedly tuned to serve the interests of the elite at the expense of the poor masses, then the chances of that society surviving for a long time are very slim. Poverty provides fertile ground for social disorders and revolutions, which are usually marked by violence and rebellion against the elite classes by the poor.
According to the World Bank, the poverty rate in Pakistan stands at 39.3%, with 22% living below the poverty line. Isn’t it shameful that after more than 75 years of independence, a significant portion of society still lives in abject poverty? The situation is undoubtedly a result of ruling elites building their own fortunes by taking advantage of the inherent avenues of corruption in the governance system.
As they say, there is a limit to everything. The poor no longer seem willing to accept it passively, and one can sense the impending arrival of a revolution if things are not corrected. The people we see on the streets throughout Pakistan, protesting against unbearable increases in electricity and petroleum product rates to meet IMF conditions, are surely a warning sign of worse things to come. Their lives have become miserable due to rampant inflation triggered by the arrangements agreed upon with the IMF, under which the government is obligated to end subsidies and increase utility prices. I suspect that we will witness more increases in the days ahead to meet IMF’s expectations, unless, considering the current threatening situation, the agency acknowledges the caretaker government’s dilemma and agrees to a relief package to appease public anger. The government reportedly approached the IMF regarding this, but the issue is that temporary steps and relief won’t resolve the problem. A lasting and permanent solution must be found to set the country on the path to progress and transform the economic profile of the masses.
The situation the country faces at the moment is a cumulative outcome of anti-people policies pursued by successive governments, and no single government can be solely held responsible for the prevailing tragic situation. The reality is that all governments, whether led by political parties or military dictators, have remained criminally insensitive to the problems faced by the poor masses and have made false claims about development. These claims are contradicted by the fact that almost all of them consistently sought bailout packages from the IMF. According to records, Pakistan has availed 23 such bailouts. If the country had truly been progressing as they claimed, they would not have needed to seek bailout packages.
Unfortunately, the country has strayed from the vision of its founding father. He was a visionary leader who understood that peace and progress depended on improving the circumstances of the poor masses. While addressing the constituent assembly on August 11, 1947, he said, “Now, if we want to make this great State of Pakistan happy and prosperous, we should concentrate wholly and solely on the well-being of the people, especially the masses and the poor. If you work in cooperation, forgetting the past, burying the hatchet, you are bound to succeed. If you change your perspective and work together with the understanding that every individual, regardless of community, past relations, color, caste, or creed, is first, second, and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges, and obligations, progress will be limitless.”
Identifying other issues afflicting the polity, he observed, “The first duty of the state is to maintain law and order, ensuring the protection of life, property, and beliefs of its citizens. Bribery and corruption are truly poison and must be eradicated forcefully. Black-marketing, nepotism, and jobbery are other societal ills that need elimination.”
It’s regrettable to note that as a nation, we have failed to follow the path envisioned by the founder of Pakistan and implement his outlined priorities. All the issues he identified have deeply affected the social fabric. We’ve deviated from his vision. Both civilian and military rulers have contributed to perpetuating an elitist culture in the country, leaving the masses in abject poverty. This has not only hindered the socio-economic development of the country but has also resulted in the emergence of numerous social divisions, harming national integration and unity. The departure from the vision of Pakistan’s architect has brought the country to a crossroads. Our survival as a respectable and vibrant nation hinges on prioritizing corrective action, returning to the drawing board to rediscover our national ethos and the intended path for consolidating the gains of independence and economic prosperity.
Our salvation and progress lie in reforming the governance system and formulating an economic charter through the collective wisdom of all stakeholders. This charter should not only ensure economic progress but also guarantee a fair distribution of wealth produced. China’s remarkable progress can be attributed to the elimination of poverty, and we can learn from its history. Time is running out for those who have wielded power and enjoyed unchallenged privileges.