**A portrait of the rich**

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There is this project that I have fancied for many years, knowing that it was beyond me even when I had some editorial resources at my disposal. Anyhow, the idea was to investigate the lifestyles of the rich and assess their impact on society in general and figure out their capacity of understanding the role and responsibilities of their own class in an impoverished and underdeveloped society.

Yes, it does seem a bit pompous and obscure. More than a journalistic exercise, it could be conceived as a well-crafted academic study with the involvement of trained experts. Besides, it would demand the kind of surveillance that only secret services can conduct. (And for all we know, they may already be at it in their own unsophisticated fashion.)

But the beginnings of my thoughts in this direction were rather simple and innocent. With my keen interest in improving reading habits and promoting the circulation of books and other reading material, I would often wonder, while passing an imposing mansion, if it somewhere had a bookshelf – and I would try to imagine the kind of books that they had.

It occurred to me that it would be interesting to ring the bell of any big, gated mansion in an upper-class locality and pose this question to anyone who came out: “Excuse me, do you have ‘Divan-e-Ghalib’ in this house?” In fact, I once wrote a column in Jang with this title. Obviously, my surmise was that it would be hard to find a house where they had a ‘Divan-e-Ghalib’’, though some surely do.

If it is not fair to look for a volume of classical Urdu poetry in a potentially English-medium locality, one has to think of an English language equivalent. In a literary context, Ghalib should perhaps keep company with Shakespeare. And if English is the repository of world literature in translation, would Tolstoy do?

It is possible that the Pakistani elite is more enlightened and more caring than I am suggesting. It is possible that the very rich are, in a collective sense, not as selfish and insensitive to the travails of the have-nots as we presume, judging them on what we see on the surface. So, will they pay the taxes imposed on them this week?

It is necessary to learn the truth of what the elites’ role has been in the making of the crises, mainly in the economic domain, that have engulfed Pakistan. That Pakistan is failing is a reality and when a small section of society is seen to have flourished in this situation, suspicions of some waywardness on the part of this group are bound to arise. A short quote from ‘Why Nations Fail’: “Those nations where narrow elites feather their nest at the expense of society usually falter”.

As I have said, drawing a realistic portrait of the rich would not be easy. To proceed from my ‘Divan-e-Ghalib’ recipe, I thought that a manageable undertaking would be to select a street in, say, DHA Phase VII or VIII in Karachi, a stretch that covers around 100 big houses and then watch them closely to find answers to specific questions. For instance, how many newspapers are delivered every morning in the target area. (Following the hawker would be easier than tracking the bootlegger.)

Having said so much about an insufficiently designed scheme to decipher the lives and deeds of the very rich, I need to explain why I am tempted to dwell on this subject. Actually, this is the week of the federal budget and the focus is on why and how the rich should pay more taxes so that some relief is provided to the poor.

Federal Finance Minister Miftah Ismail has taken this up almost as a theme that the rich – the elites – do not pay as much tax as they ought to. He has reiterated his point of view in one prime time television after another. Speaking in the National Assembly on Thursday, he argued that his budget was “progressive and historic” because it did not increase indirect taxes. Unlike the previous government of Imran Khan’s PTI, he said, the present government had taxed the rich.

So, will the rich willingly bear this burden? This question became more urgent on Friday when Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced that the government would impose a 10 per cent ‘super tax’ on large-scale industries to raise revenues for supporting the country’s poor at a time when inflation is rising. He said that high net worth individuals would also be subject to a ‘poverty alleviation tax’.

This was a surprising decision for the business and industry circles and one immediate reaction was a dramatic fall in the stocks. A debate ensued on whether this was a judicious levy. It was argued that broadening the tax base was more urgent than increasing the burden of those who were already in the tax net.

Miftah Ismail later clarified that the ‘super tax’ was a one-time tax “needed to curtail the previous four record budget deficits”. However, the rich have habitually resented paying taxes and feel no remorse when subsidies professedly meant for the poor deliver larger benefits to them, such as subsidies on fuel prices.

In his address on Friday, PM Shehbaz Sharif said history had witnessed that in difficult times, it was the poor who always made sacrifices. “Today, it is time for the affluent citizens to do their part. It is their turn to show selflessness”.

We do not know if the rich are listening and if they genuinely care. They have enjoyed good profits even in the midst of large national deficits. But Pakistan’s powerful elites are not to be tamed by the present ruling coalition – or by the party in the opposition – because their interests generally overlap.

For the birth of a new political arrangement, we may have to wait until the voices we hear from the peripheries of this system can rise in a crescendo to reverberate in the principal arena of our ancient deprivations.

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