

Rock-bottom individualism

BY DR FAISAL BARI

Our thinking about the nature of what it is to be a citizen, a member of a community and an individual living in a society has changed radically in the last thirty odd years. We have become much more individualistic. We think that we, where 'we' is usually defined now as a nuclear family or even as an individual, are an island, and we need not invest in bridges that could connect us to the rest of the community or the world. But where this thinking might have had some advantages in the 1960s or so, when the notions of community were stronger, it has taken us too far in the direction of individuation and it is clearly counter-productive now.



My maternal grandmother, who was a widow by her mid-twenties, had four children to raise, and looked after whatever amount of land she had as well, campaigned for Fatima Jinnah against Ayub Khan and even contested the local bodies elections herself. Well into her sixties she wanted me to teach her how to ride a motorcycle so that she could tour the village on that and look after the concerns of the area. Throughout her life she felt that what Pakistan needed was a political party of the small farmers, haris, peasants and workers, and that would change the face of Pakistan, and not the existing parties and the current coalitions. An avid and regular newspaper reader, she was always in touch with what was going on, had strong opinions and was not shy of discussing them or arguing for them. Her energy, her concerns that clearly went beyond herself and her family, her involvement in the local as well as national life, her keenness to argue, grow and make others also see things was impressive.

But when I see the next generation, I see a totally different approach to life. Her children have done very well for themselves. They are economically well off, have done well in civil services and business, have even dabbled in local and national politics now and then, and have made good lives for their children in turn. But they have never had the same concerns about the community, about 'others', about the society that we live in or could live in as she had. Most of their actions have been driven by a desire to do well for themselves and most of the time their concern has only extended to their respective nuclear families. Decision to enter or leave politics even has been based on a desire for a better career or for better prospects for themselves and their families.

So what is wrong with that? And that would be a very valid question. After all Adam Smith did argue that if each person did as well for herself as she could, we would have an overall maximization of benefits. And there is an entire tradition of thinking, drawing support from capitalism, certain strands of libertarianism and even liberalism that builds on Smith's insights and holds this way of organizing society as the optimal society structure.

Leaving aside the issue of whether this way of thinking is good or bad, let us just see how pervasive this view of life has become. In our conversations do we ever believe anyone who says that she is doing something for the King, the country or the people? We do not even believe this claim when politicians

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say this, and these are people who are supposed to have this mission. 'I am doing it for the people' has become a slogan and an empty phrase, and even worse, almost a joke. We know that a person who says this must have a 'private angle' and a scam somewhere, and the very people who want others to die for King and country, we know, are the ones who are causing the slow death of the country. Talk to almost any person on the street, and this is exactly what you will hear from people about the meaning of 'I am doing it for the country'.

The Smith model pervades the thinking in our education system too. Not only do we teach it explicitly, by highlighting it in economics and other disciplines, we implicitly strengthen it by making education competitive and a 'zero-sum' game for students in every class and course. They come out of the educational experience thinking that winning is not just everything, it is the only thing that matters, and it is the goal whatever the cost. In my teaching career I have come across many who have fought over their grades and tried to use any means to get ahead, but have seldom come across a student who has had a genuine desire to learn and help others learn too.

This change has not happened in Pakistan alone. It is a part of the larger ideological movement that has been going on all over the world. Thatcherism and Reaganomics became popular in this context. The movement to privatize, liberalize and 'roll-back the state' are a part of the package too. The cutbacks in subsidies as well as the welfare state, whether in Canada or in Pakistan, are yet other manifestations of the same phenomena of individuation.

Even our architecture and urban planning have reflected the change. The introduction of the motorcar and the phenomenon of suburbia take the individuation to another plane totally, and in geographical terms. A rich and privileged person spends her entire 24 hours of a day and most of her life in a very individuated environment. You live in an air-conditioned and managed environment, you live in a house that has high boundary walls, and a chowkidar at the gate, you go out in an air-conditioned car, you work in an air-conditioned office that also has a chowkidar at the gate, and you socialize, if at all, with a group that lives a similar life, or at a club that also has a chowkidar at the gate.

The motorcar almost epitomizes the individuation. You not only extend your private space around you even when you are in public space, and you demand this private space from others by honking and sometimes even being abusive, you also manage your environment in this private space by cutting off others through well insulated windows and good air-conditioning. And you do not give a hoot what the fumes from your vehicles' exhaust are doing for others who are forced to be in the public space.

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Similarly our suburbs are excellent examples of the individuation. The most striking features of our houses are the high walls around them, the high and sturdy gates at the front, and the general architectural design that mimics the 'fort' mentality. The streets, especially in DHA, are straight so that we have houses side by side and facing each other. The business centers and the community centers are located separately and away from the residential areas. There are a few public parks, and well-maintained ones in the case of DHA, but they too are not integrated with the houses. They are at the end of the street, or in odd shaped spaces that could not be utilized for housing. There is no space for street-corner society in these suburbs. You do not see groups of people, especially young people, congregating in the streets and engaging in activities together that could create non-individualistic interests. There are not enough 'eyes' on the street and not enough people on the street at any time to ensure safety and comfort levels that can only come from being in the presence and company of many people. No 'gori ka makaan' over a 'paan ki dokaan'. The architecture also isolates you from what happens in the street. It allows you to feel safe behind your boundary wall and behind your closed door. To that extent your stake in what goes on outside also goes down.

Humans are not only political animals; they are social ones as well. They live in communities and have to thus invest in structuring communities that deliver optimal benefits to all. Following individual interests might deliver good economic results for the individuals (and this too holds under very restricted conditions), but it might deliver disastrous results for the social and political life of the community. And this eventually impacts the individuals too. But where we have gone far in the direction of individuation, and to the point that it not only reflects in our thinking, structures of thought, and institutions, it also reflects in our architecture and social-environment, we have not dwelled enough on the negatives of this individuation, and how to control and ameliorate its effects.

We will tackle the consequences of this individuation and some of the remedies in detail in another article. Here, to end the article, we will just describe some of its consequences to give the reader a flavour of how important the topic is and how disastrous can the consequences be. Suppose an individuated person is walking down a deserted street and sees a car parked on the kerb. He spies a hundred-rupee note on the front seat of the car. The car is locked but there is nobody in the street apart from this person. Should she break a window and take the note. It will benefit her of course, though it will cost the car owner thousands of rupees to have the window repaired. If we are only concerned about our benefit, should we not break the window? What if it was only a one-rupee coin? The case is essentially still the same. What if it just gives the person walking in the street some pleasure if she is able to break windows? What if it is not a parked car, but it is a person walking and has some money in the wallet. Should the individuated person kill another to get money if no one is watching and if she can get away with it? This level of individuation would surely be disastrous for the society. Have we reached this level and what can we do about it?

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