**A not so wonderful life**

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According to various studies carried out across the country, the rate of depression, anxiety and stress in Pakistan is surprisingly high. It is not difficult to understand why people are stressed at a time when inflation is at an all-time high, unemployment is even higher, and more and more people struggle to find means to survive in an economy that seems to be perennially on the downturn.

There are also other pressures that people face everywhere across the country. Research also suggests that Generation Z is the most anxious and stressed generation of all time. Social media plays a big part in this, increasing body image concerns and other issues such as the number of likes received on posts or profile pictures, which continue to dominate far too many lives.

But for many in Pakistan, the levels of stress are even higher, given that they struggle to attend university with access to higher education still not available to all across the country. And then there are those who are desperate to have access to enough internet coverage to manage their work and other requirements of academic life.

Despite these odds, there are Pakistanis who have done exceptionally well. Debating teams from Pakistan that go out to the US and other countries have brought honour to the country. Another achievement for the country came recently. Saim Sadiq’s Joyland has been shortlisted for the Oscars. The entire cast and crew is responsible for this astonishing cinematographic venture. The fact that it is banned in the country’s most populous province, Punjab, just shows how little we value talent and how our lives are influenced by the views of others, especially those who put forward the most backward ideas possible in society and then demand that we stick by them. In this context it should be noted that ‘khawajasiras’ were always a cultural norm in the subcontinent and became problematic only under the colonial era.

Pakistan needs to find a way to make life a little more joyful for its people. There is too little entertainment, too little recreation, and too little other facilities in the country. Children go to school in dismal situations and return stressed both by the attitude of their teachers and the long hours of tuition that the majority are forced to follow after their regular classes. Why this has become a necessity or a norm is sometimes difficult to understand. But the pressure for excellence faced by young people makes their lives harder than ever. This is even more true in public-sector and low-tier private schools where poor teaching makes it almost impossible for students to pass matriculation exams, notably in English and similar subjects, leaving them taking the exam over and over often with the same results. Quite obviously, our education system needs to change.

At the same time, we need to create facilities for children and young people to discover creativity and find an opportunity to talk openly and discuss the issues they face. While there has been some opening up of society in this regard, such initiatives are not enough and not regularized enough to make them truly worthwhile. Too many people from rural areas or smaller urban areas have no access to them at all. Something needs to be done to make life a little more meaningful for young people and give them a sense of direction.

The killing of persons, including a disproportionately high number of young people as a result of minor crimes in Karachi, is an example of all that has gone wrong with our society. Movies that depict brutality, domestic violence, rape, and violence of the worst kind are allowed on the screens but other more meaningful entertainment is simply pushed back by governments even when censor boards approve them.

Television plays have also lost much of the meaning they carried during the 1970s and the 1980s when moments of true joy brought families together in living rooms. Today the themes of the plays are more violent and misogynist and less likely to offer any kind of relief from stress to families, especially women who, surveys show, are the most likely to suffer depression in society. The simple burdens of life such as creating kitchens from which food can be churned out to feed families, when there is simply not enough income to buy the basic supplies is one of the hardships they face. Domestic violence increased by the stress of life is another as are suggestions from so-called scholars that men should be allowed to beat their wives or discussions on such issues sometimes veiled in a veneer of religious teaching.

These problems need to be sorted out. But there is no evidence that our current government or the governments that have come before are in any way interested or eager to do so. Instead, they are more concerned in finding for themselves a way to power and then clinging on to it one way or the other. There is far too much exchange of accusations in the political realm, and far too much ugliness in the way this is put forward. At the same time, ideology has lost any place in society. This is perhaps one of the reasons life seems meaningless to so many people. At one point in our history, loyalty to a particular ideology, a school of thought, or a system of belief, gave people both a sense of hope and a foundation to build their lives on.

Things can only change if governments recognize that people need better quality of life. Pakistan has some of the lowest social development indicators in the world. These are lower than those of Bangladesh, India, and many other countries, including those in South Asia. With this set of realities in place, we cannot really hope to improve the situation of people or the levels of satisfaction with their lives.

The fact that there are people who fall sick and are unable to afford care for themselves or their loved ones is enough to explain the levels of depression and stress. There are of course other reasons as well, including layoffs by corporations and companies and the failure to pay salaries by other giant groups of companies.

The National Bank pensioners who continue year after year to fight for their pensions is another example of what kind of society we now live in. It is time that politicians looked towards creating a new kind of reality so that hope can be injected back into life in one way or the other.

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