**Sanctity of Public Taxes**

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The government laments that people avoid paying taxes. On the other hand, taxpayers think that they get no return for their money in the way of civic amenities. Sometimes, tax demands are totally out of proportion. For instance, this year, property tax has more than doubled in many residential and commercial areas of Lahore. Raising the tax ratio gradually seems logical, but a hundred per cent increase hurts the taxpayers.

When indirect taxes are levied on items of daily use-eatables and utilities-, it affects even the lowest strata of the society. But what the public rightfully deserves to know is how the tax money is utilised. Taxpayers allege that the state’s bureaucracy is one of the dinosaurs that gobble up their hard-earned money. Under the pretence of providing better governance and public services, the public service continues to expand itself. To create more opportunities for bureaucrats, tehsils are upgraded to districts and districts to divisions. Unfortunately, it makes little difference in improving the quality of services provided to the people.

Typically, when Dera Ghazi Khan was a district, it comprised a large landmass with a thin population. Agriculture remains the main source of income of its population. At the time, the government decided to upgrade the district to the level of a division. Previous tehsils within its administrative orbit were upgraded to districts. Thus, it created many more administrative slots for the bureaucrats. But did it improve the quality of services provided to the people? Hardly! In fact, providing palatial residences and SUVs for the bureaucrats added more burden to the exchequer.

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It is quite well-known how state-managed organisations suffer losses worth billions every year. Instead of privatising the loss-makers, losses are absorbed by the public exchequer. For instance, were Pakistan Steel Mills in the private sector, would its management have continued to pay workers’ salaries amounting to Rs380 million every month? Especially, when the mills had not produced even a piece of steel rod for more than half-decade. Since the government pays the salaries out of public tax money, taxpayers in all fairness have the right to question why their hard-earned money is poured into the black holes of the perennial loss-makers year after year.

Would entrepreneur and Minister Abdul Razak Dawood keep the PSM in its present state in his inventory of lucrative businesses? Never!

Russia and China wanted to negotiate with the Pakistan government for reviving the PSM. Mr Dawood is privy to it since he attended a meeting chaired by the minister of privatisation in 2019. Pakistan didn’t respond to Russian and Chinese offers, which resulted in further denting the public exchequer by keeping the mills under government domain.

Moreover, grandiosity in other spheres of governance is manifestly visible. Wasn’t the Governor House of Punjab supposed to convert into an educational institution as promised by the PTI before it came to power? Even though it would be a good idea to open the stately mansion for public visit, as the White House in the US allows tourists to visit for a certain fee. When the democratic US offers such a facility, why not democratic Pakistan? The public, especially taxpayers, would know in what opulence our mighty and the powerful live. Someone quipped that the only trouble they take is when they breathe; the rest is at taxpayers’ expense. On the other hand, about 23 million of our children remain out of school according to a UNICEF report and we have one of the lowest literacy rates.

After education comes health, about which less said the better. So much so, anti-rabies vaccines are not available in many hospitals when stray dogs infest many residential areas. Lalazar colony near Thokar Niazbeg is one such area. When complained to the president of the society, he simply said that he had written to the relevant section in the Lahore Corporation and waited for the dog-shooters to arrive. It’s been months now while packs of stray dogs prowl around to harass the passers-by.

It’s said that “least government rules best.” Our governments are too big to be efficient. Most of the organisations in the public sector are overstaffed and need a large budget to maintain them. About the railways, the Chief Justice last July remarked during a hearing, “Political recruitments have destroyed railways.” Railways fare only meets the salaries and pensions requirements of its staff. Is there a need to keep this white elephant in the public sector? Many developed countries maintain a special department to oversee which government department has outlived its efficacy and needs a chop. Shouldn’t we have one such department?

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