**Youth and Pakistan (Through the Data Lens)**

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August 1, 2022

Who can deny the role and relevance of youth in a nation’s progress and the significance of youth times in one’s own life? The youngest country in the world is Niger, where almost 50 per cent of the population is below the age of 15. The understanding of youth demographics and needs by age group is inevitable when determining the strategic directions of any country. The three subsets within the youth population include noticeably young adolescents (10-14 years), adolescents (15-19 years), and older youth (20-24 years). By the year 2030, when SDG targets should have been achieved the UN estimates that the earth will be inhabited by 1.3 billion people between the ages of 15-24. Pakistan has nearly one-third of the population between the ages of 10-14 years. According to some data sources, 35 per cent of our population is under 15 years of age. The top five countries with the largest cohort of young people between these ages are India, China, Indonesia, USA and Pakistan.

While going through not-so-viral or popular reports (in comparison with WEF’s report on the global gender index) from some important and influential platforms, I was not surprised but experience an acute attack of despondency. Some details taken from some reports may substantiate my point. The agenda 2030 that underscores inclusion is yet to be successful in mainstreaming the marginalised in Pakistan. One formidable example is the case of transgender and people with gender dysphoria. It is almost next to impossible in the absence of structured focus and required allocation of resources to the socio-economic class distribution and literacy rate in these populations. According to a UN AIDS survey, in the year 2020, 42 per cent of the transgender people in Pakistan are illiterate. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab, 30 per cent of transgender people have received primary education and 23 per cent secondary education, and about seven per cent have been to a college.

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Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurements provides ample evidence of our progress in key social sectors besides the data for monitoring of 21 SDG indicators. The 2019-20 PSLM District Level flagship survey of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, for the first time, not only included disability-related information but youth literacy as well. The information obtained was classified under the binary division of sexes hence ho statistics are available for the transgender population. According to this Survey’s results, Youth Literacy is 72 per cent at the national level (urban areas with 84 per cent and rural areas with 65 per cent). Youth literacy is higher in males with 79 per cent than in females with 65 per cent. The report has mapped out the Situation analysis of districts of all four provinces of Pakistan by considering Four Dimensions i.e., Education, Health, Living Standards and ICT and assigned weights of 30 per cent to Education, Health and Living Standards and 10 per cent to ICT. Although the situation of the districts of Punjab is better than the other provinces, it is still not acceptable with an average of 68.9 out of 100. In Sindh, the situation of Tharparkar is the most disregarded of all. The average score of KP is 53.7/100. Kohistan and South Waziristan are the lowermost functioning districts. The average score of districts of Balochistan is lesser than all the three provinces i.e., 43. Most of the districts lie in the D & E category i.e., less than 44 per cent. Khuzdar, Awaran and Sheerani are the saddest operating districts of Balochistan.

“Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Levelling the Playing Field, Systematic Country,” is a report, released by the World Bank in 2020. In 135 pages, it analysed all aspects of the development and proposed course corrections to sustain growth and reduce poverty. Two of the key messages are that our dear homeland is stuck in a development trap, and it is important to come out of it by prioritising increasing competitiveness and promoting equity and inclusion. The vicious circle of power asymmetries is also discussed there. The report documented that the provision of opportunities is mediated within a system of client-patron relations, which allows the elite(s) to maintain their hold on political power and economic resources. “The fragility of Pakistan’s institutions-namely, the rules of the game governing interactions between citizens and the State-is the result of elite capture”, the report recorded.

The youth bulge can become a demographic dividend only if there is an increase in the number of working-age individuals who can be fully employed in productive activities, other things being equal. Thereafter, the level of average income per capita should increase as a result. This academic answer is too difficult to be translated into a living reality due to the mighty marketers of inequality in politics, economy and social spheres. It is implicit that all the worst-performing districts in Pakistan need urgent Policy interventions that are age-informed and gender-responsive in all the dimensions of human development. Yet it remains a mystery who is the intended reader/consumer of such reports and data. It is a terrifying thought for unimportant writers and journalists like this scriber that such materials have never been given due value by any political party, legislator or policymakers. It is even more demeaning to realise that such revelations were used for commanding instant gratification through tweets and or for PowerPoint presentations in closed and cosy rooms to meet the needs of the donors/sponsors. The vital questions are: what is the future of a youth that comes with disadvantages of different forms in this country? What is the future of those without the power of the pedigree? Are those without the push of the class doomed to remain a delivery person, frustrated and falling prey to an array of mental illnesses, subject of documentaries by the elites (who mostly decide for the majority of the non-elites) and/or an object used to display an act of kindness/charity by the perpetually privileged?

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