

# WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE POOR?

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We have many programs for poverty alleviation — an admirable step. But more than government aid, the poor need to be included in cities of opportunity. Handouts, credit and online schemes are not a substitute for opportunity.

Think about it, many of our poor have climbed into the middle class thanks to the opportunity of migration which they eagerly grasped — even at a huge cost to themselves.

Contrary to what Pakistani analysts put out, poverty is always caused by exclusion from opportunity. Give the poor a chance, and they will lift themselves out of poverty.

A starting point could be an attempt to look into the apartheid social regime we have created. Could the extreme degree of exclusion of the poor (basically the non-elite) be at the heart of our troubles? Ask yourself the following questions and assess whether you agree with the proposed answers: you will see for yourself how the poor are excluded.

## 1. WHERE DO THE POOR LIVE?

The poor are totally excluded from elite space; they are seen only as servants and the only place allocated to them in cities are servant quarters.

Most of the population needs small — one to two room — flats. But where can they be located? Zoning laws in our cities do not allow this except on the outer reaches. Council houses in London exist side by side with expensive housing. Not so in Pakistan. The rich and the poor cannot mix. They say we cannot have high rise buildings looking into the residences of the rich.

The rich want conveniently located polo grounds and golf courses, giant parks to jog in and, of course, nice big lawns for their parties. They want sleek, low-rise cities where their cars can move easily from their estates to their leisure activities — golf and polo. The rich want zoning laws so that there is no high-rise construction or congestion in their park-like setting.

## 2. WHAT DO THE POOR DO?

The elite policymaker, who is often an industrialist, looks to industrial parks and subsidies for employment of the non-elite; regardless of the fact that factory employment lags way behind employment in the services sector.

With technological advancement, no longer are giant factories employing millions of workers. Large numbers are now employed in construction, shopping malls, hotels and the leisure industry. But that is anathema to planners and zoners, who are from the elite civil service. All retail, warehousing, leisure and community

enterprises are found in the tertiary sector, and the non-elite are regarded as non-essential. These then expand informally around residential property – fostering mix-use spaces. Limited development of these activities means less employment for the non-elite.

### 3. HOW DO THE POOR WORK THEIR WAY OUT OF POVERTY?

Traditionally, education has been an equaliser. However, in the Pakistani apartheid system, this does not seem to hold true. The rich educate their kids overseas to leave the local education system in a permanent state of disrepair. Many years ago, my driver Majeed declared quite openly his intention not to educate his son because Urdu-medium public schools do not offer children upward mobility even after years of education. Only a few months ago, talking to me a 26-year-old driver in Dubai cursed his over twelve years of Urdu-medium education from Pakistan that only qualifies him for menial jobs — a waste.

### 4. SO, WHAT ABOUT ENTREPRENEURSHIP BY THE POOR?

The poor have traditionally helped themselves by running street hawking businesses and khokhas (kiosks). They used to be around a few years ago – but administrations have become vigilant and do not allow these in rich areas. And, of course, there can be no zoning for them.

Where is the space for poor entrepreneurship? We need wide avenues for the Porsches and the BMWs! We also need large urban tracts for golf courses, polo grounds and giant parks (lungs of the city). So, let these people go to shantytowns in the outskirts of our cities.

### 5. DOES THE STATE NOT HELP THE POOR?

Every now and then, politicians set aside a large amount and give it a donor-inspired name like Income Support Fund or Social Protection. Much bureaucracy, Land Cruisers, consultants and plush offices later, the poor get some minor rationing subsidy. Most often, it is some form of food coupons, cash transfers, a yellow cab scheme or micro-credit. How strange: granting them food and capital but not allowing any space for entrepreneurship!

## 6. WHAT ABOUT ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST AND THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE PRIVILEGED? IN HISTORY, ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST HAS LED THE RICH TO INVEST IN SOME SOCIAL MOBILITY

In history, enlightened self-interest has led the rich to invest in some social mobility. Philanthropy has set up universities and community infrastructure to level the playing field for the poor. Royalty always patronised intellect. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, philanthropy means building for the rich — country clubs, polo grounds, LUMS and Aitchison College, and so on: places for elite use that, for the most part, do nothing for the excluded. As a footnote, the rich do not even visit the poor campuses to mentor and interact with the underprivileged. They have no time for these trivialities.

## 7. WHAT ABOUT LEISURE AND COMMUNITY FOR THE POOR?

Leisure and community are only for the rich. City zoning provides fully subsidised space for the elite to play golf, tennis and polo, even for rich schools, but there is not an inch of space for community and leisure for the poor. No public libraries, no community centres, no publicly provided football fields or even a basketball court for the poor. Even competitive sport as a vehicle for social mobility is completely ruled out as a result.

## 8. WHO OFFERS THE POOR HOPE?

Certainly not the government! Certainly not the donors with their minor employees! The liberal elite made big promises and delivered nothing. The promise of globalisation and liberalisation has rightly lost its lustre in the minds of the poor.

Theatre, cinema, or any form of intellectual activity that will offer an alternative vision has been zoned out. Where should the poor look for a vision; who offers them hope; who offers them community; who gives them some opportunity; who gives them the vision of a just society?

But there is hope for them! Think about it. It is the mosque and the maulvi. Mosques remain totally unregulated, need no zoning permissions and have been actively encouraged by the state. Not surprisingly, the mosque is the only community centre for the excluded poor – and the unregulated maulvi the only visionary. This is the unintended consequence of the greedy, unenlightened behaviour of our elite.

More than handouts, the poor need space in cities. Include them.

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