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INCUBATING COMMUNITY CENTRES AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

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Community centres create spaces of community engagement through socio-cultural events, recreational activities, educational seminars, workshops, awareness programs, and informational exchange programs. The purposes of developing community centres are community mobilisation and outreach, awareness and campaigning for various causes, skills development, education, and recreation. The scholarship produced on community centres shares commonality regarding the purpose, activities, and utilities of physical settings specified for community engagement. The literature is contextual when it comes to defining community centres as either spaces or places of community engagement. Islamabad has 3 functional community centres functioning under the Staff Welfare Organisation (SWO). Interviews with the employees of SWO were conducted by PIDE to understand the importance of community centres in Islamabad.

All the respondents agreed with the idea of having community centres in the cities. The reasons for having a greater number of community centres in cities vary between the domains of accessibility, communal engagement, socialisation, problem-solving and citizenry. The respondents explain the importance of city centres across various regions of a country because they function as a socialising space for people to interact in times of happiness and sorrow. Secondly, the centres are also important venues for people to engage in productive discussions. In this way, a community centre is both a recreational and an ideational space.

The data reveals the civil society function of community centres wherein people come up with solutions for communal issues and pool resources (economic and social capital) to devise a strategy. Rural settings allow people to interact more frequently, which is a rarity in urban settings. Therefore, the data emphasises building more community centres. Apart from being a socialising

place, the community centres also function as spaces for informational exchanges about the city's administrative, transportation, and communication systems.

All the respondents agreed that as compared to the population of Islamabad, the number of functional community centres is insufficient. When asked why Islamabad should have more city centres, respondents shared various views. Their responses were based on a range of factors such as communal needs, lack of socialising spaces, gatekeeping of elitist clubs, cramped-up residential zones, the revival of community activities in the existing community centres, and socio-cultural gatekeeping.

One respondent explains that the land allocation for residential areas is not equal in Islamabad. There are elite sectors where acres of land are allocated to VIPs, who can afford to arrange functions, gatherings, and funerals in their properties or can book expensive marquees or hotels. The same doesn't stand true for the majority. Therefore, community centres are needed in Islamabad. The respondent also alluded to the fact that mosques, which are strictly used for religious purposes in Pakistan, can be used as a place for running welfare, awareness and cultural activities which is the case in the West.

A similar view was shared by another respondent who by giving a case analysis of the G9 sector, detailed that those employed in federal government jobs cannot afford membership of elite clubs located in the capital. For this segment of the population to socialise, community centres are required, and the current number is insufficient.

A respondent from the Christian community centre also spoke of social heterogeneity but his reply, apart from class differences, also focuses on ethnic and religious differences. He also speaks of privilege as a social construct which plays a gatekeeping function in favor of the rich and against the underprivileged, including minorities. He articulated reasons for a greater number of community centres to house pluralistic groups and arrange diverse socio-cultural and welfare activities:

Respondent: "A lot of seminars are arranged in the capital. Most of them are arranged in five-star hotels such as Marriott or Serena. The people from remote or occluded groups will feel like misfits there. So, the concept of privilege which we have ingrained in our systems has a gatekeeping role to function. This way, such people are excluded from many social opportunities. The debates steered in such seminars may spark the spirit of doing better in life, but the social gatekeeping demotivates them to participate due to the way they look, dress, speak or what their identity is."

One of the most powerful forms of community centres are those dedicated specifically to arts and culture activities – serving to both nurture emerging talent in the performing arts as well as engage the general public in

events that inspire, educate, and entertain. Art has historically served crucial functions, including as a tool to challenge the status quo and bring definition to societal norms and values by captivating audiences, allowing them to let loose and forget about their troubles for a while. This is even more important in a country like Pakistan where economic vulnerability and poor governance have stripped citizens of any sense of hope and stability.

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics has been conducting focus group discussions with stakeholders from across the artistic spectrum – including film, dance, music, comedy, literature and arts/culture centres – to ascertain the state of creative industries in the country. With each subsequent engagement, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the landscape is restrictive, unappreciative and, in some cases, outright dangerous. In the absence of joy and wonder, we forfeit the possibility of any meaningful prosperity.

Quality art is never a definitive answer, but rather a question mark, serving to provoke, resist and challenge. In Pakistan, this is made virtually impossible by the toxic culture of censorship that gives people the license to harass, intimidate and silence those that undermine the status quo. This is especially pronounced when performing in a physical capacity. Performers have to make do with infrastructure not meant for their specific style of art, like in cafes, and perform to captive audiences.

This creates a general aura of hostility and dismissiveness, and artists must forego a significant chunk of their earnings to the venue – sometimes even having to pay a fee simply to access the space. Performing in open-air public zones is also not an option due to Pakistan's urban landscapes being fundamentally anti-citizen: with little to no walking spaces.

With a dearth of revenue streams, artists are compelled to collaborate with corporations and/or foreign donors which assist them in making ends meet, but invariably restrict their creative freedoms. Performers must toe the line, make themselves 'presentable' and promote products they would never use themselves. The ones that aren't able to make the 'cut' for these, frequently based on factors that have little to do with talent, are forced to work soul-sucking office jobs. New digital media channels have created alternative possibilities, although one's audiences must necessarily be in the hundreds of thousands for these avenues to be financially sustainable. Naturally this works against emerging artists. When it comes to organising shows and festivals, artists must navigate a complex and time consuming bureaucracy that presents them with a host of hurdles – whether through bribery, taxation, paperwork or security checks. Shockingly, virtually all these 'requirements' are arbitrary, shifting and morphing at a pace that is difficult to keep up with. Most artists are thus advised to employ formal teams to deal with legal and logistical procedures –

something that multiplies their expenses, making it difficult to compensate performers.

Governance is also absent in the industry. There are no overarching authorities to facilitate artists and grant them resources, subsidise their activities, facilitate the acquisition of equipment, or simply bring them under one umbrella. The ones that do exist function as fraternities, choosing to collaborate with 'household names'. In other countries, governments fund artists for international festivals and conferences, contributing to the accumulation of soft power at a political level. They grant them jobs in state institutions and plan events in remote areas in order to expand outreach and unite the nation under a shared love of transcendence.

On an existential level, art triggers a sense of inquisitiveness in its beholders: expanding their imaginative capacities and inviting them to dream of a better world. If societal flourishing is represented by a tree reaching the Heavens, art is the intricate system of roots underneath, symbolising the collective unconscious, extending all the way down to Hell. In Pakistan, artists are stopped in their tracks before they can even begin.

Reform efforts must be fundamentally bottom-up in their orientation, with the needs, desires, and interests of those occupying the bottom rungs of society granted the highest priority. For that to be possible, however, information about what they are must be able to freely be generated and circulated across society: eventually reaching governing authorities that are then compelled to respond. One of the best ways to achieve this is through inclusive cities that house accessible community centres: allowing (and ideally promoting) space for discourse, exchange, and entertainment.¹

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¹Sections of this essay have been reproduced from one of the coauthor's articles in The Express Tribune, 'Pakistan's Stranglehold on Artistic Expression' – published on the 26th of December, 2021.