

Where are the Opportunities for the Poor?

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The Prime Minister has announced a poverty alleviation program called EHSAS — an admirable step. But more than government aid, the poor need opportunities to become financially independent. Handouts, credit and online opportunities are not a substitute for opportunity. An old proverb says 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime'.



Think about it. Many of our financially disadvantaged citizens have climbed into the middle class thanks to the 'opportunity' of immigration which they grasped eagerly, sometimes at 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 examine the apartheid-like 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 see if the answers make sense and you will see for yourself how the poor are excluded:

1. Where do the poor live?

The poor are totally excluded from elite living areas; their role is the serving class and they are seen only as servants. The only place allocated to them in the cities are servants' quarters.

Most of the population needs small 1-2 room flats. But where can they be located? Zoning laws in our cities do not allow this except on the periphery of cities. In contrast, council houses in London exist side by side with expensive housing. Not so in Pakistan. The rich and the poor cannot mix. We cannot have high rises 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 social events. 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;

no matter that factory employment lags way behind employment in the services sector.

Technological advancements are decreasing the need for the human workforce and machines are replacing them in many areas. Giant factories no longer need to employ millions of known

workers. Although a large workforce is still employed in construction, shopping malls, hotels and the leisure industry, that is anathema to planners and zoning boards who are from the elite civil service. The retail, warehousing, leisure and community enterprises are regarded as non-essential so development of these areas is limited, decreasing employment opportunities for the non-elite, otherwise known as the working class.

3. How do the poor work their way out of poverty?

Traditionally education has been an equalizer. However, in the Pakistani apartheid system, this is not happening. The rich educate their kids overseas which has left the local education system in a permanent state of disrepair. Many years ago, driver Majeed vociferously declared his intention to not educate his son in the local government school, all he could afford, because Urdu-medium public schools do not offer children upward mobility even after years of education. A few months ago, a 26-year-old driver in Dubai told me he cursed his 12 years of Urdu-medium schooling from Pakistan as that only qualifies him for menial jobs — a waste of his time.

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 exist in our cities a few years ago. But city administrations have become vigilant and do not allow them to conduct business in rich areas. And, of course, there can be no zoning for them.

Where is the space for 'poor entrepreneurs'? 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 funding 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: give them food and capital but no place for entrepreneurship.

Interestingly enough, the state subsidy to industry goes directly into the pockets of the rich.

6. What about enlightened self-interest and noblesse oblige?

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 patronized intellect. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, philanthropy means building for the rich — country clubs, polo grounds, LUMS and Aitchison College: places for elite use that, for the most part, do nothing for the excluded.

As a footnote, the rich do not even visit the public sector 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 subsidized 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 centers, 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 globalization and liberalization has rightly lost its luster in the minds of the poor.

Theatre, cinema, or any form of intellectual activity that could 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 permission and have been actively encouraged by the state. Not surprisingly, the mosque is the only community center for the excluded poor; the unregulated maulvi the only visionary. This is the unintended consequence of the greedy, unenlightened behavior of our elite. More than handouts, the poor need space in our, and their, cities. Include them.