

A revolution of our own

Abdul Jalil

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is one of the most significant events in recent history. It not only changed the contours of the political economy of Britain but also put Europe well ahead of the rest of the world. The Industrial Revolution was a result of a scientific outlook which was a popular feature of the Renaissance (18th century).

Enlightenment philosophers put forward this thesis that the material world is governed by natural laws which can be easily understood and interpreted by humans. The supremacy of human reason and empirical method and the rejection of dogma were the defining features of the Age of Reason. This scientific and rational understanding of the world was translated into technological advancement in the 19th century which marked the Industrial Revolution. This revolution was primarily an economic affair, but it dramatically changed the political and social landscape of the whole continent.

But why did this event occur in Britain and Europe, and not in Africa and Asia? What was the recipe for such a gigantic incident? There cannot be any straightforward answers to these questions. Experts usually try to explain the situation through a sociological perspective, a religious angle, or even a geographical and demographical standpoint.

The most plausible explanation might be a humanist outlook that challenged orthodoxy in the 15th and 16th centuries. Under the influence of philosophers, thinkers and scientists like Thomas Hobbes, Galileo, Copernicus, Rene Descartes, Montesquieu, and John Locke, traditional wisdom was challenged.

It was argued that an idea ought to be passed through vigorous empirical verification and can only be accepted if it passes this test. Human reason is supreme, and it should serve as a guide in all matters pertaining to economic, political and social life. This attitude of revolt against traditional wisdom made room for new ideas to bloom and flourish and that, in time, resulted in the Industrial Revolution.

In the rest of the world, traditional wisdom continues to dominate all aspects of existence even today, and this does not bode well for these societies. Pakistan and other developing countries ought to follow the ideals of modernity in order to bring change.

Another important factor that played its role in the Industrial Revolution was Europe's coherent and close-knit geographical space. If the ideas of a thinker were not acceptable in his country, he could simply move to another country. When the church censored Galileo's book 'Discorsi' in Italy, he got it published in Holland. When Voltaire got in the bad books of the French government, he moved to Switzerland. Karl Marx moved to London when his philosophical ideas became too harsh for German authorities. This indicates that thinkers in Europe had relatively more freedom when it came to expressing their opinions.

In Asia and Africa, however, it is almost impossible to move from one country to another

for various reasons. Intellectuals in Asian and African countries face persecution and public condemnation when their ideas do not conform to officially accepted narratives.

An event like the Industrial Revolution can also be linked with the attitude and aptitude of European society. Europe has always been open to importing ideas from other cultures. Oriental societies lack this attitude. The following example can prove this point: after the printing press was invented in the 15th century, some Middle Eastern countries refused to print books for three hundred years. As a result, new ideas remain restricted in that part of the world.

On the other hand, European societies keenly accepted ideas from Arab scholars during and after the medieval period. Second, only ideas are not important for a country's progress, and people should have an aptitude for adopting those ideas. During and after the Renaissance, European societies exhibited both attitude and aptitude to transform; this resulted in major technological advancement.

European political institutions also played their part in the nourishment of this attitude. British society has always followed classical liberalism that means the least intervention of government in social and political affairs. It allows the private sector to play its role. Such a development is not possible in societies run by totalitarian governments.

What roads should be taken by developing economies in the contemporary world? There are two possible lines of action. The first one is to follow the European model and foster a culture of openness and innovation. This would require these societies to move away from traditional wisdom.

Second, they can follow the Chinese and Korean models. China and Korea have not invented most technologies but they have built their economies on mass-scale production. We can see that this approach has turned China and Korea into the world's powerful and dynamic economies.

Pakistan may try the second approach to stabilise and advance its economy. Once it does so, innovation won't be far behind. But, again, this requires an overhaul of the existing economic policies. As mentioned earlier, the Industrial Revolution flourished in England under classical liberalism where the state's control of private enterprise was minimal.

Pakistan should move towards an optimal laissez-faire economic model. The state should only play the role of a facilitator and arbiter. Tax reforms and other incentives ought to be introduced to entice foreign investors. Education sector reforms need to be implemented so that we produce market-sensitive labour. These policy-level initiatives are the need of the hour, and this is the way towards economic independence.

The writer is a professor of economics at the Pakistan Institute of Development

Economics (PIDE) and can be reached at: abdul.jalil@pide.org.pk

The views expressed by the writer are his own.