

Social and Structural Transformations in Pakistan

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Structural developments over the last decade in Pakistan have resulted in numerous substantive transformations, which have altered social relations and societal structures. There are many reasons for this change such as capital inflows, globalisation, the media boom and trends in women's education. There is a need to interpret and further explore such developments to examine and understand what, if anything, they mean for political transitions and transformations.

While Pakistan's hesitant political transformation falters, now looking even increasingly less like a deformed version of an anticipated transition, social and structural developments over the last decade and earlier have given rise to far deeper and numerous substantive transformations, which have altered social relations and societal structures. While always undergoing a process of change, many of these developments are affecting our social, economic and political relations with each other.

Perhaps the most important factor that, sadly, many social scientists still do not comprehend is that Pakistan is neither a so-called "feudal", agricultural, rural or even "traditional" society or economy. Only those social scientists – not just Pakistani, but particularly foreign, including Indian – who write their papers on anecdotal evidence still talk of Pakistan being feudal. Even a cursory examination of any kind of economic data suggests that this is not so. With the share of agriculture in the gross domestic product (GDP) falling drastically, from 26 per cent in 2000 to 20 per cent in 2007, the sector has lost its predominance in the economy. The share of agricultural labour in the total workforce has also fallen, from more than half of the total in 1990, to 43 per cent today and land tenure relations and landholdings, have also changed markedly. In terms of social "values" and behaviour, while many analysts still call them feudal, perhaps "authoritarian, discriminatory and undemocratic" may better describe the nature of social relations between people, values and behaviour which are found in many highly developed countries as well. In order to understand social change and transformation, it is critical that we move beyond clichés which limit our ability to observe and understand.

This is particularly so with regard to clichés such as "Pakistan is an agrarian economy", and the view that "Pakistan is largely rural". Research on the 1998 Census showed clearly that Pakistan was, even then, an urban country with perhaps 50-55 per cent of the population living in settlements which by no stretch of the imagination, could be called "rural". A decade on in the forthcoming census, most certainly, the characteristics which help us define the sensibility and the social and economic relations of exchange and production will reveal an even greater share of the urban. Moreover, with the increase in communications of all sorts, and with so-called "urban" amenities such as phones, electricity, roads and other social services, easily accessible if not available to the so-called rural dwellers, the arbitrary binaries between urban and rural begin to fade. While a huge host of data can be shown to emphasise this point, the simple fact is that of the one million mobile phones added to the 81 million in service in Pakistan every month, the large majority are rural, or outside the spaces which are administratively defined as urban.

Socio-economic Matrix

A particularly interesting consequence of this demographic and spatial change is in how it affects Islamic political parties. Results from the most recent election – probably the fairest in Pakistan's history – show that for the most part, electoral Islam is reduced to being primarily a rural phenomenon and "Islamic" parties win largely in rural areas – from Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province – and from the least developed districts in these provinces.

These structural shifts in economic and consumption patterns have given rise, finally, to the recognition of the emergence, substantial growth and consolidation of a Pakistani middle class. The consumer boom that has taken place in Pakistan over the last decade or so would not have been possible without the existence of a large entity called the "middle class". Just how large such a class is, it is difficult to capture or measure and one

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hopes that some estimates of its size will emerge through research. On account of easy credit, one can present data which support the claim that a consumerist middle class defines the workings of the economy. For instance, the numbers of cars and motorcycles doubled in Pakistan in the period 2001; mobile phones, which had a density of just 5 per cent of the population in 2004, within four years, have reached the equivalent of 51 per cent of the Pakistani population. Moreover, despite growing regional and income disparities, per capita income has almost doubled since 2000.

While an economic middle class exists, one can surmise that along with the huge growth in the media providing constant news and information, this class has also become more aware of its rights and perhaps, even responsibilities. Perhaps it was these new, emergent and assertive groups who participated in and gave direction to the political and civil society movements of 2007 and Pakistan's media revolution played a key role in this. In 2002 when the last elections were held, there was only one private TV channel in the country; today there are more than 30 private news and information channels, in all major languages. With constant information, analysis and chatter about even minuscule political tremors and developments, much of Pakistan's society has become involved with and informed about what goes on in the country. While numerous rumours and spins are given to political stories, no one can any longer claim to be uninformed.

However, one must add a word of caution here. If the economic transformations from the agrarian, rural and feudal structures have given rise to these new groups or middle classes, it is important to state that the political role of such classes need not be "progressive", as is often incorrectly assumed and romanticised. The category of the middle class has no particular moral or ideological mooring. This group or class can be as democratic and revolutionary as it can be fascistic.

Gender Enrichment

Another factor that is affecting society and its relations is the increasing visibility of women in public spaces and not merely

in parliament. While the largest number of women have been elected from the general seats in the last elections, evidence from most urban centres suggests that women are more visible at higher tiers of education, in the media and in the growing services sector. It is not just that girls predominate in liberal arts and humanity colleges, but rough estimates suggest that in the case of Karachi University and Government College University, for example, girls dominate the campuses by a huge margin, perhaps four-to-one. While many observers point out that while on university and college campuses more girls are certainly more visible, they immediately add that most wear some version of the hijab, suggesting a form of growing conservatism. These visual descriptions perhaps confirm the view of some – that Pakistani society has become far more socially conservative – yet they obscure the liberating element in the lives of many of these girls who escape from their oppressive, traditional, patriarchal and familial bonds, if even for a few hours in the day. Clearly, just the fact that girls are being educated in growing numbers and that women are coming out to work, is a revolutionary transformation, which has multiple and diverse social, demographic and economic repercussions, which many would consider highly progressive.

The Business Interests

A dramatic shift that has taken place in the last six years or so and I believe, this might be the only benefit from the consequences of 9/11, is the substantial change that has taken place in India-Pakistan relations. On the one hand, little seems to have changed, with an inhospitable visa regime still in place, and with bureaucrats trained in many an old school still determining relations between the two countries. On the other, one of the most astonishing sets of figures which paint a completely different picture show something very different. For example, India is today Pakistan's seventh largest trading partner for imports and the first three in this list supply primarily oil to Pakistan.

Pakistan imports more from India than it does from France, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Iran, Turkey or even Thailand!

Overall, India is Pakistan's ninth largest trading partner. From official trade of around \$ 235 million in 2000, trade between the two countries now is over \$ 1.4 billion. And this, despite insurmountable travel and visa restrictions for traders and businessmen.

In terms of investment, a new phenomenon is the emergence of business interests from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Gulf states. Awash with excessive amounts of money on account of the rise in oil prices, Arab sheikhs have been buying up key sectors in Pakistan. They have invested in real estate, banking, telecoms, information technology and in other service sector tie-ups. While in its very early days, there are indications that the UAE is "getting involved" in Pakistan's economy and politics to the extent that it can influence decisions. Both Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari have had very close ties – business and personal – with many of the rulers in the Emirates and both have lived in Dubai for long periods of time. Moreover, the November 3, 2007 closure of the private channel Geo News (following general Musharraf's Martial Law), which was based in Dubai, suggests that numerous arms of the Pakistani state also have close connections with the Emirates' sheikhs. If UAE business interests grow and given the overlapping business, personal and political relationships, one can be sure that financial capital from the Gulf will influence, or keenly follow, developments in Pakistan.

These are just a few of the many changes that are transforming Pakistani society, its economy, its politics and its social relations of exchange and production. There are many reasons for these changes, from excess capital liquidity, to globalisation, to the media boom, to women's education and similar trends. Some of these, such as trade with India, are reversible, but many suggest a more permanent trend. There is a need for scholars to interpret and further explore such trends to examine and understand what, if anything, they mean for political transitions and transformations. One must add, however, that while there have been substantial and noticeable transformations, some institutions and some forms of politics have still not changed.