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Media And Pluralism

By

Rehana Hakim
Media and Pluralism

The ideal situation in a pluralistic society is that envisioned by the founder of Pakistan, Mr. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, in his inaugural address to the country’s first Constituent Assembly,

Jinnah said:

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state... Now, I think that we should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”

Forty-six years down the road, the words ring hollow. The widely held conviction that the triumphant anti-colonial nationalism would eclipse all problems and bridge all gaps has not proved to be true. In fact some of the prototypes of the colonial period are reflected in present times and prejudices have been reinforced rather than removed.

Religious and ethnic intolerance and economic, social and political injustices have all contributed towards making a pluralistic society seem like a distant dream. To give you just one
example 57 lives were lost in Shia-Sunni sectarian violence alone in '93. And in just one incident that occurred in Gilgit, 20 people were killed.

Several hundreds were killed and several thousands put behind bars in Sindh, that is plagued with an ethnic battle between the two major communities living there, the Sindhis and the mohajirs, which threatens to destroy the unity of the province.

Meanwhile the country's 5th national population census to be held this month after 13 years (the last one was held in 1981) was postponed yet again and the most vocal proponent for the delay was Pakistan's biggest province, Punjab, because it fears that exaggerated population figures from other provinces especially Sindh will deprive it of its due share in the national income and also reduce its quota of jobs, resources and legislature seats. Incidentally Sindh contributes approximately 60% of the GNP and gets only 13% of the budgetary allocations.

Desperate efforts on the part of the two major ethnic groups in Sindh to allegedly rig the censors in their favour was also becoming a bone of contention.

But the government's skewed sense of priorities did little to alleviate the sufferings of the masses across all sides of the ethnic divide. Defence, yet again, hogged the major share of the budget and education and health were given short shrift. The amount allocated for health in this year's budget is less than 1%. According to cold statistics, there was one hospital per 1,600 of the population but in actuality there was none for the majority of the population living in the rural areas.
Education in a country where the literacy level is 23% (and literate in the Pakistani context means is one who can sign his/her name) got 2.2 of the GNP.

On another front, women who constitute 51% of Pakistan's population but have only 2% representation in the legislatures were also given short shrift. The question of whether they should be entitled to reserved seats in the assemblies was put in limbo in the government-opposition game of one-upmanship. Discrimination against women both in law and practice, and in economic, social and family life remained undiminished and violence against women continued. (Nearly 400 cases of domestic violence were reported in the Punjab alone). According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Report 1993, one woman was raped every three hours and in several cases influential were involved.

1993 witnessed pluralism of another kind: five governments were in and out of power and one saw the birth of a whole new style of politicking termed "lota politics" which implied that parliamentarians' swung their ideology whichever way the cash crumbled. And the masses were left holding the crumbs – as always. Hardly the stuff pluralistic societies thrive on.

According to the '73 constitution, Pakistan has a federal system of government but in actuality it has been run like a unitary form of government with power vested mainly in the Punjab which has given rise to strong nationalist sentiments in the other three provinces. The lessons of '71, when Pakistan lost one wing to a people's struggle against economic and social injustices and deprivation, have yet to be learnt. Balochistan, which provides the
rest of Pakistan with natural gas, was not the first to receive it for either domestic or commercial use.

Attempts to enforce a uniform culture to fit in with the establishment's concept of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan have been made at the state level. The persistent attempts to establish a myopic theocratic dispensation are all symptomatic of a society held hostage by religious obscurantists. It has suffocated liberal and intellectual development and places at risk the country's political and economic future. The obscurantists became legit in 1979 following their close alliance with General Zia-ul-Haq's government. Zia wanted to create a political base with which his government could counter democratic forces. And some of the discriminatory laws introduced during that period continue to impinge adversely on the lives of Pakistan's religious minorities to this day and the worst affected have been the Ahmedi, Christian and Hindu communities. Under one ordinance issued in 1984, the Ahmadis were prohibited from using certain words and phrases (masjid, namaz, mashallah, assalam alaikum, bismillah) on the ground that the words and phrases of one particular religion if used by another amount to forgery. It said the Ahmadis should coin their own words.

Religion is not a registered company or a minting factory, the Ahmadis argued. It was not clarified if names of individuals (such as Bismillah), since they were akin to Muslim names, would be considered similar attempts at imposture.

Among a series of cases brought against members of the Ahmadiyya community, was one in which Qureshi Munawwar Ahmed
was sentenced to 3 years rigorous imprisonment for writing the Kalima, Assalam alaikum and Inshallah on a calendar. In the Lahore University of Engineering and Technology and the Allama Iqbal College, students beat up 3 Ahmedi students and demanded their expulsion and the dismissal of Ahmedi teachers. And the body of a 90-year-old citizen of Toba Tek Singh was prevented by the police from being buried in the town's graveyard.

The law of blasphemy meant to prevent any disrespect to the Holy Prophet became the handiest instrument for minor mullahs to launch themselves into spirited public leadership as the keepers of the public's conscience. They made public issues of it and then followed it up to the desired end through building street pressure and mobilising intimidatory presence in the courts.

The blasphemy law was used and abused as a sentinel of faith and Christians were the most frequent victims of the blasphemy laws.

One case that drew international attention was that of an unlettered 13-year-old boy, Salamat Masih, who was arrested along with two others on charges of writing blasphemous material on the Holy Prophet in public places. Lawyers were pressured not to fight the case. The boy remained in jail for 5 months before the HRCP chairperson Asma Jehangir was able to secure his release on bail. Due to public hostility, the families had to move. Investigations by HRCP and reports in the press found that the charge sprang from certain petty quarrels between individuals in the village.
Currently a campaign to declare one million Zikris, concentrated mostly in the province of Balochistan – non-Muslims is gaining ground and a bill to this effect was moved in the Assembly on January '93. However, it must be pointed out that it was a liberal Prime Minister like Bhutto who succumbed to pressure from the mullahs and declared Ahmedis non-Muslims.

One direct interference with the religious faith of a minority occurred in the case of the Kalash, a pagan tribe, living in the northern areas of Pakistan. There were reports of conversions among them being carried out by Tableeghi missions.

Instances of burning down of places of worship like Shia imambargahs in Moharram and Hindu temples in the aftermath of the desecration of the Ayodhya mosque in India in December 1992 also occurred.

Besides, the minorities one of the biggest sufferers of Zia’s 10-year-rule have been women. Oppressed by gender, custom and tradition they have been further oppressed by the laws that were introduced during his tenure: 75% to 80% of the women languishing in several jails of the country during 1993 were there under the Hudood Ordinances. In Punjab, the total number of women prisoners in October '93 was 780 and nearly half of them were booked under the Zina Ordinance. In matters of inheritance too, the law continued to discriminate against women.

But the country still desisted from ratifying the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Shahnaz Wazir Ali, an adviser in a government headed by a woman, promised to do so, but said the government had some reservations.
The media in Pakistan is reflective of all the prejudices that exist in this society. And is bifurcated along religious ethnic/linguistic and political lines. The English papers are more liberal, the Urdu more orthodox, more rightist and more righteous. The Urdu papers will give more coverage to, and are more tilted towards, the MQM; the Sindhi press will speak for Sindhi nationalist parties and Sindhi nationalism.

The independent media faces threat from both ethnic and religious parties. And there have been instances where presses and newspapers have been burnt down. In one instance, Pakistan's largest circulated Urdu daily, Jang, could not distribute 3,000,000 printed copies, because it had invited the wrath of the MQM.

So not unoften, the media has been browbeaten into submission. But it's not always an ethnic party that is to blame. Often, it is the government of the day that has used the clout of newsprint quota and government advertisements, among other baits, to get a publication to toe the line.

And this while it has the electronic media, fully under its control. The radio network which reaches far and wide is fully state-controlled – and every government blocks out the opposition's point of view: a Khabarnama becomes a Zianama, a Nawaznama or a Bhuttonama depending on who is in power. Television's second channel, owned partly by an advertising company, is free to air all but the news and news programmes. That is taken straight off TV's government-controlled channel.

There are the once-a-week-or fortnight women's programmes (where cooking is a must) and all serious issues that concern them...
are set aside till International Women's Day. Minorities get their
token programmes on Christmas and Easter and I don't remember
when I last saw a Divali programme. Ahmedis, as a matter of policy,
do not exist. Once upon a Zia's time, Faiz and Faraz and Josh,
Pakistan's best-known poets were not allowed on the state media.
And neither was a man called Shoaib Hashmi, an actor-cum-writer,
because he was Faiz's son-in-law.

So a plurality of views on the electronic media will only be
possible if it is freed of state control. As for the print media it
needs to rid itself of ethnic and linguistic biases and refuse to
buckle under in the event of economic or muscle pressure.

Another problem that plagues the print media is that it is
extremely disaster-oriented - the news coverage is that of the man
bites dog variety. Everything negative on India, for instance, makes
good copy. One needs to get rid of this cynical approach.

Then there is a tendency to overplay politics, little coverage is
forthcoming on social and cultural developments, in the region. This
disbalance in news content needs to be rectified.

Pakistan suffers on another count too - there are no liberal
arts universities, no forums that will generate lively debates on
controversial issues. The Quaid-e-Azam University which had in the
'70s attracted several brilliant Pakistanis who were teaching
abroad fell a victim to Zia's reactionary policies. As the harassment
became unbearable, most of the professors went back. To what
extent fundamentalists blocked scientific knowledge can be gauged
from one incident at the Karachi University where a Zoology
professor was stopped from teaching Darwin's theory of evolution.
“Campuses were turned into intellectual deserts,” to quote the well-known scholar, Dr. Eqbal Ahmed who, after much ado, has finally been granted permission to set up a liberal arts university, Al Khaldunia, in Islamabad.

In the final analysis, unless Pakistan has a socially civil, open-minded, clear-headed, dynamic society, pluralism will remain an ideal, a distant dream.

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