Transition: Rational Democratic Discourse and the Modern Nation State

Areas that constitute Pakistan have witnessed many episodes of sociocultural developments. However, regular foreign invasions have been interrupting this civilizational journey either by destroying or reshaping the social structures. Hence, the history of Pakistani society, generally speaking, is an interaction between indigenous and exogenous factors with many ups and downs.1

Nonetheless, at the advent of British colonialism in this area, the society was primitive in terms of its power structure. Power was concentrated in a host of dynastic families ruling in many principalities, fiefs, states, and tribal realms. Power was less penetrative, un-institutionalized but intensive in character. The sporadic use of this intensive power was effective in socializing obedience in the minds of the subjects, and that was transmitted to future generations as well.

# THE COLONIAL HERITAGE: LIMITED REFORMS AND SLIGHT EXPOSURE TO RATIONAL-DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

The British Raj modified this power structure by introducing two modern institutions, the civil bureaucracy and a standing army. The bureaucracy was meant to consolidate and maintain colonial rule through civil administration with the help of the co-opted local elite (feudal lords, tribal chiefs, and heads of princely states). The army dealt with internal and external security threats faced by the British Raj. This power was more institutionalized as compared to the pre- colonial period and quite penetrative. However, it was still authoritarian in nature. Thus the civil bureaucracy, local elite, and army formed the new authoritarian power structure under the tutelage of the British Crown.

Even though the power structure got modified, the society remained traditional in character. Thus during the colonial period, the society in these areas was predominantly rural with fewer urban centres. Tribal, clan, and occupational caste affiliations were the structural basis of the society. Social position was usually determined by inheritance and the roles attached to social positions were relatively fixed, making structures rigid with limited upward mobility. Social interactions and their outcomes were driven by emotions, affiliations, and personal links rather than rationality or objective rules. Feudal lords and tribal chiefs were all powerful and autonomous regarding local issues while externally their position was often dependent on the good will of the British Raj manifested by the civil bureaucracy. The relationship between the powerful feudal/tribal elite and powerless common man was exploitative in nature. The socialization of allegiance to feudal lords had embedded the life of the common man in the exploitative structure to such an extent that he/she could not take independent decisions in political affairs.2

Along with structural changes the British Raj influenced the socialization processes too. A sense of intellectual and civilizational superiority over the colonized people characterized the colonial mindset. They transmitted this colonial mindset to local elites especially to the bureaucracy and military.

At the same time, however, through rational-democratic discourse the local elite and an emerging middle class were being exposed to the western ideals of liberty, democracy, equality, self- determination, and so forth. The rational-democratic discourse, which was consistent and broader in scope as compared to the present Pakistan, along with gradual sociopolitical reforms brought about changes in the power structure and thus created required conditions for democracy in the areas that are now India.3 These favourable conditions facilitated the consolidation of democracy in post-independence India. While in the Pakistani areas, both sociopolitical reforms and the rational-democratic discourse were limited in scope and hence less effective in bringing about changes from an authoritarian to a democratic power structure.4 Therefore, after independence when the governing elite had to manage the affairs of state, their colonial mindset with only partial socialization of democratic values caused them to consider democracy as the legitimate form of government but authoritarianism as a practical necessity.

# UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT: CENTRALIST VS. AUTONOMIST TENDENCIES

The rational-democratic discourse and modern nation state also influenced interethnic relations of the future state. Pakistan is situated at a strategically critical juncture of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. Hence, it is ethno-linguistically and culturally a diverse society. Almost all the major ethnic groups—Punjabis, Pakhtuns, Balochs— have co-ethnics across the borders in other countries.

When the British extended their Indian empire towards the north-west, what is presently Pakistan, they resorted to different strategies for governing these areas. Since the main motives behind the extension, in addition to the imperialist drive, were the security concerns from potential threats of the Russian empire that had already taken over Central Asia, hence they avoided alienating the local feudal/tribal elite in this territory. Rather they strengthened their hold further by granting them magistracy and executive powers and thus made them internally autonomous and responsible for maintaining law and order.5 Though co-option of the local elite was the central theme of governance, however, it was not a uniform system for it varied in the various princely states, settled and tribal areas. The areas adjacent to Afghanistan (a buffer zone between the Russian and British empires) were more autonomous and tribal in nature, while the Punjab was more developed.

Pakhtuns and Punjabis are populated along the traditional route of invaders and traders from Central Asia to India. Repeated invasions in these areas had been softening the rigidities of structures by affecting the stability of social relations. Thus individuals, relatively free of structural rigidity, were more dynamic. That dynamism was sufficient to create an environment in which individuals vie with others, take risks, and welcome new opportunities. In the more secluded areas of Sindh and Balochistan, social structures were more stable and rigid. Hence

people were more content and averse to change and thus reluctant to avail new opportunities. However, Punjab being closer to the centre benefitted more from its dynamism than remote Pakhtun areas. The Potohar, which is an arid area, became one of the major territories to exploit for military recruitment for the British. Punjabis who were more literate were quick to avail job opportunities offered by the British Raj, hence, often lower level state functionaries in other provinces were Punjabis. Punjabi peasants also welcomed the opportunity to cultivate newly irrigated lands in other provinces, particularly, in Sindh and Balochistan. Thus before partition ‘opportunistic’ and ‘malleable’ Punjabis were already present among the ‘feudally controlled’, ‘backward’ and ‘passive’ Sindhis and Balochis.6 As North India had been the centre of Muslim rule in India, the ruling Muslim community (most of whom claimed ancestral roots from Central Asia or Middle East) had been enjoying a privileged status in sociopolitical and economic life visà-vis the Hindu majority community and even locally converted Muslims. Decline of their rule due to British colonialism gave them a sense of insecurity that stimulated them to become more dynamic in socio-religious, cultural and educational activities.7 Hence, they were successful in maintaining their privileged status vis-à-vis the Hindus during the colonial period. Moreover, on account of living in the mainstream areas and playing proactive roles for the maintenance of their status, they were more literate and conscious of their position and thus enjoyed a greater share in the civil services and senior positions in the army as compared to the people in the remoter Muslim majority areas in north-west and north-east.

The north-western Muslim majority area, presently Pakistan, was dominated by feudal lords and tribal chiefs. Most of the feudal and tribal chiefs, with few exceptions, were Muslims. The British Raj co-opted the local elites and thus strengthened the feudal and tribal structure for security reasons. The common man, tied to that social structure had little say in sociopolitical life.

Under the new power structure in Pakistani areas, the common man was being exploited and kept illiterate. However, the British Raj made special arrangements for the education and training of children from elite families on modern lines. Elite schools were established and some of the children of the elite were even sent to UK for education.8 Hence political consciousness about democracy, liberty, equality, self-rule, and nationality was restricted to the western educated elite. For the internally autonomous elite, political consciousness had regional or ethnic connotations. Though the scope of reforms in these areas was limited, these limited reforms further strengthened the regional outlook.9

Thus in the new state, ethnic relations were to be determined through the struggle between over developed and over represented Urdu speaking migrants and Punjabis on one hand, and less developed, less represented, but no less assertive due to rational democratic discourse, Balochis, Sindhis, Bengalis, and Pakhtuns on the other. In the new state, this struggle was to be reflected as the emphasis on centralization with an exclusive ideology by over developed groups and demands for autonomy and an inclusive ideology by the less developed groups.