

Social change in Pakistan: a conversation with Mr Arif Hasan

BloomsburyPakistan organised an event, ‘Social change in Pakistan: a conversation with Mr Arif Hasan’ on May 11, 2015.

In his usual captivating narrative style woven together with methodologically collected data and insightful anecdotes, Mr Hasan provided a trend analysis of structural changes in Pakistan over the last 50 years. Drawing upon extensive research in Sindh and Punjab, the aim of the talk was to illuminate current social conditions by situating them in historical movements.

Mr Hasan noted that far reaching social changes in Pakistan’s history took place in rural areas. For centuries, villages were characterised by economic self-sufficiency which helped retain social stratification between agriculturalists and artisans and strong bonds between caste and occupation. The artisans who worked for the agriculturalists were paid in kind [*dana*]. The barter system provided the necessary economic glue to the system.

This stable self-sufficiency was challenged during the Green Revolution in 1960s which increased agricultural production many fold. The rising productivity of land made it possible for farmers to sell their products in distant markets and thereby introduced a cash element into rural life. Thus, the agricultural economy expanded and allowed rural residents of Pakistan to acquire an increase in income as well. There was now also a need for new skills to operate and maintain farm technologies. In time, artisans too began to work for cash which gave them greater control over their resources. These changes gradually led to the weakening of caste and profession links and nurtured the possibilities of social mobility. A process of migration to cities started. This ‘post-Green’ migration was qualitatively different from earlier migrations as it often happened in the wake of collapsing political and social systems in rural areas. The old system of governance based on caste was destroyed; the *jirga* and the *panchayat* lost their power; the *mukhi*, the *patel*, the *nambardar* all became redundant. New links were forged between rural and urban which in time made the former increasingly dependent on the later for everything except subsistence food.

As agriculture became an increasing source of national revenue, state policies were drafted to support this rise. One example was the Suzuki loan scheme started by the Bhutto government in early 1970s which facilitated the transport of agricultural produce, allowing these to be sold in far distant areas. As a result, small *mandi* towns in the village vicinity where farmers used to previously sell their goods disappeared as it was now possible to sell goods in distant larger cities. In time, a transporters’ lobby emerged which in due course was to play a highly important role in politics as well.

All the above noted changes created unprecedented mobility which freed people from older power relations and institutional arrangements, and so enabled them to venture beyond their immediate geographical and social world. There was a new-found freedom together with new aspirations. Above all, the link between caste and profession was weakened. But the old landed class was not dislodged and found new ways of maintaining at least some of their privileges. One strategy was to sponsor religious leaders who in turn condemned the changes

as moral degradation. To venture to marry outside one's group was seen as a sign of moral corruption, giving local elites a reason to force the new generation to remain subservient. As a result we see an increase in *karo kari* or honour killings (though part of this increase could also be because of more reporting of the this practice). Another strategy was to send children into civil service – thus seeking to access and control administrative power.

The migration from rural areas, along with global influences from informal capitalism, forced huge changes in the character of urban areas as well, particularly in *katchi abaadis*. Once these *abaadis* were purely working class settlements, women did not work, the informal sector worked only within these *abaadis*, and language reflected social hierarchy. Now, these are no longer working class settlements: global communication technologies have flooded them, women have educated themselves and are working in service sectors, and people have developed a strong sense of identity and aspirations that they did not have before. If we take the age group from 15 to 24 as an illustration, the effect of these changes can be observed. In 1981, 39% women and 17% of men in this age group in Karachi were married; extrapolating the 1998 census shows that less than 18% of women and less than 6% of men are now married. As the demand for education increases, a huge network of private schools has emerged. As children of this generation grew up, many new universities were established, both in public and private sector.

A very powerful trend that captures various aspects of these changes is the significant rise of court marriages. In 1992, there were 10-15 marriage applications per day. By 2006 this had risen to more than 200 per day and by some estimates the number now stands at around 800 per day. This rise indicates changes in family structures, weakening of *biradari* system, heightened consciousness of individuality and personal aspirations.

Just as in rural areas, these progressive changes are being resisted in urban areas as well by conservative forces which have joined hands with religious elements and use informal economic power – land mafias for example – to retain power. The religious element received a huge support from the state as well during the Zia era which saw state suppression of student politics, artistic activities and political dissent. As a result, the overall tenor of society has remained conservative with a rising anti-western/modern discourse. Yet, beneath the surface a process of individualism and freedom continues, as reflected in the figures for education and marriage choices. One way in which many young people, women in particular, have negotiated these dynamics is by adopting conservative religious symbolism – the veil, for example – while continuing to participate in modern life.

Overall, it can be said that Pakistan provides a good case study of so-called modernization – technology, education, infra-structure – bringing about changes in social structures, freeing individuals from traditional life styles and giving them aspirations. Yet, the state has proved unable to bring macro-changes (such as abolishment of feudal system, industrialisation and democratic governance) which would have helped institutionalize these changes and given the new generation more hope of realising their aspirations. As a result, as we are now witnessing, there is now an ongoing struggle between the progressive and conservative forces in Pakistani society.

The state, instead of working for the common good of its citizens, has become subservient to big capital, facilitating the transfer of public money into private corporations, and religious

groups. People in this way are caught between the forces of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism.

Despite the generally pessimistic picture painted above, Mr Hasan remained optimistic about the future. He saw the current struggles as a necessary phase in social transformation, and expressed the belief that human spirit for freedom has awakened in the younger generation, particularly women, and in the medium to long term this spirit will overcome conservative resistance. His approach was a good example of Gramscian words that “I’m a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.”