

Excluded from elite space



The Prime Minister has announced an EHSAS program for poverty alleviation. It is quite an admirable step. However, handouts and credit and online opportunities are not a substitute for opportunity. Contrary to what Pakistani analysts put out, poverty is always caused by exclusion from opportunity. Give the poor a chance and they will lift themselves out of poverty. A starting point could be an attempt to look into the apartheid social regime we have created. Could the extreme degree of exclusion of the poor (basically the non-elite) be at the heart of our troubles? The poor are seen only as servants and the only place allocated to them in the cities are servant quarters. Zoning laws in our cities do not allow this except on the outer reaches. Council houses in London exist side by side with expensive housing. Not so in Pakistan. The rich and the poor cannot mix. We cannot have high rises looking into the residences of the rich.

The rich want conveniently located polo grounds and golf courses, giant parks to jog in and, of course, nice big lawns for their parties. They want sleek, low-rise cities where their cars can move easily from their estates to their leisure activities — golf and polo. The rich want zoning laws so that there is no high-rise construction or congestion in their park-like setting.

The elite policymaker, who is often an industrialist, looks to industrial parks and subsidies for employment of the non-elite; no matter that factory employment lags way behind employment in the services sector.

With technological advancement, no longer are giant factories employing millions of workers. Large numbers are now employed in construction, shopping malls, hotels and the leisure industry. But that is anathema to planners and zoners, who are from the elite civil service. All retail, warehousing, leisure and community enterprises, and the non-elite, are regarded as non-essential. These then expand informally on residential property. Limited development of these activities means less employment for the non-elite.

Traditionally education has been an equalizer. However, in the Pakistani apartheid system, this is not happening. The rich educate their kids overseas to leave the local education system in a permanent state of disrepair. Only a few months ago, talking to me a 26-year-old driver in Dubai cursed his over twelve years of Urdu-medium education from Pakistan that only qualifies him for menial jobs — a waste.

The poor have traditionally helped themselves by running street hawking businesses and hookahs (kiosks). They used to be around a few years ago. But administrations have become vigilant and do not allow these in rich areas. And, of course, there can be no zoning for them.

Where is the space for poor entrepreneurship? We need wide avenues for the Porsches and the BMWs! We also need large urban tracts for golf courses, polo grounds and giant parks (lungs of the city). So, let these people go to shantytowns in the outskirts of our cities.

Every now and then, politicians set aside a large amount and give it a donor-inspired name like Income Support Fund or Social Protection. Much bureaucracy, Land Cruisers, consultants and plush offices later, the poor get some minor rationing subsidy. Most often, it is some form of food coupons, cash transfers, a yellow cab scheme or micro-credit. How strange: give them food and capital but no place for entrepreneurship.

Interestingly enough, the state subsidy to industry is way more than the state has ever spent on the poor. And the subsidy to the industry goes directly into the pockets of the rich.

In history, enlightened self-interest has led the rich to invest in some social mobility. Philanthropy has set up universities and community infrastructure to level the playing field for the poor. Royalty always patronized intellect. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, philanthropy means building for the rich — country clubs, polo grounds, LUMS and Aitchison College: places for elite use that, for the most part, do nothing for the excluded.

As a footnote, the rich do not even visit the poor campuses to mentor and interact with the underprivileged. They have no time for these trivialities.

Leisure and community are only for the rich. City zoning provides fully subsidized space for the elite to play golf, tennis and polo, even for rich schools, but there is not an inch of space for community and leisure for the poor. No public libraries, no community centres, no publicly provided football fields or even a basketball court for the poor. Even competitive sport as a vehicle for social mobility is completely ruled out as a result.

Certainly not the government! Certainly not the donors with their minor employees! The liberal elite made big promises and delivered nothing. The promise of globalization and liberalization has rightly lost its lustre in the minds of the poor.

Theatre, cinema, or any form of intellectual activity that will offer an alternative vision has been zoned out. Where should the poor look for a vision; who offers them hope; who offers them community; who gives them some opportunity; who gives them the vision of a just society?

Not surprisingly, the mosque is the only community centre for the excluded poor; the unregulated maulvi the only visionary. This is the unintended consequence of the greedy, unenlightened behaviour of our elite.