

The Plight of Children in Pakistan



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The birth of every new baby is a message from God Almighty that He wants to continue the world. A child is undoubtedly Nature's masterpiece and a messenger of God to the people on earth. Our children are our plenipotentiaries to the future world and means of continuation of our own existence. However, it is also a fact that children are the most vulnerable segment of any society. In the early years of their life, these innocent beings are entirely dependent on the elders or in other words, they are at the mercy of the society which shapes their future. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has rightly said that the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children. It is an undeniable fact that the society which ignores its responsibility to its children is doomed. The succeeding discussion will substantiate with the help of examples and arguments that the society which dodges its responsibility towards its children is unable to progress and succeed.

In Pakistan, a whopping 34 per cent of the population comprises children having ages up to 14 years. These 70 million children are the most vulnerable segment of our society. According to Roshni Helpline, around 3,000 children go missing every year in Karachi alone and according to another NGO, Sahil, about 11 children are sexually assaulted every day. Child labour, brick kiln bondage, domestic slavery, beggary, trafficking, prostitution, sexual abuse and many other crimes against children are perpetuated in Pakistan due to the negligence of the state as well as the society in general. The children are abducted for ransom, recruited by criminals for organised crimes and used by terrorist outfits to commit suicide attacks. Those who escape from this outrageous fate are deprived of education, adequate nutrition, proper recreation and good healthcare. In short, the children in Pakistan are the most neglected and deprived segment of our society.

The greatest plight of the Pakistani children is their sheer insecurity and vulnerability to the criminals. The memory of Javed Iqbal who sexually abused and killed 100 children all aged between 6 and 16 is still fresh in our minds. Another very prominent case, which took the Pakistani people by storm, was the Kasur child sexual abuse scandal. Pakistani media organisations estimated that 280 to 300 children, most of them male, were victims of sexual abuse. The scandal involved an organised crime ring that sold child pornography to porn sites, and blackmailed and extorted relatives of the victims. The rape and murder of a seven-year-old girl, Zainab Amin Ansari, in the same district Kasur in January 2018 was also one such case. The perpetrator was identified as Imran Ali, who was determined to be a serial killer responsible for seven previous murders in the area. These are just a few cases which reveal the vulnerability of the children in our society. These incidents, which came to the public notice thanks to media, are just a tip of the ice-burg. The real figures of these crimes against children are much higher than the figures which are reported in the media.

There are thousands of street children in our society which are the easiest prey for the criminals who abduct them and use them to perpetuate their heinous agenda against humanity. These children are the most unfortunate human beings on earth. They are used for beggary, street crimes and sexual acts. Some of them are maimed and some physically distorted to become more appealing beggars. They are not given two meals a day while they remain posted at different locations to beg from daybreak to the depth of night. They suffer the worst mental and physical torture, but they cannot escape their handlers. Some of these abductees are trafficked to the neighbouring countries where they are used for child sex or domestic slavery or for the illegal removal of organs for transplant. In March 2018, the Police busted a child trafficking exchange of four minor girls taking place at a house in the Band Kurai area of Dera Ismail Khan and arrested their father. Highlighting the gravity of this crime, the Express Tribune's editorial of 28 March 2018 notes:

“The scale of the problem is unknown as there is no data gathering beyond the anecdotal; but given the known breadth encompassing a spectrum from child brides to forced labour it may be reasonably assumed that there are tens of thousands of instances in any given year.”

There are around 11 million children performing domestic tasks and working as farm labourers in rural areas. Other children work in the textile industry, construction, and automotive industry. Sometimes, these children work up to 20 hours a day, 7 days a week. These children do all sorts of odd jobs to keep the wolf from the door. In their hard chase for bread, they are exposed to indescribable perils. Many poverty-stricken parents themselves lease out their minor children to wealthy people for domestic work in return for a loan they would never be able to repay. There being no proper legislation to ban employment of minors or to protect them from domestic violence, they are completely on the mercy of their employers and masters. These children are often subjected to extreme mental torture, put in solitary confinement without food as punishment for minor mistakes in their daily chores, and given severe physical beatings, which, sometimes, cause their death. Their masters easily get out of any legal complication by settling the matter with the parents of such unfortunate children by paying them some extra money or just dismissing the remaining amount of their loans.

One of the biggest problems of poor children is the absence of basic healthcare for them. Child healthcare is not adequate in Pakistan even for the children of the better strata. In Pakistan, close to one child in six dies before the age of five. The nutritional status of children is very poor due to which 35% of them are underweight, more than 50% suffer from stunted growth and around 9% from emaciation. Each day, around 1,100 Pakistani children under five years old die of diarrhoea and water-borne diseases. According to a UNICEF report released on 20 February 2018, Pakistan has the worst infant mortality rate in the world. A baby born in Pakistan faces one in 22 chance of death, while a newborn in Japan has only one in 1,111 risks of dying. Access to healthcare is a daunting challenge in rural areas where many families simply can't afford basic healthcare or their ignorance stops their children to get suitable medical treatment. Many children develop dangerous but curable diseases in the early years of their life resulting in physical disabilities, deformed bodies or severe mental disorders.

With a whopping out-of-school population of 23 million children, Pakistan exhibits a glaring example of worst negligence in providing basic education to the children. Only 71 per cent of the children attend primary school in Pakistan. The best figures of government's budgetary allocation for education are 2.2 per cent of the gross domestic product, however, for more than a decade the nation has not been able to raise this amount above 2 per cent of the GDP. There are both out-of-school and in-school factors responsible for this alarming situation. The out-of-school factors include general poverty, child labour, socio-cultural inhibitions towards the education of the females, feudalism and dynastic politics. Among the in-school factors, dilapidated school buildings, lack of equipment and teaching aids, shortage of competent teachers and their low morale, corporal punishment, and dull curriculum significantly contribute to the present poor state of primary education in Pakistan. Poverty also compels around 1.84 million children to get early education from religious seminaries which provide them boarding and lodgings along with education. In past, some of these religious seminaries were found to be the hatcheries of terrorists.

This disturbing state of affairs is affecting the Pakistani society and state in many ways. When tens of millions of unattended, illiterate, uncivilised children grow up to become adults, they only add to the socio-economic woes of the society. Hence, the society remains bogged down in the quagmire of socio-economic complications. These illiterate, jobless, poverty-stricken children grow up to become fathers and mothers of many more children of their own sort and the cycle goes on and on. All efforts of the government to restrain population and improve socio-economic conditions of the society fall flat and poverty keeps on rising. In 2005-06 the people living below the poverty line in Pakistan were estimated to be above 50 per cent. Though the previous democratic government claimed that their policies had brought economic improvement causing the numbers of people living below the poverty line to fall to 24.3 per cent in 2015-16, the poverty bomb is still ticking. It can be stopped from exploding if the children are pulled out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

Another cancer the Pakistani society is suffering from is the unabated crime which emanates, to a great extent, from the plight of the children who are doomed to be the poorest human beings in the society. "Poverty," wrote Aristotle, "is the parent of crime." All social scientists and experts of criminology agree that the greatest reason for the rising wave of crime in Pakistan is the indulgence of the poverty-stricken people in criminal acts. Owing to lack of education and training the poor people find fewer opportunities to earn a decent living and when they grow impatient with their long-standing poverty in their later life, they resort to street crimes, stealing, robbery, kidnapping for ransom, killing for money, drug trafficking and the like to fill the inferno of their stomachs. Pakistan's largest metropolitan, Karachi has suffered the worst incidence of target killing in the past. It was revealed by the law enforcing agencies that the assassins would charge only a few thousand rupees to kill a person. Similarly, one can hire a suicide bomber of 15 years of age by paying only 20000 rupees to his family. An adequate education in childhood can save thousands from such crimes or self-destructive activities like drug addiction and suicide.

One of the worst effects of the poor state of affairs of the children is a bad image of the country in the world. Millions of out-of-school children, a plethora of socio-economic problems and a high crime rate are always a cause of embarrassment for the entire nation.

Some of the criminals' rings transport crime to the foreign countries and earn a bad name for the whole nation. Trafficking of children outside the country to induct them into the dark world of child pornography and sex trade demolishes self-respect and national pride of every member of the society. The poor, persecuted children of Pakistan paint a bleak picture of our society which is plunging into darkness with no end in sight. The nation which cannot look after millions of children, which cannot save them from slipping into the world of crime, which cannot weather the storm of suicide bombing and target killing; will not be able to persuade foreign investors to come and invest in their country.

Children are the future of any society as they are a great national resource, and their well being is key to prosperity and progress of the society. When Napoleon said, "Give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilised, educated nation," he very wisely explained the role of a society to give birth to a civilised generation. The Pakistani society is in dire need to address the problems of the children. Here are a few measures which the Pakistani people and their government should take to improve the condition of children for a better future.

Firstly, the government should adopt a policy of zero tolerance for crime against minors. If there is a need for new legislation, all political parties should do it on a priority basis. A special child protection department on the model of counter-terrorism department having trained personnel and special frontline police should be established to deal with the child traffickers and molesters. Begging should be made unlawful or at least begging by children should be banned and all the children involved in this practice should be sent to rehabilitation and child-welfare centres to be provided with basic necessities of life including education. Similarly, the juvenile delinquents should be sent to borstals instead of adult-jails. In Pakistan, there are just 2 juvenile jails, one in Faisalabad and one in Bahawalpur which are insufficient for the number of several thousand juvenile criminals in the country. The government should strictly implement the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000 in letter and spirit. These measures will decrease crimes against the children and perpetrated by the children.

Secondly, particulars of the street children and child labourers should be properly documented and they should be issued special registration cards to receive health services, education and financial assistance. To meet these expenses; some special tax like iqra surcharge, which was levied under the Zia ul Haq's regime, be collected from specific businesses like cinemas and private schools to be exclusively utilised for the provision of free education to the out-of-school children whose major reason to stay away from school is obviously their abject poverty and the society's oversight. As our Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) has already set an example of granting freedom to the prisoners of war in exchange for their service to teach the illiterate Muslims, our government can condition the issuance of a degree to a university student with imparting of basic education to ten out-of-school children. This way, hundreds of thousands of children will be enabled to learn how to read and write. Similarly, as some families are compelled to send their children to work in order to earn the bread, their employers can be asked to arrange for their basic education by hiring at least one teacher to give them basic education for one hour daily. However, the menace of child labour should gradually be eradicated.

Thirdly, the government and non-government organisations should step forward to provide adequate food and free-of-cost health services to save the children. Allocating a

specific budget for this purpose is the need of the hour. Since 80 per cent of the poor children live in rural areas, some innovative measures suitable to the lifestyle of rural people can be taken. Provision of a few hens per poor family or giving cattle to larger families can be a helpful strategy. Rationing of food for the poor children and launching of health cards to provide them with free health services will also solve some of their severe problems of health and nutrition. The government of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf has vowed to plant one billion trees which will cost 27 billion rupees. I think ending the misery of the children is a more deserving goal which the government can achieve by diverting the same money to the programmes of child welfare in Pakistan; the trees can wait for their turn.

Lastly, for the sake of healthy physical growth of the children, the government should provide playgrounds and recreational facilities, particularly in the urban areas where such facilities are too few to cater to the needs of the urban children. Apart from this, all the children in government and private schools should be periodically examined by physicians, and their medical condition must be reported to their parents or patrons. The sick students should be given free medical treatment. The environment of the school should be made child-friendly to ensure the children's mental grooming and personality development. Lessons on hygiene and the principles of preservation of health should also be included in their syllabi and displayed at prominent spots inside their schools. The media should also present special programmes to highlight the problems of the children and the electronic media should use the tv screen to give them basic education about personal hygiene and cleanliness.

A large number of Pakistani children live a miserable life sans the basic necessities and basic human rights. Thousands of children are compelled to rummage garbage heaps to find their livelihood and food. Hundreds of thousands of children are deprived of basic education and thousands succumb to the anti-social elements. Those that get a further lease of life after victimisation in the world of crime, themselves grow up to become criminals to add to the misery of their society. A large segment of the child population remains in the tight grip of disease for want of access to health facilities and, thus, the disease not only fills their life with pain but also curtails it. While such children remain a victim of the government's neglectfulness and society's general insensitivity, they, in the later part of their life, also add to the socio-economic complications of the society. The people of Pakistan are filled with the spirit of selflessness and love for humanity. However, so long as the pain of these children is not felt, their misery will not come to an end. Our government's relevant institutions and NGOs, as well as our media, should try their level best to highlight the issues of the children and draw the attention of all and sundry to understand their plight. The political parties should also play their role and do the needful inside and outside the parliament. The collective effort from all segments of society is the need of the hour to end the misery of the children in Pakistan.

