

Views of a Leading Social Sector Personality



""Society should move towards the realization of a social order that is based on the democratic equality of all citizens, participatory governance, and justice for all."

– I.A. Rehman



I.A. Rahman stands as the standard bearer of a long and uncompromising struggle for social and political rights of the people. He has espoused an enlightened worldview in matters ranging from education to religion; the causes he has campaigned for range from freedom of the press to the rights of workers, women, children, minorities and smaller provinces, from the rule of law and democracy to regional peace. He considers social development, including education and health, to be part of the basic human rights of the people.

I.A. Rahman is currently the Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), which he joined in 1990. He commenced his career in 1950 as a journalist with the English language daily *Pakistan Times* and rose from the position of cinema/art critic to Editor-in-Chief. He was dismissed for his support to trade union and democratic causes in 1970. He then spent nearly two decades in editorial/management positions of the Urdu daily *Azad* and the English language *Cinema the World Over* and weekly *Viewpoint*. Besides hundreds of articles and papers in national and foreign publications, he has three books to his credit: *Jinnah as a Parliamentarian* (1977), *Arts and Crafts of Pakistan* (1983) and *Pakistan Under Siege* (1990). He has served as a member of the National Commission on History and Culture and the National Advisory Council on Environment and has chaired the Pakistan Chapter of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy. He holds the Chair of the Kathmandu-based South Asia Forum for Human Rights, is an advisor to the Bangkok-based Forum-Asia, and is a member of the Bureau of South Asians for Human Rights. He is the recipient of the 2003 Nuremberg City International Human Rights Award.

SPDC spoke to Mr. Rahman and asked him to share his views on social development in Pakistan. Following is a paraphrased version of his observations.

Let me first apologize for being an old-fashioned idealist who still believes in democracy, rule of law, justice and secular ideals in today's Pakistan, and for placing social development higher than the state's prestige or the amount of foreign exchange with the State Bank of Pakistan.

I take a somewhat broad view of social development. My definition refers to improvement in social relationships between individuals and in relationships between the individual and the collective, meaning society and state. Society should move towards the realization of a social order that is based on the democratic equality of all citizens, participatory governance, and justice for all. Citizens should be able to achieve greater opportunities for higher standards of living through work that corresponds to their choice and ability. There has to be respect for human rights, including the right to educational and employment opportunities. Social development includes the enjoyment of and participation in literary and cultural activities. It translates into the greater realization of the community's aggregate intellectual and technological potential as manifested in scientific invention, academic research, and achievements in the areas of literature and culture. It means improvement in the behaviour of dominant sections of society towards the less advantaged and in the level of concern for the marginalized. And finally, social development necessitates freedom from intolerance, violence, prejudice, hate, and sectarianism.

In addition to broadening the definition of social development to facilitate progress towards it, one must also recognize that social development is a basic human right. Many of the elements constituting social development have been recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Some of these are also recognized in the fundamental rights chapter of the Constitution of Pakistan. Many societies in the world also now recognize that the rights of communities are comparable to the rights of individuals.

During the last five decades, Pakistan has not been able to achieve the level of success in social development that it should have attained and its citizens have been deprived of this right. The problem is multifaceted and its rectification demands a broader analysis than is usually attempted.

When Pakistan came into being, it was assumed that a state had been created, whereas a new state had yet to be structured. There was the view that the colonial system inherited from the British was too good to be given up and was, thus, not abandoned and has not been abandoned to this day. This has meant the retention, to a large extent, of pre-independence political, economic and social relationships. The absence, at inception, of any meaningful exercise to define the ideals of society, failed to open the doors to social development. Since then, the continued determination of social and cultural norms almost entirely by traditional and conservative feudal, tribal and religious leaders has also been responsible for impeding social development. In a country where a majority of the population is still employed in the agriculture sector, the continuation of feudalism, its mores and norms, has made social development nearly impossible. The drift towards theocratization of the state has also had a divisive impact and disrupted the integration of a pluralistic society into a nation of equal citizens.

The result is that whereas fifty years ago we had considerable freedom to think, this is no longer the case. Over the years the space for the 'unthinkable' has expanded, while the space for the 'thinkable' has contracted. This is the main barrier to social development, which demands not only development on the basis of present day wisdom but also the formulation of new social values. In a socially dynamic collective, tradition is subject to evolution. Only that part of tradition that is of eternal value is worth retaining. Therefore, to achieve any degree of social development, the features of tradition acquired in periods of feudal and colonial domination have to be shed.

The problem of social and cultural domination has been aggravated in Pakistan due to the lack of participation by civil society. Since social development and democracy are interchangeable concepts, the persistent denial of democratic rights to Pakistanis has amounted to denial of social progress. The state has curtailed the space for civil society, particularly political parties, trade unions, academics, and the youth, all of whom could have contributed to social development. We need to accept the philosophy that Quaid-e-Azam bequeathed to us. There has to be commitment to democratic governance and acceptance that democratization is a process. One aspect of repudiation of democracy has been non-acceptance of federalism in its essence. The compromise of the rights of the federating units has suppressed social dynamics and stalled social development. We need to resurrect civil

society's right to regulate public affairs through recognized organs of the state – the legislature and the judiciary.

The state stands accused of keeping a majority of the population illiterate and in poor health, of failing to recognize the right to work, and of failing to end discrimination against women and minorities, thus undermining the accumulation of social capital. To attain social norms based on the ideals of equality and justice, the state has to treat individuals as citizens and not as subjects. A move towards the ideal of equality can begin by dismantling the provisions of laws that sanction inequality, particularly those that affect less populous provinces, women and minorities. All forms of discrimination must be erased, a system of equal entitlements enforced, and justice established for all. The colonial practice of establishing justice between subjects of the state and not between the state and its subjects must give way to a system in which there can be justice not only between citizens but also between the state and the individual. Justice has to be guaranteed to the poor and the socially vulnerable rather than a commodity that only the rich and the resourceful can hope to secure. This may require not only a change in laws, but also a change in the class character of the judiciary and, indeed, of the state itself.

The role of education is important in social development. Public schools and education contributed to social and economic development when the government enforced its compulsory education law in Punjab in the 1930s, when education could be afforded by the poorest. The poor could join elite institutions, share benches with the rich and the powerful, and the doors of colleges were not closed to anyone. Now, however, schools are closed shops of different income groups and there is little scope for intermingling.

Problems in the education sector can only retard efforts to achieve social development, and the current state of this sector is not satisfactory. Today, education in Pakistan is in the hands of bureaucrats and educators who have no role in its planning and administration. There are sharp variations between institutions in big cities and in the countryside. The curricula revision exercises are myopic and lopsided. Over the past decades, the objective of education has become oriented more and more towards careerism. The development of all-round personalities and consciousness of civic responsibilities appears to have been discarded. Education institutions are conceived as a tax-free means of accumulating wealth. Students are taught to think of their own interests and not about their fellow citizens. The decline of public sector education has given rise to a private sector that is largely inspired by the profit motive. Schools and other educational institutions can only become centers of change and development when no child is denied quality education for want of means and committed professionals replace bureaucratic cabals.

The contribution of education to broader social development must be seen in perspective. For example, the nexus between education and women's empowerment is generally exaggerated. There are more educated Pakistanis today than there were in 1947, but the process of empowerment, including that of women, has not kept pace with improving education statistics. It is impossible to deny the role education has played in the uplift of women, but their empowerment demands changes in the state system and laws, demolition of feudalism and its practices, relaxation of the rigours of dogma, and recognition of the right to

economic independence. Pakistan is supposed to be a modern republic and there is a lot of talk about attaining the heights of scientific knowledge. However, at the same time, the nation seems determined to live in the past and be governed by an age old dogma. The premises underlying these two assertions are irreconcilable and give rise to a situation where agreement on what constitutes social development becomes impossible.

Thus, reforms in education alone will not achieve social development. After all, the educated are not always free of feudal mindsets, which will not change until production relations change; until the monopoly of religious leaders on interpreting religion is done away with; until curbs on the freedom of thought and participation are done away with.

Similarly, universalizing literacy and education alone will not lead to the establishment of a democratic state in Pakistan. Most arguments along these lines are based less on the merits of education and more on a desire to justify deviations from democracy. Education plays a role in the democratic process, but it is not a decisive element. On the one hand, there are examples like France, England and the USA, which made progress in terms of democratization while a majority of their populations, had not attained high levels of literacy and education. On the other hand, there are examples of fascist states with high levels of education. Pakistan's own history shows that a largely illiterate electorate did not make wrong choices whenever free and fair elections were held.

The deliberate 'mistake' made by those who wish to defer democracy until education is universalized is to suppose that these two goals are sequential rather than concurrent. However, not only are both processes interdependent, but they also share common prerequisites. Thus, at present, Pakistan is at a stage where education is needed to supplement democratization by attacking impediments to the establishment of a legitimate democracy – problems of feudalism, 'beradari', social inequality, poverty, discrimination and sectarianism. Those who stand for democracy must also press to universalize education/literacy and those who campaign for education must have democracy on their agenda.

When a society is neither educated nor democratic, democratization is required to catalyze social development. In subsequent stages of democratization, education helps because a literate and educated citizenry can make better choices, which is the essence of democracy. Democratic progress should lead to better education, in terms of quantum and content, and better education should make higher forms of democracy possible. The equation does not permit an 'either/or' proposition.

Social development is an individual and collective right and the state must acknowledge it. If this is done, the direction of the collective endeavor will have a new dimension and efforts at defining national goals will acquire greater clarity and sharpness of focus. This will also provide us with a new measure to judge the country's progress. What I am suggesting is a broader indicator than what is available in present social action plans or even in human development indices. Social development can be recognized as a right by defining it as such in the constitution, with necessary changes in laws, policies and practices.

