



Different perspective

The Baloch and Sindhis certainly believe that Pakistan should be more than an Islamic monoculture

By Raza Ahmed

Pervez Hoodbhoy is a familiar name among critics who see Pakistani society in the context of extremism and terrorism. A distinctively fierce critic of nuclear weapons and technology, Hoodbhoy is a professor of nuclear and high energy physics at the Department of Physics, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. He has delivered lectures at US and European research centres and universities. In addition to his BS, MS, and PhD degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he has received Baker Award for Electronics and Abdus Salam Prize for Mathematics.

He was awarded UNESCO's Kalinga Prize in 2003 on science. The same year, he was invited to the Pugwash Council. He has also received the Joseph A. Burton Award from the American Physical Society.

His book, *Islam and Science -- Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*, has been translated into seven languages. Understandably, Hoodbhoy is one of the most sought-after commentator on nuclear and related issues today. Recently, TNS sat with Pervez Hoodbhoy and focused on various aspects of Pakistani state, society, and regional affairs. Excerpts follow.

The News on Sunday: What, in your opinion, is the root cause of religious extremism-terrorism in Pakistan?

Pervez Hoodbhoy: It came from Pakistan's foreign policy in the early 1980s. The US and Pakistan, with Saudi funding, created the deadly jihadist machinery after the USSR invaded Afghanistan. For over a decade, they armed, financed, and trained the mujahideen. Once the USSR withdrew and disintegrated, the infrastructure should have been disbanded. But then Pakistani generals, like Mirza Aslam Beg, decided to use jihadists to conquer Kashmir and establish strategic depth in Afghanistan. Those mujahideen, "assets" as they were called, are now slaughtering our soldiers and officers whenever and wherever they can.

TNS: Has Pakistan been misdirected because no political or intellectual input seems to have gone into policy making?

PH: Civilian and military governments are to be blamed for today's catastrophic situation. Although he denies it now, let us remember that Nawaz Sharif was thick with Musharraf on Kargil and had accompanied him to visit the troops there. Our insistence on Kashmir being the number one problem is the cause of many of our sorrows. We did not realise that the well-being of Pakistan, and addressing the grievances of Balochistan and Sindh, is more important than liberating Kashmir from Indian occupation.

TNS: Is there any logic on the part of our decision-makers to put Kashmir ahead of people's welfare?

PH: We have a mental block because we teach our children that Kashmir is the 'unfinished' agenda of partition and that Pakistan is incomplete without it. But this way of thinking is exactly what made the army the dominant force in Pakistan. Kashmir also made us dependent on the West because the money for creating a large fighting force could not come from anywhere else. Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO, allowing the US to heavily influence our military leaders, if not control them. We forgot that the most important thing is to educate our population and provide them with employment, housing, electricity, etc. But let us not blame the military alone for this. It was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who promised war of a thousand years against India.

TNS: Do you think social alienation has made people to resort to religion in Pakistan?

PH: Across the world, when all else fails people turn towards God. Lawlessness, breakdown of the social contract, the corruption of rulers, and manifest economic injustice means that there is less and less faith in the government of the day. So, people get attracted more and more to hawkers of various religious utopias. Hence the explosion of religiosity that one sees today. It has made Pakistan a totally different country from what it was in its first 30-40 years. Today, if you ask a person on the street whether he considers himself Pakistani first or Muslim first, the big majority would say 'Muslim first'. This is the completely opposite in India where a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or a Christian would say he is an Indian first. This means that we are failing to construct a nation. A nation by definition is made of people who share common values, ideals, the same way of thinking, and who are bound together by the notion that there is common good in being together. Religion is certainly one component of Pakistan's nationhood, but just one. It is inadequate by itself because Afghans, Iranians, and Saudis would then also have to be considered Pakistanis by this definition.

TNS: This sounds realistic but do you think a significant number of us believe this?

PH: The Baloch and Sindhis are certainly a significant number, and they certainly believe that Pakistan should be more than an Islamic monoculture. Sadly, our rulers keep harping upon unity and denying diversity. That one-unit mentality, imposed by General Ayub Khan, brought about the alienation that we see today. Even the fall of Dhaka did not open the eyes of our rulers to the realisation that people's history, culture, and aspirations are just as important as religion. When shall we learn? Balochistan is in open revolt and Sindh is not far behind.

TNS: Will Pakistan stay together? And what, in your opinion, should be the collective goals of Pakistanis?

PH: Pakistan must stay together because it makes sense for us to be together as a geographical unit. If you try to separate Punjab from Sindh, it won't work. The Punjab would have no outlet into the sea and would be locked in by India. On the other hand, Sindh is definitely dependent on Punjab for water. So, I not only want Pakistan to stay together, but to thrive. This requires that we have peace with our neighbours and stop using jihad as a secret weapon. Then, we need a new federal arrangement that gives much greater powers to the provinces, a fairer taxation system, accountability of rulers, and revamping of the legal system. Above all, we must have educational system that emphasises modern knowledge and civic values rather than one which prepares us only for the hereafter.

TNS: In the backdrop of this alarming situation, don't you think there is a need of a new social contract among people and nationalities of Pakistan?

PH: The notion of a social contract is a very critical one. The citizens of a state owe allegiance to the state because they feel that in return they get protection for their lives and property, and that their legal and economic rights will be respected. So rulers can come and go, but the individual citizen's contract with the state remains intact. When rulers flout the law of the land, it signifies a serious problem. If a state cannot protect its people from internal challenges, then society starts falling apart. I am alarmed by the extent to which citizens have taken recourse to private security agencies. For example, every house in every city's housing society has multiple guards. If we could straighten out the barbed wire in our cities, it would be enough to go around the world several times.

TNS: So, it is not just the crisis of the state but also that of society?

PH: Society is indeed gripped by a crisis and has moved towards factionalisation as a protective move. It is both deeply class-ridden and sect-ridden. Entire mohallahs have only Shias, Bohris, Ismailis or Christians living within them. The rich have put enormous walls around themselves, and are increasingly putting physical barriers to prevent being visited by those from poorer parts of a city. In part, it was the state which has been responsible for creating separate abodes for the rich and the poor. Islamabad's different sectors, for instance, were designed for different socio-economic classes. Differentiation and discrimination, not integration, were built into the city's initial planning.

TNS: Is a classless society possible in Pakistan?

PH: Eventually, yes. But we have lost a lot of time, so this will not be achieved for another generation or more. Secularism and socialism alone can guarantee a prosperous and peaceful Pakistan. We have a very diverse population and cannot afford discrimination, particularly at the level of the constitution. The concept of minority, as given in the Objectives Resolution, is fundamentally incompatible with democracy and nation-building. It must be dispensed with.

TNS: Do you agree that clerics in Pakistan are playing the role clerics play elsewhere, i.e., that they become agents of the ruling class?

PH: No, I do not agree. Clerics have their own interests, and often their goals coincide with those of the ruling clique. But it is an over-simplification to say that they are mere agents. The mullah's importance increases in direct proportion to the role that religion plays in society. In Pakistan's earlier years, there was less public role of religion and mullahs were relatively less important than today. Madrassas were few and far between, and often viewed with pity as places for famished students. But today they have a lot of money, fancy computers, and the maulvis look very well-fed. Rather than think of mullahs as agents of the ruling class, one sees that they are rulers in places like FATA.

TNS: Various experts point at different power centres in Pakistan. Have the clerics also emerged as a new power centre?

PH: Pakistan's power centres include the army, the elected government, and the religious establishment. The religious establishment is not entirely unified or coherent, nor does it get a sizable proportion of the popular vote (except what we saw with the MMA in NWFP, but that was an exception). However, it has a disproportionate influence upon society. The sermon before Friday prayers gives clerics the opportunity to drill ideas into a captive audience. Sometimes it is about religious affairs, but often about national and international affairs. The contents are frequently inflammatory, leading the society towards intolerance and an inability to live in peace with itself or others.

TNS: It is also said that clerics in Pakistan are also agents of depoliticisation and status quo forces?

PH: Clerics in Pakistan have their own agenda. They want to rule. Although different sects have different versions of utopia, they all believe that solving social, economic, and political problems demands returning to some imagined past. The failure of looking for solutions to new problems in old times may be clear to us but not to them. Because they are rivals of each other, they have been unable to create a coherent political platform. The day that unity happens in Pakistan I think we would be in for a revolution -- and a very bloody one.

TNS: Would you agree that political vacuum in Pakistan in terms of long years of military rule and deliberate depoliticisation has been the main cause of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan?

PH: We cannot just blame everything on the military, although it is doubtlessly guilty. It is a fact that our secular governments were corrupt, and that they also pandered to the mullah. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's concessions emboldened them. Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif did nothing to reverse Zia's Islamisation. Musharraf played with the jihadists until they became his sworn enemies. Weaknesses of the political leadership and its tenuous legitimacy, have strengthened religious forces.

TNS: Is there anything like Islamic socialism, such as what Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had come up with?

PH: It was just rhetoric. ZAB tried to please both socialists and the Islamic parties by inventing this new thing. But it had no wings and could not fly. It is curious that ZAB spoke of socialism but there was no land reform in his tenure. His large land holdings remained intact and were inherited by his children. ZAB's attempt to forge Muslim unity worked well for a while -- or at least had that appearance. Today, even the pretence of unity has disappeared, as the Palestinians have tragically discovered.

TNS: How relevant is Marxism and Leninism to the contemporary world?

PH: Personally, I think Marx had some interesting ideas. He had an exceptionally good understanding of the social forces of his time, i.e. the Industrial Age. However, contemporary society is much more complex. He underestimated the power of ideology, religion, and ethnicity. These factors have turned out to be extremely powerful in determining world affairs. So it is not just an individual relationship with the means of production that determines consciousness. So, while I give Marx maximum credit for understanding and explaining his day and age, his predictions proved less than prophetic.

TNS: Is there a possibility of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan?

PH: It is unlikely but one cannot rule it out. There have been four situations (1987, 1990, 1999, 2002) where there was talk of nuclear conflict and nuclear threats were hurled in both directions. People say these tense situations did not escalate into war itself because nuclear deterrence kicked in. That is, of course true. But is there a guarantee that every crisis will resolve itself peacefully? Can a conventional conflict be always prevented from escalating upwards? Certainly, there is no mathematical theorem that says this.

TNS: Why have Pakistani universities been unable to produce scientists of international repute?

PH: Science and scholarship is a product of thinking minds. In our universities we don't think, we merely reproduce what is already known. There is little practice with problem solving, or dealing with new and unusual situations. Universities will not improve merely by dumping more money in them. You can fill libraries with books and labs with the best equipment, but it won't make much difference by itself. Pakistani universities today have more equipment and buildings than ever before but the quality of learning is no better. So what we need is attitudinal change, a new culture that values learning. We must stop constraining our students both intellectually as well as socially. Boys and girls are separated from each other, and our girl students are disappearing under the burqa. When I teach my class I can't see the faces of half of them. When you have girls thus hidden away, they are not going to be intellectually creative and curious. Instead they become passive note-takers.

TNS: This attitude change seems to have led to behavioral changes?

PH: Absolutely. One can see growing conservatism on the campuses. One also sees that free expression is tightly controlled by university authorities. On the one hand, despite the present government decision to lift the ban on the students' union activities, university administrations have not allowed them to work. On the other hand, the goons of Islami Jamiat Tulaba (IJT) rampage frequently. They recently terrorised and beat up students and teachers at Punjab University. IJT activists killed a student at Peshawar University just because he was listening to music. So, we have fascist-religious thugs who are a curse to our universities.