

Faiz on problems of cultural planning in Asia, Pakistan

Alien imperialist domination of Asian countries was not merely a passive process of pure political supremacy. It was also an active process of social and cultural subversion



The vast land mass known as Asia encompasses numerous countries and peoples and the cultural patterns specific to different lands do not easily yield to broad generalizations. Thus we have in Asia a number of Socialist States where cultural planning obviously takes on a completely different orientation from other countries operating under a different socio-political organization. Then there are countries which have escaped direct foreign colonial domination or occupation and where the continuity of cultural traditions was not radically subverted by foreign influences. Lastly, there is a group to which my country - Pakistan - belongs who have been only recently liberated after a prolonged era of subjugation. This paper is mainly relevant to the cultural problems of the last group, although some of these problems may be shared in some measure by the other groups as well because dominative western influences have been operative there as well at some stage of their political history.

Culture in the broad sense is commonly defined today as the whole way of life of a given human community. In a more restricted sense it comprises finished or stylized expression of this way of life in various forms of creative and artistic expression. For purposes of convenience these two inter-related aspects may be discussed separately.

In the broader sense, culture in human societies has two main aspects: an external formal aspect and an inner ideological one. The external forms of culture, social or artistic, are basically an organized expression of its inner ideological content. Both are integral components of a given social structure. They are changed or modified as this structure changes and because of this organic link they also promote and influence such

changes in their present organism. Cultural problems, therefore, cannot be studied or understood or solved in isolation from social problems, i.e. problems of Asian countries also have to be understood and their solutions found in the light of this larger perspective--in the context of their underlying social problems. Very broadly speaking, these problems are primarily the problems of arrested growth: they originated primarily from long years of foreign domination and the remnants of a backward, outmoded social structure. This should not require much elaboration. Today's industrialized or economically powerful western countries caught up with various Asian lands between the 16th and 19th centuries. Some among these were fairly developed feudal societies with ancient traditions of advanced feudal culture. Others had yet to progress beyond primitive pastoral tribalism. The social and cultural development of them all was frozen at the point of their political subjugation and remained so until the advent of political independence. The culture of these ancient feudal societies, in spite of much technical and intellectual excellence, was restricted to a small privileged class which rarely intermingled with the parallel unsophisticated folk culture of the general masses. Primitive tribal culture, in spite of its child-like beauty, had little intellectual content. Both feudal and tribal societies living contiguously in the same homelands were constantly engaged in tribal, racial, religious or other feuds with their tribal and feudal rivals. Foreign colonialist domination accentuated this dual fragmentation, i.e. the division among different tribal and national groups on the one hand and the division among different classes within the same tribal or national group on the other.

One basic cultural problem which faces many of these countries, therefore, is the problem of cultural integration. Vertical integration which means providing a common ideological and national basis for a multiplicity of national cultural patterns and horizontal integration which involves educating and elevating the entire body of the people to the same cultural and intellectual level. Thus, the qualitative political change from colonialism to independence was required to be followed by a similar qualitative change in the social structure left behind by the colonialist era.

Alien imperialist domination of Asian countries was not merely a passive process of pure political supremacy. It was also an active process of social and cultural subversion. It tried on the one hand to kill or destroy whatever was good, progressive, and forward looking in the old feudal or pre-feudal structures by way of arts, skills, customs, manners, humanist values or mental enlightenment. It tried to sustain and perpetuate, on the other, whatever was unwholesome, reactionary, or backward looking: ignorance, superstition, servility, and class-exploitation. What was handed back to the newly liberated countries, therefore, was not the original social structure taken over at the point of their subjugation but the perverted and emasculated remnants of this structure. Superimposed on these remnants were cheap, spurious and second-hand imitations of

western cultural patterns by way of language, customs, manners, art forms, and ideological values.

This poses a number of other basic cultural problems for these countries. First, the problem of salvaging from the debris of their shattered national cultures those elements which are basic to national identity, which can be adjusted and adapted to the needs of a more advanced social structure, and which can help to strengthen and promote progressive social values and attitudes. Second, to reject and discard those elements which are relevant to a backward and out-moded social structure, which are either irrelevant or repugnant to a more advanced system of social relationships and which hinder the progress of more rational, enlightened human values and attitudes. Third, to accept and assimilate from imported foreign and western cultures those elements which help to elevate national culture to higher technical, aesthetic and intellectual standards. Fourth, to repudiate those elements among these imports which are deliberately aimed at promoting degeneracy, decadence, and social reaction. Roughly speaking, these problems may be termed. problems of new cultural adaptation, assimilation, emancipation, and purification.

In addition to the above, political independence has also given rise to certain new attitudes, subjective as well as social, which also require rectification and reorientation, e.g. the craze for chauvinistic revivalism and the craze for indiscriminate modernism. Thus certain social groups insist that it is not only the good and valuable element of traditional, cultural and social practice which should be revived and revitalized but also the bad and worthless elements. Conversely, not only the bad and worthless elements of modern western culture must be discarded and repudiated but the useful and progressive elements as well. The baby must be thrown out with the bath water! The motivation of these schools is primarily not cultural but political, i.e. to hamper the progress of rational social awareness and to confirm the exploiting classes in their interests and privileges. Secondly, political and commercial entrepreneurs from the more advanced western countries have sought to fill the cultural vacuum confronting newly liberated countries with a deluge of cultural, or more correctly, anti-cultural trash in the form of debased literature, magazines, music, dances, fashion, etc. which extol and glorify crimes, violence, cynicism, perversion, and profligacy. A good deal of this trash has been indiscriminately accepted by certain other sections of *these* communities under the mistaken notion of modernism.

From this point of view some of the major cultural problems of Asian countries, e.g. arrested growth, uneven distribution, internal contradictions, imitativeness, etc. are primarily social problems related to *the* organization, values, judgments, and social practices of a backward social structure. Their solution, therefore; lies outside the domain of a

purely cultural endeavor and falls within the domain of political and socio-economic reforms.

II

Notwithstanding what has been said above, it should also be borne in mind that while national culture cannot transcend the limitations of a given social structure it can certainly lag behind it. In other words, while cultural activity cannot go beyond the progressive potentialities of a particular society it can certainly fall short of what is both possible and desirable within the limitations of this society. It can accept or reject attitudes; it can adopt or ignore measures in the cultural field which are conducive to social progress and intellectual enlightenment within its own social framework. This is particularly true of those forms of human culture which are alienable to deliberate planning and conscious promotional effort, e.g. creative skills and the body of the arts. It is in this context that I would like to speak about the situation in *my* own country and the problems and solutions that have been, or are being faced and attempted.

In May 1968, the then Government of Pakistan set up a Committee under the chairmanship of the writer of this paper to investigate and report on these problems and what follows are some of the conclusions arrived at by this Committee. While discussing certain national attitudes inimical to the promotion and development of art and culture it was observed:

"There is a school of thinking which holds that all cultural activity in general and the performing arts in particular are immoral and anti-religious. The anti-culture, anti-art attitudes fostered by this school mainly derive from the following:

i) Prolonged colonial subjection subverted the native cultural patterns of our old society and the imperialist rulers sought to replace them by their own cultural imports. Everything native by way of culture and the arts was held up to contempt and ridicule and their western counterparts held up as the only models fit for imitation. The resultant disruption of national life and impoverishment of all the national arts robbed large sections of our people, particularly the influential section called the Civil Lines' of all love, respect and understanding of their national arts. (ii) During the declining years of the Mughal Empire in the sub-continent, as elsewhere in similar historical conditions, the arts were seduced to become handmaids of dissolute courts and instruments of their *decadent* pleasures. This was particularly true of music and dancing which was encouraged to become the monopoly of a socially and morally unacceptable class. After the downfall of the Mughals, the moral indignation evoked by *these* decadent practices and the social prejudices attaching to the class of 'singing girls' were detached from the social conditions which gave them birth and transferred, in the popular mind, to the arts themselves.

(iii) Since Independence these anti-art attitudes inherited from the past have been seized upon by certain factions in the country for topical political ends. They first sought to equate all music and dancing with the lewd vulgarizations of these arts by inept professionals. From these premises, it was easy to proceed to the conclusion, as has often been done, that all art is immoral, hence anti-religious, hence ideologically unacceptable. Any ideological objection that can be brought against any art, *however*, must relate to some particular form and content of a particular art and not *the* art as such. This obvious platitude is deliberately ignored because the basic motivation of this school is neither moral nor religious but socio-political. This motivation seeks to promote attitudes hostile to all agencies of sensitive feeling and enlightened thought, including scientific research and artistic creation.

(iv) The generally negative public and official attitudes towards national art and culture have opened the gates for a resolute cultural invasion by western commercial and political agencies. Thus, in the last few years many corrupt and perverted versions^{ns} of western culture focused on sex, violence, and profligacy, have provided the staple cultural fare for the sophisticated Pakistani boy and girl and the main outlet for his or her natural craving for self-expression.

(v) A second fairly influential point in the controversy is that culture and the arts, *even though* they may not be morally undesirable or ideologically reprehensible, are still something of a luxury which only the rich countries can afford. Developing countries, like Pakistan, must put first things first and devote all their resources to material developments, i.e. agriculture and industry, and let the harp and the fiddle wait until better days come round--just as the poor would put his daily bread before the pleasures of art."

We are unable to agree with this point of view.

In a developing society, where the paucity of funds hinders all development, education constitutes personal capital and hence counts as a basic factor in development. Similarly, culture which represents the awareness of a society of its values, aims, and aspirations provides an important incentive for a national development. Any development efforts which ignore the emotional and spiritual aid provided by a nation's awareness of its own goals and aspirations are bound to engender antagonistic contradictions between the people and the agencies responsible for such development. Cultural activity in a developing nation is in many ways a form of socio-political activity and it is only through this activity that a people's full participation in nation-building efforts can be ensured.

Secondly, the arts are as much a factor in the material process of production as is education. Just as an investment in national education

has a direct bearing on national productivity through creating superior skills, an investment in the arts has a direct role in improving the standards and qualities of many forms of industrial production by superior fashioning and designing.

Thirdly, in the world of today, advertising and public relations are no longer regarded as a luxury but an important change in industrial revenues. Nations do their advertising and public relations through cultural exchange, i.e. exchanges of art products and performances.

Before the inception of Pakistan there was, understandably, no such entity as a Pakistani nation. Politically, the people of present-day Pakistan (leaving aside some minority groups) were part of the Indian Muslim Community. Ethnically and geographically they were called after the areas they inhabited, i.e. Bengalis, Punjabis, Sindhis, Baluchis, Pathans, etc. Understandably, therefore, the culture of the new Pakistani nation when it emerged was not a finished, ready-made unified entity. The differences in social development among different regions of the country, differences of climate and geographical habitat, ethnic and historical factors and administrative divisions enforced by foreign rulers, all combined to make the culture of the people of the present-day Pakistan a composite of diversified patterns. Nevertheless, these people in all parts of Pakistan shared a common historical experience as well as those common ethical and cultural mores which originated from the religion they professed. It was this common religion and the sum total of these values and their expression in social life which made the Muslims of the sub-continent emerge as a separate and distinct cultural entity over a long period of history.

There is considerable difference of opinion on how precisely this culture should be defined. There appears to be some agreement, however, that the culture of the people of Pakistan includes everything which has been integrated into the bloodstream of the social and historical life of our people. This conglomeration is principally composed of (a) the religion of Islam which provides the ethical and ideological basis for the people's way of life; (b) the indigenous cultures of different linguistic regions inherited from their own specific cultural past; and (c) elements of western culture absorbed since the days of British occupation. Added to the above are the distinctive cultures of minority groups who form a part of the Pakistan nation.

This raises some debatable issues, e.g. the issues of regional cultures. The basic and characteristic vocabulary of our people's culture, i.e. language, dress, customs, architecture, music, folk arts, etc. has naturally been better preserved in our villages and the countryside of the various regions than in big towns where dominative foreign influences have introduced a cosmopolitanism composed of many elements and characteristics which are not exclusively national. The growth of these folk

cultures was arrested at various levels of development with the disintegration of feudal societies, the withdrawal of feudal patronage, and the concentration of power, wealth and educational and cultural facilities in the big towns. A reversal of this process of stagnation, therefore, and a revival of these regional cultures--the most authentic storehouse of what is distinctively Pakistani--seems obviously called for.

This raises two issues: first, whether such a revival would promote centrifugal tendencies of narrow regionalism and militate against the goals of national integration; and secondly, whether such a revival and the development of regional cultures would yield to some sort of a synthesis on the national plane.

The consensus of the opinions can be summarized as follows:

(a) In as much as all regional cultures are an organic part of the totality of our national culture, love for the part does not preclude, and, in fact, predicates love for the whole. The confusion of thought which continues to plague this subject stems from one basic fallacy which seeks to counterpose national and regional cultures as antagonistic rivals and thus postulates that one can or would develop only at the expense of the other. This fallacy can be dispelled by a clear understanding of the obvious fact that just as the country is a geographical union of its constituent regions and the nation is a political union of the people inhabiting these regions, similarly, national culture is an aggregate of these regional cultures plus the unifying bonds of faith and history.

(b) A genuine synthesis of diverse forms of regional cultures into national patterns cannot be brought about by any forcible impositions through administrative means. It can only evolve through a gradual accumulation of affinities and a gradual assimilation of "sympathetic elements into a new compound." This is possible only if "diversity" is not misinterpreted as disunity and the natural process of the growth of diverse elements is not perverted or stifled by an impatience for immediate results.

IV

The problem of national identity also relates to the classical tradition of the arts. And this presents a different set of problems.

(A) Since this tradition, particularly in arts like music and dancing, is much older than the Muslim era, it contains many ingredients unrelated to Muslim social traditions.

(B) Since the Indo-Muslim civilization was not confined to the areas which now form Pakistan, it contains many ingredients which transcend our boundaries and cannot be deemed exclusively Pakistani.

Should this tradition, then, be owned and accepted wholesale or should it be recast into a mold nearer to the heart of a Pakistani? There is considerable difference of opinion over this issue. One school holds that to establish a completely different national and ideological identity it is necessary to discard all these ingredients, and if this is not possible with regard to a particular artistic tradition, it is best to do away with this tradition altogether. The opposite view is that by maligning a tradition evolved by Muslim society in the days of their greatest glory, a tradition which represents their main contribution to the cultural history of this subcontinent, we really malign our own history; that we are not justified in taking exception to what our ancestors, in whom we take pride, not only took no exception to but actively sponsored and patronized.

As for territorial limits, it should be obvious that some of the most basic components of our cultural heritage originated and evolved in areas beyond the present geographical boundaries of Pakistan. These include the Urdu language and literature and the whole body of Arabic, Iranian, Central Asian, and various other influences which have been integrated into our cultural tradition.

Lastly, there is the problem of re-valuing our cultural and artistic tradition in the light of contemporary experience, the adjustment of "continuities from the past" with the demands of the present."

Western societies, after nearly two hundred years of scientific, industrial, and technological advancement, mainly at the expense of the peoples they dominated, have introduced to the world techniques, methodologies, tools, materials, and modes of production unknown before. These advances, in their turn, have induced new habits of thought and cultural expression, thus modifying or eliminating various traditional elements in social or cultural life. In developing and newly liberated countries, like Pakistan, this process has just begun. And along with it have emerged the horns of a dilemma--of tradition versus modernism.

This dilemma has generated three tendencies--one of blind imitativensess of our own past in the name of tradition, the other of blind imitativensess of everything Western in the name of modernism, the third of a tasteless hodge-podge of the two in order to have the best of both worlds. We are of the opinion that all these attitudes are incorrect, that:

(a) The continuity of tradition does not mean its perpetuation in toto. For instance, the place of our traditional arms, the sword and the spear, is no longer in the battlefield but in the museum. Nevertheless, they should be preserved, loved, and respected as part of our heritage.

(b) The acquisition of scientific, technological, industrial, and intellectual knowledge from the West does not necessitate a negation of our own historic personality.

Therefore those elements of our traditional culture which were only relevant to another set of conditions in the past and have outlived their utility cannot and should not be artificially perpetuated merely on the grounds of sentiment. The sentiment of love and respect alone should be enough. The application of new techniques in the arts, experimentation with new forms of expression, utilization of new materials, popularization of new artistic concepts should not be discouraged merely because they have originated in the West, provided the artist retains his/her identity as a member of his/her on community.

(c) A living and dynamic culture is one which provides conditions for maximum contribution by national talent for the aesthetic and intellectual enrichment of the community at the highest level of contemporary attainment. Our endeavor should be to create the most favorable conditions for this maximum contribution at appropriate levels.

This article was published in NOV 1984 in the magazine "Pakistan Progressive" by the Dept. of Economics , University of Wisconsin at Madison USA.

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/faiz-on-problems-of-cultural-planning-in-asia-pakistan.html>

The logo for Viewpoint features the word "Viewpoint" in a stylized font. The "V" is large and red, while the remaining letters "iewpoint" are in a green, lowercase, sans-serif font. The "i" and "j" have small dots above and below them respectively.

Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the ones who think differently