

*En Route*

## Rights issues and the social sciences

ATLE HETLAND

Last weekend I attended a national conference organized under the auspices of the new Inter-University Consortium for the Promotion of Social Sciences (IUCPSS). It was a great event and many interesting talks were given and a myriad of ideas shared. At a Q&A session a young visitor from a European country asked why there was so little concern in Pakistan about the horrendous fire in Karachi, which a few days earlier had killed hundreds of factory workers due to neglect of safety regulations. She thought there had been more attention given too a poorly made anti-Islamic, foreign film. The young woman had a point, or at least a starting point for further debate and analysis.

Yes, it was possible to compare the two events which happened closely in time. However, if we want to analyze the events more deeply, the topics should be kept separate. In addition, each of them would have a number of related topics that also needed to be studied, again, mostly separately. When the direct causes of the fire has been studied, and criminal neglect considered, then we should move on to study and debate about labour laws, working conditions and life of the poor working class people, who actually make Pakistan go round.

At the conference I attended, one of the speakers said that the role of and debate about the labour unions in Pakistan is negligible today. That is probably true, and we could add, university teachers and researchers should join hands and help each other understand the issues and find solutions. It is a fact that no workers' rights can be developed unless the workers themselves fight for their rights, but academicians can help.

And then the film ridiculing Islam which was recently released should indeed be studied and debated, but it should be done separately from the factory fire tragedy. There are many issues to consider about the film. I assume the young speaker at the conference hinted at one of them, notably that it has probably led to too much action, even violence and attacks of official American buildings abroad. That is to go too far, of course, and we should study why it has happened I hope that religious scholars and social scientists can study the events in detail to be able to understand the causes for such emotional and widespread actions. It is often the case when Islam is criticized in outrageous ways. I hope the researchers can help find better solutions and ways of reacting in future, yes, because it is likely that we will have more of such cases. We should agree on acceptable and constructive ways of response.

Since the young woman at the conference drew our attention to both the fire and the film, to a labour event and a religious event, both very tragic, let me with her that there in some ways are relations between the two events. It is also a fact that religious leaders should be concerned about the first tragedy, as I am sure they are, because the tragic event has moral and religious aspects to it. In the end, most aspects are moral and religious.

The title of the conference I attended over the weekend was "The State of Fundamental Rights in Pakistan". I came to reflect on the fact that it was held in the most comfortable room thinkable with the best lunch you could wish for. Nothing wrong with that, but it is always gives me, and I am sure other participants, something to think about. The young woman I mentioned above did not make any comparison between that and the poor workers and other people just around the corner, even in the affluent city of Islamabad. Of course, we can excuse ourselves and say that we discussed research, which could lead to policies and practical changes and betterment of people's lives. We were not attending an action-oriented conference although some of the young Pakistani speakers were more militant than I have heard in a long time. Good was that, but analyses were fairly simplistic, with few suggestions for strategies for how to see a better and fairer Pakistan for all. Perhaps social scientists must become better at their work, and perhaps, too, they must become better at taking fieldtrips and seeing the real life outside the universities? Because, focus-group meetings, the recent social science data

collection tool, and the least scientific, is far from enough for understanding “how the other half live”, and for learning about so many other unknown things in Pakistan’s deeply class-divided society.

And then, since it was only I and the Vice-Chancellor from Bahawalpur, Prof. Dr. M. Mukhtar, who had visible grey hair, which he pointed out, I came to reflect on the issue of age of staff in the social sciences and the elderly in society at large. One of the presentations was about how we treat old people in Pakistan, and it had many sympathetic wishes for the future. The Gujrat Vice-Chancellor drew attention to his university’s large study of the elderly in Punjab. He said most of them have to fend for themselves whereas it is conventional wisdom that the younger members in the families still care for their older members. Well, I still believe they do, more so in Pakistan than in my home country Norway. But even Norwegians do it, till this very day. In Norway it is usually a social responsibility of women; in Pakistan, men have greater responsibility.

And then, being on the “Norwegian topic”, at the age of 67 every citizen is entitled to his or her pension. Some of the forty thousand Pakistani-Norwegians in the country are now reaching retirement age, and for the first time in their life, many Pakistani women receive a pay-cheque. No, wonder that they have become patriotic on behalf of their new land, and they have gained an unknown independence, similar only to upper-class women in Pakistan. This right for old people in Norway is only about three-quarters of a century old. They can enjoy a good time after long and strenuous days as homemakers or employees. By the way, only some twenty percent of Norwegians live in old people’s homes when they need extensive medial services and care, usually in their 80s and 90s. No, we don’t send old people there to get rid of them!

On the second day of the conference, a retired Norwegian school teacher, Anne Halvorsen, stopped over in Islamabad en route to a special education school in Kharian, where her former Pakistani-Norwegian colleague, Bashir Ahmed, who has also retired, stays part of the year. She told me that it was easier for her to travel now because her mother had passed away last year, at the age of 102. When they celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, the old woman was doubtful that she could really be that old. She said that 100 years was a very high age and had gotten the idea that her daughter and grandchildren were fooling her! Yes, she spent her last years in an old people’s home where she could be looked well after, but her daughter went to see her every day, and sometimes they went for a drive in the city and visited friends and relatives.

The social sciences in Pakistan are made up mostly of young people. They are often quite inexperienced and the subject areas have in the past had less status than they deserve. The conference I attended and the new Consortium behind it which I mentioned at the introduction of this article will help improve the social sciences in Pakistan. Better skills are needed and much of that can only be obtained through practical research. I hope politicians, civil servants and others will realize the importance of social science research, and set aside funds.

But there are many other factors than funds that are important to develop competent social scientists. The researchers own life experience and their general knowledge of the lower classes, in addition to deeper scientific understanding of society, are essential. The values and attitudes of the social scientists are essential.

We usually say that if young people are not radical and militant, then they don’t have a heart and their own thoughts. But then, if we in older age don’t become moderate and pragmatic, then we don’t have a head and we remain irresponsible. I am not sure this is quite true, especially not in Pakistan among young university students and staff, and the social sciences remain relatively new and underdeveloped, and student unions are just debate forums, at best.

Young academicians have to conform. They have to learn what older colleagues know, and then they can start questioning existing truths and look for alternatives. Few seem to be able to be critical in a systematic way at an early age. We should put more emphasis on teaching students to be critical and radical, and document their arguments. Critiquing is not synonymous with disloyalty. It is part of the responsibility of a social scientist. If a social scientist has stopped asking critical questions about rights, he or she is no longer a social scientist! It is true that we don’t always have the right answers, but we shed some light on reality so that societies can be better understood and improve. Last weekend’s conference and the new Consortium help us on the way.

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The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from research, diplomacy and development aid.