

Book Review

Tasneem Ahmad Siddiqui, *Towards Good Governance*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2001, Price: Pak Rs. 495/-.

Tasneem Ahmad Siddiqui is a bureaucrat turned author and that in itself speaks volumes about the book under discussion. It is an absorbing and refreshing publication, but somewhat lacking in expression. It is amply apparent that the author has his heart in the right place and the ideas are sound and convincing. In essence, though replete with insights and jarring home truths, it is an exhaustive litany of laments and then, eureka, the author has simple, easy to follow solutions to all the ills plaguing Pakistani society. The saving grace of course is that unlike the majority of Cassandra-like intellectuals of whom there is no dearth, Siddiqui hopes against hope and sees a plausible way out of the morass.

The book commences with a section on an insider's view of the bureaucracy. The author makes many a pertinent comment, that the basic shortcoming of our planning is lack of innovation, and that community participation is the only mechanism by which the government can reach out to the under privileged. Discussing the present ordeal of city life, the writer categorically states that the crisis of governance lies in the fact that it does not reflect the reality on the ground. There is a lack of understanding on the part of the ruling elites of the country's predicament, ad hocism being their watchword at the best of times.

Not that all is despair. The author outlines certain remedies such as the need for small and lean government, autonomy being adopted as the *modus operandi* of governance, elected local government, the imperative of transparency and the need for a bottom-up, pro-people approach in planning and development processes. These are but some of the host of concrete, hard core solutions the author offers. And this in fact makes the book truly worthwhile. It isn't a spiel of criticism for criticism's sake, the ramblings of an armchair socialist. The solutions are well thought out, practical and feasible.

There follows a chapter on the mindset of the ruling elite. He talks about the system of governance being 'cabalistic', whereby all major decisions are taken by a handful of people, the reactive rather than proactive nature of the system. All told, there are incisive insights with an abundance of information tightly packed into crisp sections.

Siddiqui then hits the nail on the head by asking what one would like to query from the economic pundits of today: "Why are a majority of our people poor when the economy has made such rapid progress?" What went wrong? If pragmatic policies had been adopted, the country would have become another Japan or Singapore according to the author. A facile answer no doubt, but a home truth too.

The author also in the chapters that follow discusses the cynicism of the educated classes, the macro economic scene and various other aspects of the socio economic canvas. He is not over emphasising the point when, to quote, he says 'We simply have to follow principles of good economic management, tighten our belts, and avoid ostentatious and vulgar consumerism'.

Discussing the moral crisis that pervades Pakistani society, the author has scathing criticism of the acquisitive instincts, the greed, selfishness and opportunism of the privileged. 'It appears all of us have sold our souls to Mephistopheles. This is what our dilemma is today', he states. I, for one, couldn't agree with him more.

His chapter on 'Why do people come to the cities' is relatively disappointing, says nothing new as such, old wine in new bottles. Then 'Breaking through the poverty trap' is again a chapter without much in depth analysis and seems to skirt the issue. There are far too many generalisations in this and the following chapter on managing our cities.

The writer talks about conflict in civil society and indicates a remarkable understanding and empathy of the poor in our society. He quite rightly lauds the fact that the poor are not pessimistic, are hard working, enterprising and have a couldn't care less attitude about who rules the country because of the absence of delivery. Further that in place of the dependency syndrome that once existed, the poor realise that the government will not come to their rescue and they are attempting to discover their own ways to solve problems. Succinctly summing up the situation as it currently exists, he says that at present there are two economies. One is the formal sector with their particular stamp of doing things and the other is the informal, reflecting the people's own initiative, unrecognised furthermore in official statistics.

Siddiqui talks of mechanisms by which people can initiate their development as alternative systems, but fails to consider bottlenecks and barriers such as inhibitions and lack of motivation. These are factors that quite obviously impede the development process.

In a somewhat pedantic tone he adds that government and professionals ought to start participating in people's activities and that it is well nigh time we shed our bias and prejudice against the poor.

The punch line of the book is apparently that governance is the source and root cause of the current crisis. Concluding on an optimistic note, fortunately, the writer states that a turn around is possible given that certain reforms in governance are inducted.

Making for an excellent read, the book could have done with more careful proof reading since there are a considerable number of typographical errors. Not high brow or esoteric, it is scholarly in its own fashion and can be appreciated by the ordinary concerned citizen of today's Pakistan.

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