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Well-being of the people: guiding principle of Quaid-e-Azam

Farzana Raja

Federal Minister / Chairperson Benazir Income Support Programme

The father of the nation, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whose birth anniversary we are observing, was a dynamic leader, a great political thinker and strategist, a believer in democratic values and, above all, one of the great nation-builders of modern times. He followed a highly disciplined life, had an immaculate character, was bestowed with the ability to forecast the results and had the analytical mind to approach any problem in an objective and solution oriented manner.



The political acumen of the Quaid could be ascertained by the fact that he not only created a nation out of an amorphous and subjugated minority but also succeeded in establishing a nation-state for them. He never resorted to undemocratic or unconstitutional means; rather he was a democrat to his very core. At a public meeting in Dhaka on March 21, 1948, he made it clear that the government's aim and objective should be to serve the people and devise ways and means for their welfare. He said, "It is in the hands of people to put the government in power or remove it from power."

He gave special importance to well-being of the people. In his policy speech on August 11, 1947, he said, "There is no other solution. Now what shall we do? Now, if we want to make this great state of Pakistan happy and prosperous, we should wholly and solely concentrate on the well being of the people, and especially of the masses and the poor."

The Quaid dreamt about Pakistan with equal opportunities and equity in the distribution of resources for all, especially the masses, to live a meaningful life. Following in his footsteps, the first democratically elected prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and his daughter Benazir Bhutto sacrificed their lives for realization of his dream. But the pursuit did not end; rather it has gained an unprecedented momentum under the unwavering resolve and relentless support of President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani.

We are all aware of the fact that in 2008, both exogenous as well as indigenous factors affected Pakistan's economy severely. Unprecedented hike in international prices for oil and food coupled with the uncertainties of the political transition in the country debilitated the already unstable socio-economic structure of Pakistan.

Due to this economic crisis, shocks were felt at almost every front of the economy. Consequently, the nascent democratic government had to face the challenges of rising inflation, mounting unemployment, and diminishing opportunities for the major sections of society resulting in a major section of population living below the poverty line.

The global economic recession and exceptional food inflation triggered the apprehensions that the already impoverished would not be able to sustain this economic shock and will plunge deeper into the abyss of poverty. With the nation already committed in the war on terror, causing a dent to already fragile national economy and consuming a considerable chunk of national resources, the situation was ripe for breeding even more frustration among the masses, leading to apathy and vulnerability to extremism.

Here, I would quote the golden words of the Quaid in regards to the status of women in society. He said, "I have always maintained that no nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world: one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women."

The guiding principles of the quaid, the vision of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the commitment of Benazir Bhutto prompted the present democratic regime for an urgent and direct relief for the vulnerable and marginalized segments of society to give them hope and means to live.

The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) is one of such steps. It is the first ever such initiative in the social sector, which has gained support and trust of various prestigious international organizations as transparency, objectivity and impartiality have been the hallmark of this programme. The only selection criterion, for a deserving family to be registered with the BISP, was the information provided by these families pertaining to their resources. To improve the procedure further and establish utmost transparency, the BISP has recently started a countrywide door-to-door poverty survey aiming to enroll maximum number of deserving families in an objective and scientific manner.

To serve the downtrodden segments of society, the BISP has introduced various initiatives like monthly cash grants, long-term interest free financial assistance and offering vocational and technical training opportunities to the under-privileged sections of society. These initiatives are highly significant to break the myth that people belonging to these helpless strata are not capable enough to initiate and run their business or to acquire the skills to change their fate. Truly, the BISP is a fulfillment of the dream of Jinnah; practical manifestation of the lifelong quest of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; and a tribute to the vision of Benazir Bhutto.

As far as service to the poor masses and making Pakistan a welfare state is concerned, Quaid-e-Azam Day provides us an opportunity to reaffirm our resolve and commitment towards these marginalized segments of society and to continue with our struggle to uplift and improve their lives.

The writer is the chairwoman of the Benazir Income Support Programme.