

The Long March of Progress

A Historical and Personal Account



Mahmood Hasan Khan

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Introduction

History is made in such a way that the ultimate result is invariably produced by the clash of many individual wills.... For what each individual wants is obstructed by every other individual and the outcome is something that no one wanted.
Friedrich Engels.

I cannot recall exactly when and where I was first attracted to study the idea and history of human progress. I do know that it was after reaching the Netherlands from Pakistan in 1961 that I began to approach the issue seriously for two reasons. For one thing, I was able to compare the conditions of life I had left in Pakistan with those I found in the Netherlands: in almost every respect, they looked like two different worlds. The second reason was my exposure to the literature and discourse on why and how societies change or make progress. What ideas, values and conditions bring about progress? How can we explain differences between societies with respect to their standard of living and quality of life? Almost fifty years later, I started to look back at the history of human progress and my own march of progress. The result is this book as a narrative of my march of progress as part of a larger account of human progress. I hasten to add that it is not a scholarly book or written by a university-trained historian: it is simply an account of progress, weaving together my understanding of the historical processes and their impact on my own experience. Let me begin with a few words about the idea of progress.

Most people tend to agree that ideas have power. One such powerful idea in human history is the idea of progress. At its simplest level, progress means moving forward. It implies improvement from a presumed inferior to a superior state in both the material and moral conditions.

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Progress has been both necessary and desirable, and in the opinion of some inevitable: humankind has advanced from some primitive (aboriginal) state and will continue to advance. Admittedly, progress has not been a linear or continuous process; there have been serious, even awful, regresses based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and ideology. Historically these divisive forces have been the pretexts for aggression, war and plunder. We can see many signs of material improvement, but we continue to debate about moral improvement. There are those who see an inverse relationship between the material and moral conditions: technical advancement and moral decay. Others tend to claim that humankind has made moral improvement as well. There is evidence on both sides, but far less convincing on the side of the doubters. Put it this way. Generally we do not now tolerate, much less accept, torture, slavery, denial of equal rights across the board, and arbitrary rule by divine or any other authority. There remains that moral sensibility to differentiate between right and wrong, notwithstanding the tension between the life here and the afterlife.

The problem is that while we can verify the change in material conditions—there are too many pieces of evidence to deny or doubt—it is hard to agree about the change in moral conditions. What are the essential ingredients of morality on which most people can agree irrespective of their cultural context or intellectual perspective? Morality means those principles of behaviour about right and wrong (or good and bad) that allow people to flourish. In other words, we should think of morality in terms of well-being. Evolutionary biology has produced good evidence that the process of natural selection underlies our moral sense (conscience) since it helps both individuals and groups to flourish. What we consider as moral (virtuous) conduct is of concern to individuals since it makes sense. Honesty, fairness, liberty, loyalty to family and friends, authority, and sanctity are on everyone's list. However, religion, sex, and drugs (alcohol included) are optional according to many. The essential ingredients of individual morality are necessary though not sufficient to make a society moral. The measure of our moral progress is that today we judge the moral character of a society by the Enlightenment values: tolerance, openness, fairness, and democracy. While the scourge of discrimination, based on race, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, or lifestyle,

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and violence are still with us, they are generally far less tolerated or accepted hence less prevalent. In some places, some form of discrimination is morally accepted and legally sanctioned. Discrimination tends to be more visible and acute in societies with sharp inequalities and in almost all societies during periods of economic stagnation. It is safe to say that improved material well-being allows people to be more receptive to the Enlightenment values.

There is broad consensus that from the beginning human beings have been struggling to improve the quality of their lives. They have not been in search of a utopia (in Greek it means ‘no place’), an imagined perfect place about which one finds in the writings of Plato, Thomas More and Karl Marx. Instead, they are trying to make their life a bit better if not their nature perfect. Nature has endowed human beings with both the will and capability for progress. The idea of family—the basic unit of a society—was probably the first step in that struggle. Living in groups was one of the earliest and most important inventions of humankind. The idea of society, and its associated social and economic structure, is not an artificial construct: society is more than the sum of individuals. Individuals could not have survived for too long without deep interdependence, starting at infancy. There is good evidence that an individual’s selfhood is created by the initial attachment to another individual, such as infant’s attachment to the mother. In this perspective, society creates individuals and not the other way round. Self is realised through relationships, but everyone’s self is unique though mutable. In fact, the slogan of liberty, equality and fraternity in the French Revolution focused attention on those dimensions of social relations that matter most to make a society better and improve the quality of life of individuals.

Why and how do societies diverge with respect to progress? There is no generally accepted grand theory or explanation of what forces (factors) cause or are essentially responsible for social and economic progress. A close examination of the history of progress sheds much light on one theme than any other: application of gradually accumulated knowledge (in the arts and sciences) to cope with the problems presented by Nature and social relations. Inventions and innovations—reflecting human ingenuity and capital—have been at the heart of the process of

progress. However, we also know that knowledge and its application to technologies gained unprecedented momentum only in the last 250 years or so and deep institutional and structural changes either preceded or accompanied it in some Western societies.

Religious, political and economic freedoms, buttressed by the Enlightenment ideas, were probably the major forces underpinning the creation and dissemination of technologies and the consequent experience of unprecedented economic growth. This is not to underestimate the role of modern slavery and imperialism in the accumulation of capital and economic growth. But there is also good evidence that the first Industrial Revolution could not have been initiated and sustained by slavery and imperialism. Slavery and imperialism existed for millennia without creating the conditions for an industrial revolution. But history also gives us copious evidence that, in the name of progress, large groups of humans have paid a very high price, e.g. by millions of indigenous people of the Americas and Africans for over three centuries and for that matter by millions of Russians and Chinese in the twentieth century. No less important were the millions of victims of wars in Europe.

Thanks to the overwhelming evidence on human progress, certain facts are well established. For one thing, today a network of economic, social and political infrastructure interconnects a majority of over seven billion people. The complex global network affects by its workings even those still on its margin or outside. The information and communication technology developed in the last 150 years—telegraph, telephone, radio, airplane, TV, satellite, internet, and cell phone—allows cross-border movement of information and finance in matter of seconds and carries millions of people and their cargo around the globe in hours. The world has shrunk and human beings are face to face in cyberspace. There are global institutions that monitor and facilitate exchange, and help reduce tensions and conflicts. Hundreds of millions of people are in contact with each other and have become part of a floating Diaspora. The electronic public space exposes millions of people to the plight of others and allows them to empathise and respond with compassion.

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For the first time in history, more people are living in urban areas engaged in diverse economic and social activities. The growth of urban space has stimulated diversity and with it greater understanding and tolerance. Multiple identities and affiliations are a common feature of the expanding urban culture across the globe. At the same time, global production and exchange of goods and services has transformed the marketplace on the side of both supply and demand. National brands on goods for sale are often misleading because their production may involve labour, capital and material of more than one country. It is also a fact that the standard of living and quality of life of most people are far better now than they have ever been; almost everywhere on the globe, the average person enjoys a far higher standard of living today than in the past. This is not to deny or under-estimate the poverty and suffering of millions of people, but the condition of the poor of today is incomparably better than the mass poverty that a majority used to suffer in recent past.

I am not saying that generally people are living more happily than in the past. What I am saying is that people are living better now than in the past, enjoying (individual) rights and freedoms not recognised or enjoyed before. Human beings have made progress and it has been particularly impressive in the last 150 years compared with the preceding millennium. It is also safe to say that most rights and freedoms have followed rather than preceded material progress. The struggle to gain those rights has been long and costly and the legal and institutional support for many rights and freedoms is of recent origin. Let me cite some examples. Slavery as a normal institution, once generally accepted and legally protected, is no longer with us, although millions still suffer under the weight of bonded labour because of poverty and bad administration of law in several societies. Many countries have abolished capital punishment and, in others, it is no longer on display for public entertainment. In almost no country, we find debtors' jails today. No longer is torture sanctioned by law, though governments in many countries tolerate or use it as a means to punish people or extract information from victims.

Most societies today accept the principle of equality before the law, regardless of gender or ethnicity, although not implemented effectively

or universally. The right of free expression and association is far more commonly accepted and enjoyed than before. In many countries, the rights and freedoms of individuals, especially minorities, are enshrined in the constitution and there are laws to protect them. Brutality, ethnic cleansing and genocide are still with us, but there are now laws and institutions to deal with them and their perpetrators more effectively. While imperialism and wars in various forms have not (and perhaps cannot) be abolished, international institutions and mechanisms are in place to reduce their incidence and mitigate their impact on the victims. Hundreds of thousands of small and large, local, regional and international non-governmental (civil society) organisations are actively engaged in advocacy for and provide assistance to people with respect to human rights, hunger and famine, natural disasters, epidemics and basic health care and education, transfer of technologies, small loans, housing and public health, and conflict resolution.

Needless to add, the march of progress has not been linear: there have been many high ups and deep downs on the way. There are reminders of human regression, not counting civil wars, in recent history: African slavery, World Wars I and II, Jewish Holocaust, atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam war, genocides in Armenia, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and liquidation of millions in the former Soviet Union and China. In addition, proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction is a serious threat to security of life and property around the world. Likewise, there are too many signs of serious imbalance in the global ecosystem because of current patterns of production and consumption that do not take into account the enormous environmental and resource cost. The demographic transition underway, thanks to smaller families the world over, is a good omen for this to happen. Generally, people tend to underestimate the twin threat that the weapons of mass destruction and environmental imbalance pose to security of life and the means (resources) that sustain it. The great challenge to human progress in the future will be to harness the will and mobilise public opinion for political, economic and social adjustments necessary at the global, regional, national, and local levels. I am quite certain that we cannot enhance human well-being without meeting this challenge. The evidence on human behaviour

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in the past is a reason for cautious optimism, but there is no assurance that it will be repeated to avoid or minimise catastrophic consequences.

I should now turn to the organisation and structure of this book. I have divided the narrative on progress into five interconnected parts, though each part can stand on its own. In Part I, I focus on the emergence of the 'Modern Age' in the West, including an account of the period from ancient Greece to the 'Middle Ages' (Chapter 1) and from the Italian Renaissance to the first Industrial Revolution (Chapter 2). The ideas and institutions evolved in Europe during the long period have played a central role in the rest of the world by their dissemination through modern imperialism. Man's long march of progress began probably with the migration of *Homo sapiens* from Africa some 60,000 years ago. However, in the context of my narrative, human civilisation had its beginnings with the first settlements between 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. The prominent settlements were in Iraq (Mesopotamia), China, India (Indus valley), and Egypt (Nile valley). These civilisations made significant contributions to human progress through ideas, structures and inventions, making life more liveable. They gave to the rest of humanity the building blocks for further progress. However, it is also fair to suggest that ancient Greece was the crucible for the study of man and Nature, hence its disproportionate influence on the emergence of Modern Age. Along with their own refinements and additions, Romans, Christians, Jews, and Muslims have played a major role in transmitting Greek knowledge and practices to the West. Muslims also acted as a conduit for transfer of knowledge and inventions of China and India to Europe. In Europe, centuries of turmoil created by political and religious rivalries, conflicts and wars led to an intense re-examination of values, relations and institutions. This process made people increasingly receptive to the ideas, artefacts and practices of Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Chinese. Gradually people's focus shifted from the afterlife to life itself. Conflicts between faith and reason, religious and secular authority, state and individual rights were debated, contested and resolved over a period of over three centuries. The Modern Age owes its painful birth to this tumultuous period in European history.

How the Modern Age came to India is part of the narrative in Part IV of this book. To set the stage, in Parts II and III, I give an account of

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