

Pakistan: Are We Out of Our Minds?

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Why have we spent the last four years, presumably the most crucial time of our lives, organising at various campuses across the country and its administered areas on issues pertaining to student life, gender, education, class, ethnicity, race, etc.?

Why have we wasted our time in searching for those who share our principles, dreams, and resolve? Why have we spent what little money we have had in touring various parts of the country to try and meet every single one of them? Why do we prioritise and spend more energy on protests and marches (like the Students' Solidarity March happening on 29th November) than our chances at getting good degrees and be successful in life?

Are we mad? Have we been out of our minds?

Do we not see dreams of having bright illustrious careers? Do we not want to live in large mansions that we could own and drive cars that we could buy from our own pocket? Do we not want to be successful? Do we not want to inspire millions and become the CEO of the next big business idea?

Do we not fear that we continuously disappoint our mothers who have spent twenty years of their lives under abuse and violence under a singular hope that, one day, we shall grow up to earn a respectable living for them? Do we not disappoint our fathers who want us to top the CSS and make them have the respect they deserve in the family? Do we not just want to 'study peacefully and not grab any attention' for our politics?

Have we not read that the Soviet Union disintegrated in the 90s and with it (for the time being) the promise of socialism and its politics? Have we not spent days and nights wondering that in trying to reconstruct this politics, we might end up wasting our lives? Have we not read that there is something you term as the basic human nature? Have we not argued amongst ourselves whether financial incentives are the basic motivators for human action? Do we not feel the guilt you impose on us by saying that our interest in politics has robbed us of the chance to become the geniuses that we could have been had we followed your ideals of a career path?

Have we not read the books that you have read?

Do we not wish to worship a God that loves us all?

We do, actually. It is just that we have seen life close enough that we don't see a point in being happy and successful in a social order that has failed most of its constituent members. We just think that there is more to life than this obsession with ourselves. That we make a fool out of ourselves when we start believing that the pain we see around has nothing to do with us if we either aren't a cause of it or aren't at the end of it. That choosing to be happy and successful for our own sake is an easier choice in the current scheme of things. And as they say, a life lived easy is seldom a life lived decent.

We think that life actually starts when you connect your happiness and your pain to those around

you. That our politics must be predicated upon the pledge to construct a world that is equal for all its people, regardless of who they are, what they choose, what they wear, etc. That our politics must be pure. That it should make us stop living oblivious of the privileges we enjoy (which are, in all cases, directly based on someone else not having the same privilege.) It must make us learn about the mistakes that we have made and the people who have chosen to abandon us when we failed them. It must make us question the forces that define how a life should be led, the structures that deprive the majority of us to strengthen a minority of our population, the systems that extract their profits and power out of the deprivation of women, students, transgenders, ethnic, racial and religious minorities, etc.

We just think that a politics terminates all moral, ethical, rational, social, and political codes if it makes us choose to be happy and successful within a social order whose ideals of success are based upon the misery and dispossession of the poor and the destitute.

We think that it is our fundamental job, as humans, to try and ponder over what lies beyond what we see. We think that as soon as one gets aware of the realities of life around them, politics ceases to remain a choice. Abandoning politics, then, or being what we call apolitical also becomes a political decision. Because you see, if you know that you live in a structure that is based upon systematic oppression and prejudice, choosing to prioritise your success and let the system remain as it is means that you side with those that oppress rather than those who are being marginalised.

Now, do you not know that students were, last week, booked under sedition laws for demanding clean water? Do you not know that last year, more than 300 students were booked under Anti-Terrorism laws for protesting for their fundamental rights? Do you not know for how many weeks and months they were kept in prisons? Do you not know that in the University of Balochistan, more than 500 cameras were installed, even inside female washrooms, at the behest of an administration that saw women only as objects of sexual pleasure? Do you not know that the whole public sector higher education infrastructure of Balochistan, FATA, and Gilgit Baltistan comprises of less than five public universities? Do you not know that for more than 120 million youngsters, we have just 97 public universities? Do you not know that there are campuses in Pakistan which are not being run by Deans or Vice Chancellors, but by irrelevant security or bureaucratic officials? Do you not know that there are campuses in Pakistan who have decided that the curfew times for their girls' hostels must be 3 in the day?

Do you not know how far apart standards of education are for Aitchisons and Central Models? Do you not know that we still spend a paltry 2.6% of our GDP on education? Do you not know that the tuition fee of higher education has never been this high in the history of this country? Do you not know that our curriculum actively promotes extremism and hatred towards identities that live all around Pakistan and its administered territories? Do you not know that our educational infrastructure is being sold to private investors at the behest of the IMF?

Do you not remember that Mashal Khan was killed on campus and our governments have made no consequent attempts to reduce right wing extremism on campus?

Have you not seen how many students have committed suicides on campus in the last two years?

Are you still happy with life? Do you still just wish to 'just study and not waste your time in grabbing attention'?

Perhaps you know all of this. But it is not your fault. The problem is that we are only taught to see things as they are and identifying the root and doing something about it a practice that has been actively snubbed in this country. You see, your power to think, rationalise life, and make a change

has been taken away from you. You will be taught by Rizvis that these problems are a direct result of our distance from the glorious religious traditions. You will be told by PTIs that these problems would cease to remain once the neoliberal project is complete. You will be told by PML-Ns that once they win over their share of civilian supremacy, you will be relieved of all your miseries. You will be trained by I don't know who that all of this is an international conspiracy to undermine your national heritage.

On the contrary, our analyses, which are based on experience as well as theory, make us believe that these problems are a direct result of the lack of student representation on campuses. Those affected most by a problem must enjoy the right to make decisions about it. Students make the universities what they are and educational institutions turn into garbage centers if students are not asked how they should be run. The same faculty members who harass women must not be the ones to hold accountable other faculty members who harass other women. The problems, otherwise, only increase like they have done. A considerable amount of the control over a campus must lie with the students and not with a state official that has never even gone to a university.

When the student unions were banned in 1984, it was justified by saying that student unionisation begets violence and therefore it must be banned. Dare we ask how come violence on campus has only increased after the ban? Why do we continue to see fascist forces, like Jamiat, periodically snubbing women from sitting with men, and attacking cultural festivals of students who wouldn't have come to Lahore had they were allocated universities in their home towns?

It happens because the state, always, as if consciously, misses the point. You don't decrease violence by curbing constitutional ways of representation; you rather increase it. Student grievances regarding fee structures, cafes, sexual harassment, research, transport, mess, hostels, etc. once not given a representative platform are the perfect breeding ground for right wing extremists to mobilise people and carry out violence for their own interests.

Also, whenever we talk about campus violence, why are we always forced to remember violence carried out by student bodies? Does a 100% fee increase not amount to violence for students belonging to working class neighbourhoods? Is sexual harassment on campus not violence? Is racial profiling not a violent crime? Is not keeping youngsters from FATA, Balochistan, Gilgit Baltistan, and Kashmir away from public education violence against them? The question doesn't get simpler than this: the Pakistani public educational sector literally is based upon a context of a violent use of power and students are not allowed any little space to be represented. Which drug were you high on when you expected its outcome to be completely submissive and peaceful?

After all, students are allowed to unionise in campuses in almost all countries where people possess some levels of sanity. How come it is only in Pakistan that students would get violent if they are allowed to form unions? What is so fundamentally wrong with our DNA? Whose fault is it? Ours?

In the case of student unionisation, however, the state didn't just abandon students who had legitimate demands to make. It actively supported, monetarily and logistically, fascist organisations that would further strengthen its project and victimise those who could politicise around the campus and educational issues. As a result, it has been more than 30 years, the violence is still there, the problems have only increased. They just don't show up as frequently as they did because now you are allowed to talk about it.

A campus where thousands of students spend half a day, on a daily basis, is bound to develop political ideas of its own. What do you want to do with it? Keep it quiet? Do you really think you can?

The state we live in has mostly based its legitimacy not on the things known and understood by its

people, rather on the things they are not aware of. This is why the logic of all action for our governments is based upon a closure of the past, an insistence of the present, and a blankness of the future. People are made to believe that whatever happening currently is true and there is no need to look deeper or further than the immediate reality. (People end up thinking that this is the first time a Prime Minister has been brought to accountability, etc.)

In the case of students, they are viciously taught that their fundamental job is to study and becoming what we term as political is out of bounds. They are kept away from the truth that there was once a student movement in Pakistan that played a pivotal role, a movement that took down Ayub, a movement that made Bhutto who he was and when he ceased to remain loyal to what he had proclaimed, it stood against him too.

For all those wondering why we chant 'Asia Surkh Hoga!', we do it because we think that in times of collective forgetfulness, remembering a past is also a revolutionary act. The '68 movement was made on the streets, campuses, and factories, and it will be remembered now on the same venues, regardless of how cruelly the government attempts closing down the past. Hasan Nasir will be remembered. Nazeer Abbasi will be commemorated. The voices of justice for Nimrita Kumari will be raised and Mashal Khan will get immortalised, again!

We are told that we don't matter because we are socialists and that is anti-national. But if believing for an end to a class-based exploitation and an educational structure based on equality makes one an anti-national, then there is no document more anti-national than the constitution of this country itself. The Article 3 states, "The State shall ensure the elimination of all forms of exploitation and the gradual fulfilment of the fundamental principle, from each according to his ability, to each according to his work." The Article 17 gives us the unalienable right to unionise and the Article 25A bounds the state to provide free and quality education to each and every citizens of this country and its administered areas. Since when have traitors started to fight for the constitution?

We are told that we are a bunch of elitists and our voices will never resonate outside our own circles of influence. Interestingly, that question is never asked from bourgeoisie political parties, whose collective electoral campaign fund is ten times our whole education budget. We don't ask them why they dance in their sit-ins, we don't ask them what planes they use and which Bani Gala they live in. Because perhaps dancing to tunes doesn't really matter, as long as they remain the tunes of the rich and not transform into the melodies of a people's revolt.

The march is now going to be held in 50 different cities in Pakistan, including the most backward towns of Sindh, Balochistan, Kashmir, Gilgit Baltistan, and KP. We were told to control ourselves. We now tell openly that it is getting out of our hands.

Many of us don't know Fred Hampton, an inspiring 21 year-old Black Panthers leader, who, interestingly, also wore a black leather jacket (was he also an elitist bastard?). He said something in his last speech before he was assassinated by the FBI. It was a question to our civilisation that still needs to be addressed:

"You have to understand that people have to pay the price for peace. If you dare to struggle, you dare to win. If you dare not struggle then damnit you don't deserve to win. Let me say peace to you if you're willing to fight for it. Why don't you live for the people? Why don't you struggle for the people? Why don't you die for the people?"

Will you join us? Do you have an answer to Fred's question, or do you think the FBI was right to assassinate one of America's brightest minds?

Or do you not care?

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