

Pakistan: Baba Jan's plight - Our youth have very little knowledge about those who have waged a relentless struggle for the oppressed classes in our society"

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In the land of the pure, many intellectuals, analysts and political commentators are always curious about the lives of bourgeoisie politicians. They seem to have a dogged determination to learn about the type of clothes that a particular politician prefers; the kind of food that he craves; or the breed of animals that he wants to rear. Some of them proudly share this information with 200 million people. A number of them also make arduous efforts to discover the non-existent political ideologies of these politicians.

But it seems that not much energy is being invested in learning about those politicians or political workers who have fought for the downtrodden and marginalised sections of society. It comes as no surprise that our new generation is well-aware of Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Asif Ali Zardari, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and a myriad of other politicians who were born with a golden spoon in their mouths. But our youth have very little knowledge about those political workers who have waged a relentless struggle for peasants, workers and the other oppressed classes in our society.

For instance, how much does our new generation know about the great peasant leader Hyder Bux Jatoi, who dared to challenge the mighty feudal elite in Sindh? Is the large majority of our youth aware of the courageous revolutionary leader Hasan Nasir who declassified himself, giving up the aristocratic lifestyle of his ancestors and moving all the way from Hyderabad Deccan to fight for a cause in Pakistan? He was tortured to death in Lahore's Shahi Qila. Have we highlighted the contributions of Jam Saqi who struggled for the toiling masses throughout his life and spent several years in jail?

Many luminaries from our country's history are still unknown. Some of us may have dim memories of people like Mukhtar Rana, who led workers in Faisalabad, or Major Ishaq, who fought for those in the bottom layer of social stratification. However, there is a long list of people who spent their lives fighting for a noble cause who we, unfortunately, know very little about.

One may disagree with the style of politics adopted by figures like Mairaj Mohammad Khan, Dr Rasheed Hasan Khan, Dr Aizaz Nazir, Imam Ali Nazish, Chacha Maula Bux, Mirza Ibrahim, Asim Akhund, Sadiq Jatoi and Fanoos Gujjar, but there is no denying the fact that these leaders spent a significant part of their lives fighting injustice and oppression.

Over the last two decades, several courageous political workers challenged the mighty forces of society while championing the cause of workers and peasants. Mehr Abdul Sattar, the leader of Anjuman-e-Mazareen Punjab (the Tenants Association of Punjab), had to pay a heavy price for waging a struggle against powerful elements in Okara. He was imprisoned for more than a year.

Ghulam Noor Nabi, the secretary-general of the association, also faced state repression for the same reason. In addition, hundreds of other peasants were also booked in concocted cases for waging a just struggle.

Raja Arshad, who died at a very young age a few years ago, mobilised power loom workers in Faisalabad to demand the implementation of the wage rise announced during the Musharraf era. He organised large rallies and demonstrations that had the potential to spread across the province. Raja Arshad was implicated in trumped-up charges, forcing him to go into hiding. Although he faced extreme poverty and suffered from a serious illness, Raja Arshad did not give up his struggle.

At present, one such leader is Baba Jan Hunzai, the vice-president of the AWP. Baba Jan is from a very humble background and doesn't even own his own house. He has been dubbed the "Che of Gilgit-Baltistan" by his supporters. According to Baba Jan's supporters, the AWP leader mobilised the people who were displaced after a landslide that destroyed the livelihood of hundreds of people in January 2010 and artificially created Attabad Lake.

In August 2011, the local police opened fire on a group of protesters in Aliabad who were demanding compensation for those who were displaced. As a result, two protesters were killed. Night raids were conducted following the incident, resulting in several arrests on charges of vandalising public property in Hunza. Later, Baba Jan and 11 others were sentenced to life imprisonment by an anti-terrorism court for torching government property and ransacking a police station during the Hunza riots in 2011. While the prison sentences of most of these protesters were overturned and they were later released, Baba Jan and a few others still remain in custody.

The incarcerated leader is believed to be suffering from a heart condition and is in need of an angiography. According to his supporters, Baba Jan has also written letters to Prime Minister Imran Khan, GB Chief Minister Hafeezur Rehman and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, requesting access to a healthcare facility in Islamabad.

The lacklustre response to this appeal has prompted many to compare Baba Jan's situation with that of Nawaz Sharif and point out the difference between the way both jailed leaders are being treated, with one enjoying a number of facilities and the other being denied even a simple test that could allay his family's fears regarding his health. Mian Nawaz Sharif has been an elected prime minister three times and has every right to claim all the facilities permitted by law. At the same time, the PML-N should ask its government in Gilgit-Baltistan to also respect the rights of other political prisoners.

Baba Jan is an extremely popular leader in Gilgit-Baltistan. He contested elections and secured thousands of votes. His followers, especially among the youth, are scattered all over the country. Thousands of students from GB are studying in the major urban centres of the country and view him as an inspirational figure.

Even if we disagree with Baba Jan Hunzai's politics, he has every right to obtain treatment. A simple angiography isn't such a big deal. The authorities shouldn't waste time in allowing Baba Jan to receive medical care. If the delay causes any harm to him, it could cause further discontent among GB's youth, who have held hundreds of protests demanding his release. This anger is often exploited by the enemies of the state. Therefore, it is important that the state should fulfil its responsibility by extending the required health facility to the incarcerated AWP leader.

Some elements have already been carrying out a deleterious propaganda against the situation in Balochistan, Karachi and the Pakhtun belt of the country. GB is a sensitive area. It is also the gateway to CPEC. New Delhi has been hatching conspiracies against the northern areas and CPEC

and any disturbance in the region could prompt it to exploit the situation. Therefore, we need to foil such machinations.

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