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## **EQBAL AHMAD: POST-POKHARAN DAYS**

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He fought for Kashmiri self-determination in 1948, against French imperialism in Algeria in the early 60's, roused students on American campuses in the early 70's against their government's immoral war in Vietnam, dodged arrest by the CIA in a case trumped up by Richard Nixon's government that accused him of trying to kidnap Henry Kissinger, passionately campaigned against the ethnic cleansing of East Pakistan by the West Pakistani army, and was the trusted lieutenant of the Palestinian leadership. With the passage of years, and his eventual return to Pakistan, his efforts gradually focussed upon healing the wounds of Partition, and diffusing the poison of intolerance and militarism of the post-Zia era. Challenge and adversity left him undaunted – until that fateful day of 11 May 1998, when the ground trembled uncontrollably at Pokharan and the subcontinent was to change forever. Exactly one year later – on 11 May 1999 – Eqbal Ahmad died in an Islamabad hospital. He was 67.

Pokharan left Eqbal, the otherwise indomitable fighter of many struggles, depressed and fearful for the two countries he so deeply loved, Pakistan and India. It was with effort that he roused himself to action once again. Would the new nuclear hysteria drive out all hope of reconciliation and goodwill? Were the two countries now destined to become radioactive wastelands in the decades, or perhaps just years, to come? India's mindless right wing leaders who started it all were to blame, driven by their misguided view of nuclear weapons as a currency of power. "They will soon realize that this is a counterfeit", he wrote, arguing that the religious chauvinism and intolerance of the BJP made it ineligible for guiding India towards becoming a truly great and powerful nation:

"Each historical time has had its own temper. But one factor has been common throughout history to the attainment of progress and greatness. Historians of culture describe this one factor variously as syncretism, openness, pluralism, and a spirit of tolerance. Where ideas do not clash, diverse influences, knowledge, viewpoints, and cultures do not converge, civilization does not thrive and greatness eludes. Nuclearisation of nationalism has further degraded India's environment. The tests have worsened the xenophobia of Hindutva supporters."

Soon the drums started beating on the Pakistani side, the initial wave of fear giving way to shriller and shriller cries for retaliatory tests. India's belligerence was no longer veiled; it was a time when even the thoughtful were puzzled. "What then should Pakistan do?", wrote Eqbal in his weekly column in Dawn on 17<sup>th</sup> May, "My advice is: do not panic, and do not behave reactively. This translates as: do not listen to people like Qazi Husain Ahmad and Benazir Bhutto who, either out of ignorance, or more likely crass opportunism, are advocating nuclear tests, here and now. The arguments for steadying the jerking knee are compelling. For these reasons and more, it is much better for Islamabad

to stay cool, calculating, and utilizing the opportunities Delhi has presented. May reason prevail!”

Astonishingly, difficult though it was, reason did stand a 50-50 chance in the first week after Pokharan. There is considerable evidence that a Pakistani nuclear test could have been avoided. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and some of his close associates in the cabinet, notwithstanding what they were to claim a year later, were not enthusiastic about testing because of the heavy international sanctions that would inevitably follow. This feeling was shared by the Chief of Army Staff, General Jehangir Karamat, and it extended to many others in the government. Some with impeccable hawkish credentials, such as Riaz Khokhar, then Pakistan’s ambassador to the US, told me privately that they had campaigned hard against testing. Pragmatism, not pacificism, drove them to this conclusion.

But reason was soon destined to lose. By the second week the Pakistani leadership had capitulated; the Chagai tests came just 17 days after Pokharan. What the decisive factor had been may never be known, but it could be one of several: the warning by L.K. Advani, India's Interior Minister, that Pakistan should note a change in South Asia's "strategic environment", Prime Minister Vajpayee's statement that his government might forcibly take Kashmiri territory under Pakistan's control, the handing over of Kashmir affairs portfolio to the hardline Home Minister who had so enthusiastically overseen the destruction of Babri Mosque, and heating up of a limited but live conflict along the Line of Control. On the domestic front, a pack of opposition leaders, led first by the Jamaat-i-Islami, was soon overtaken by Benazir Bhutto. “She seems to have sensed in this national crisis an opportunity to restore her flagging fortunes. I know of few gestures in the ugly repertoire of Pakistani politics as revolting as her demagogic toss of bracelets at Mr. Nawaz Sharif”, wrote Eqbal.

The debate stopped abruptly after Chagai. Eqbal was devastated. “I saw on television a picture more awesome than the familiar mushroom cloud of nuclear explosion. The mountain had turned white. I wondered how much pain had been felt by nature, God's most wondrous creation”.

Alas, it was joy, not pain, which made crowds dance that day in the streets of Islamabad and Lahore. Similar orgasmic celebrations had taken place 17 days earlier in Delhi and Bombay. The men of faith were triumphant, although which faith had triumphed was not clear. Grains of holy radioactive sand from Pokhran, blessed by Lord Shiva, had been sprinkled in temples by the Vishnu Hindu Parisad. In Pakistan the Jamaat-I-Islami transported a cardboard "Islamic Bomb" around the country, while right-wing Urdu magazines like Zindagi wrote about the wondrous miracles of Chaghi. They told stories of divine intervention that protected the mard-e-momin from poison-spitting snakes as they prepared the nuclear test-site, of four chickens that sufficed to feast a thousand of the faithful after the tests, and of Prophet Mohammed taking personal charge of protecting the centrifuges of Kahuta.

Now was the time of the Kalams and Khans, the Chidambarams and Mubarikmands. Catapulted into the role of subcontinental heroes, but unknown entities in the world of real science, they basked in adulation pretending to be the Oppenheimers, Tellers, and Bethes. But it was the political leadership that had it even better. As the Sharifs and Vajpayees strutted and preened themselves before roaring crowds, Eqbal had sober words of warning for them:

“I still believe that, notwithstanding Delhi’s provocative muscle-flexing, Pakistan’s security interests have not been served by matching India show-for-show-plus-one.... The leaders of India and Pakistan have now appropriated to themselves, as others had done before, the power that was God’s alone to kill mountains, make the earth quake, bring the sea to boil, and destroy humanity. I hope that when the muscle flexing and cheering is over they will go on a retreat, and reflect on how they should bear this awesome responsibility.”

One wonders if in his prison cell, where he now serves a life-sentence for treason, ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif does finally feel the need for reflection. But all those who were then busy stoking the fires of nationalist frenzy had little use for such advice. Drunk with the new-found power to commit mass murder, they blew raucous trumpets and beat drums in macabre, insane, officially sponsored celebrations. It mattered little that that very year Pakistani newspaper had reported cases of 300 people having chosen self immolation and death to living yet another painful day of grinding poverty and deprivation. Uranium there was plenty of, but certainly not enough bread and clean drinking water.

More insidiously, nucleomania was giving birth to a dangerous vision, propagated with the full force of the state media. Commentators and spokesperson daily harangued television audiences that Pakistan had become impregnable, and was now at least India’s military equal if not superior. But Eqbal argued that beyond the change in atmospherics, which rarely endure, Pakistan’s passage from an ambiguous to an explicit nuclear power had not substantially changed its strategic position. Economically it had become weaker, its domestic situation would grow graver, and the forces of fanaticism yet stronger and more divisive. The illusion of security provided by nuclear weapons would, however, have fearful consequences.

In the months after Chaghai, Eqbal spoke at anti-nuclear meetings throughout the length and breadth of the country. I accompanied him at many such events. He spoke eloquently and passionately, as was his style, frequently drawing upon exemplars drawn from his vast store of experiences and knowledge. He would remind listeners of the Soviet Union, and its satellites such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, which became highly sophisticated arms producers, but whose states and societies grew dis-organically and eventually collapsed. For Pakistan to avoid that fate, it must resist falling into the trap of seeking strategic equivalence with India.

India-Pakistan proxy war, more than anything else, worried Eqbal. Look at the history of the Cold War, he would say. Since nuclear weapons had made direct confrontation

impossible, the US and USSR had exported their conflict to the Third World where millions of Koreans, Vietnamese, Africans, South Americans, and Afghans had died soundlessly, mere pawns in the great global grab for power. Eqbal feared that bloody times were up ahead for the Kashmiris, who he predicted would be the worst losers of the nuclearized subcontinent. Safely hidden behind their nuclear shields, the leaders of India and Pakistan are perfectly willing to fight their game down to the very last Kashmiri, he said.

It was sometime in early March 1999 when Eqbal telephoned me. His usual good-natured banter was missing today, there was an edge of tension. I went to see him as soon as I finished teaching my class at the university. I had not seen him in such a foul mood for years. Yesterday he had had a long session with a top general – paradoxically one of his many admirers – and had come back greatly disturbed, his fears confirmed. Terrible things were to happen in Kashmir but nuclear weapons would ensure that war would not spill over into Pakistan. Such was the plan. Eqbal did not live to hear about Kargil, but he already knew enough.

Two weeks before the end. When we took him to the hospital he was in an awful state, although we did not yet know that it was an advanced stage of colon cancer. He was vomiting violently and feeling sharp pains in his chest but there were quiet phases when he asked about the world outside. He shook his head in silent disgust as I told him of the official preparations to celebrate Pakistan's anniversary of the nuclear tests. Little badges with mushroom clouds were to be distributed free to children, poetry competitions would extol the greatness of a newly nuclear nation, and missile replicas would be placed at major intersections. "Eqbal, when you get well I'd like you to look at an article I've just written against the celebrations", I said. No, he replied, give it to me now. He carefully adjusted the intravenous drip to take hold of his pen, asked me to crank up his hospital bed into a semi-sitting position, and then went through my article adding his editorial comments – incisive and useful as ever -- here and there. It was his last political act, the final affirmation of solidarity.

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