

Reflections (1997)

A young Indian scientist introduced himself during the coffee break at an international high-energy physics meeting. We politely shook hands. “Pervez”, I said, “I work in QCD”. His face lit up: “Ah, then you are from Bangalore....”. “No”, I interrupted, “I’m from Islamabad”. He looked surprised, “oh, I didn’t know they did physics in Pakistan”. Unable to think of a better reply, I retorted weakly, “well, then you ought to know otherwise”, and excused myself.

I think it was Bernard Shaw who said patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. In any case, I have always believed that everyone should consider himself a citizen of the world rather than of this or that country. Why, then, did I feel insulted and even a bit angry? Possibly because of that chaps’ bad manners. But more likely, it was because he was so close to the bitter truth.

The bald fact is that, 50 years down the road, there is no science worth speaking of in Pakistan today. Yes, maybe there are 2-3 dozen dedicated scientists doing research of some significance. But that’s it. Our universities ought to be nurseries of science and learning but, in fact, they are sterile and empty of creativity. Wild-eyed sectarian student groups rule the campuses, and university professors are recruited from those who have failed at all else.

My 24 years at Quaid-e-Azam University, and the ongoing daily personal skirmishes with a greedy and incompetent teaching community that wants to grab that university’s land for private profit, leaves me with no illusions about the future of our state universities. In personal terms, what keeps me still there is a belief that Nature is often kind -- beautiful flowers grow even on a heap of foul dung. Somehow, exceptionally gifted and motivated students still exist. I find deep satisfaction in helping them to make it to the top. Of course, they succeed not because of our system but in spite of it; once in a while an Abdus Salam will be born and make his way to Stockholm even if our universities fall to the ground.

In a country as large as ours, it is easy to point to failures, excesses, and disappointments. But I have a quarrel with those who feel that *everything* is wrong and there’s nothing you and I can do to change things. The power of Reason is ultimately irrepressible and will advance, even if by small steps.

Hence, there are advances, improvements, and victories too. Let me give an example.

Does the reader remember the “Islamic Science” of the bad old Zia-ul-Haq days? Every science loony in the country (many with Ph.Ds) with a beard had jumped onto that band-wagon and started making calculations of the temperature of Hell, the speed of Heaven, getting energy from trapped *jinns*, finding the “angle of God”,..... They stood at the head of various scientific organizations and spent millions of rupees on their absurd conferences. Those people are still around but, because they were ridiculed and shown up through the press, they dare not hold those conferences at public expense again. A small victory perhaps, but a victory nonetheless.

Individuals have made a huge difference. My heroes are Moulana Abdus Sattar Edhi and Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan who have touched the lives of a million poor people. We have brave and brilliant lawyers like Asma Jehangir, Abid Hasan Minto, and many others, who put aside considerations of personal safety and profit when defending matters of principle. Razia Bhatti belonged to the finest breed of journalists there is. The list is long.

Pervez Hoodbhoy