

Why We Lost The War On Ghosts (1998)

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In March of 1998, with great sound and fury, the government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan declared war. The war was different from previous ones because this time the enemy was well within our borders and unassailable by air power and tank assaults. Though furtive in character and hard to apprehend, this ghostly enemy was known to be immensely destructive. Therefore we all clapped when the war actually began -- a war against the fraudulent revenue-consuming but student-less and teacher-less schools, popularly known as ghost schools. Thought to number several thousand, these suck money out of education straight into the pockets of various officials. Everyone knew that the federal and provincial education ministries, whose corruption and inefficiency is legendary, simply could not deal with an enemy that had penetrated so deeply and widely. But suddenly there was hope again.

Within weeks, thousands of khaki-clad exorcists of the Pakistan Army were ordered out in a blitzkrieg offensive against phantoms, spooks and ghouls through the length and breadth of the Punjab. As in all wars, stunning success was claimed. Citizens learned that educational corruption had been dealt a mortal blow. Five thousand of these schools had been discovered just in Punjab, said the newspapers, and there were many thousands elsewhere. The scourge will be eradicated from its roots, thundered the Chief Minister of the Punjab, Mr. Shahbaz Sharif.

But a year later the drums are silent, the war forgotten. All that remains of Operation Ghost is a ghostly silence. No report has been published, no one has been punished. What began with a bang has ended with a whimper. The only good news is that the cynical feel comfortable again. Expectedly the vast network of cuts and kickbacks remains intact and powerful interests within the state bureaucracy have proved their resilience once more. Certainly, the system could not have dealt with the shock of making public the list of ghost-schools, the names of the ghost-headmasters and ghost-teachers, the district education officers who connived with them, and the salaries regularly shelled out in fictitious names.

Many questions lie begging for an answer. First, why did the state suddenly decide to move against something whose existence it had hitherto denied? Prior to the aborted exercise, education officials had said there were no ghost schools. I have a personal recollection of this matter: four years ago, in a public forum on education in Islamabad, the-then federal secretary of education, responded to my question by stating that ghost schools did not exist. Thereupon I offered to reveal to him the name of a distant relative who operates one such school near Hyderabad, and regularly defrauds the state of huge sums every month. The offer was instantly and angrily rejected.

A second question relates to why the report has not been made public. Privately, some people in the ministries have tried to justify this to me. They claim that that the army data is unreliable, the methodology of the survey was faulty, the criteria for what constitutes a ghost-school were not properly laid down, etc. Education officials have obviously resented the intrusion on their turf. They say, with some justification, that calling in the army to check WAPDA meters may be okay but no army is suited to check whether a

school is functional. Apparently school buildings officially vacated or abandoned, or never actually built, had been wrongly included and so the reported numbers could be inflated. In one alleged instance, a rivalry within a village led to wrong reporting and subsequent mis-declaration of a properly functioning school as ghostly. Another claim I heard was that no army personnel visited schools of the area (as they were supposed to) and simply wrote down what the assistant commissioner wanted of them -- a case of ghost inspections by ghost soldiers.

There may be grains of truth in these allegations and explanations. But even if the army operation left things to be desired, it is unlikely to be hugely wrong. Since no documents have been released, or are likely to be released, it is hard to say. If past experience is a guide, the truth shall lie smothered in the dense and dark cocoons of official secrecy, never to see the light of day. Yet another war has been lost, but may still be declared as won.

It is time for a post-mortem. We must understand why our society has taken this defeat with such equanimity instead of bursting with moral outrage against those scoundrels and blackguards who steal from our innocent children and youth, especially since this is but one of a score of recent thefts. A brand new university campus with 30 buildings was fully constructed in Khairpur, but had to be abandoned because the buildings started collapsing even as they were being built. The contractors made millions but no one has been punished in spite of some scattered protests. Then, last year one million dollars from Asian Development Bank funds were brazenly embezzled by government officials in Karachi responsible for education planning. In spite of an FIA investigation, no arrests were made. And so one is compelled to ask: why do people not fill the newspapers with angry calls for justice, take to the streets, or "gherao" the education ministries even when such disgraceful scandals become public?

Let me hazard one reason. In every society, some things are considered good to have, others important, and some as absolutely crucial. I have no doubt that a survey of opinions will uniformly find that ordinary Pakistanis consider education good or important. But that is it and no more; education is not considered crucial, the lifeblood of the society's future. Correspondingly its failure is seen as bad, regrettable, but not catastrophic. Therefore ghost schools, shoddy textbooks, ignorant teachers, exam cheating, and worthless universities raise concern without exciting passion.

More importantly, perhaps, the war on ghost schools was lost because Pakistani society has become excessively tolerant. Tolerant of corruption, that is, though not yet of other faiths, beliefs, or ideas. A chance encounter with two ghosts reinforced this belief of mine. The female draws a monthly salary of Rs 2800 but has not seen her school in a year. She justified it on grounds that she had to pay Rs 50,000 to get her job. The male ghost is from central Punjab and paid his MNA Rs 75,000 to get his job. Neither have a negative self-image as criminals nor consider themselves a whit different from other ordinary people

Curiously, neither of my two ghosts saw stealing from the government as real theft. Everyone does it, including all the prime-ministers we have had, they said. The idea of the common good was alien to them, as it remains to many in a society where the connection between private and public good still remains obscure. In further conversation, both supported the Talibanization of Pakistan. I remarked that today's

Kabul, with amputated hands and feet dangling from trees and lamp-posts, was barbaric. Not so, was the response, because Allah designed such punishments as a deterrent. Clearly these two didn't think that their limbs were at stake.

At a still deeper level the ghost-school fiasco, and the collapse of state education more generally, is an indication of the decreasing ability of successive governments in Pakistan to enforce their writ. Other indications come from such key areas as tax-collection, law-and-order, environmental protection, economic planning, and civil administration. These are signs which point to a state that is withering away, unable to assert its authority in a positive sense. Karl Marx would be puzzled. After all, the proletarian Revolution never came to Pakistan, the ruling classes have become steadily wealthier, and many governments, including the present one, have been strong. Yet the state gets weaker by the year, less and less able to organize the forces of production, assure the safety of its citizens, and educate the young.

This puzzle of a strengthening ruling class and a weakening state can be understood from the historically allocated priorities and postures of Pakistan's state and society. On the one hand, there is a consumptive ruling elite that lives far beyond its means and has drowned the country in debt and, on the other, the lop-sided expenditure on defence. These have made it difficult to create strong institutions in civil society for want of resources.

Still more importantly, it is the notion of what constitutes a "good Pakistani" that has made nation-building so hard in Pakistan. The problem is that in our lexicon, patriotism is divorced from loving the people who inhabit this particular geographical area of the earth, or a desire to make their lives better. Instead, the measure of an individual's patriotism is the intensity with which he or she hates our neighbour to the east.

It has therefore come to be that public alarm and anger are exclusively reserved for defending the "true national priorities" as defined by the state and efficiently guided by the propaganda machinery it controls. Anyone seeking proof of this assertion will find it on every 5th of February when the Pakistani state forces all businesses and schools to close down and orders people out in the streets. Indeed, the standard formula for mass mobilization is well-known and well-tested: Islam-is-in-danger, Kashmir-is-in-flames, and India-is-the-enemy. Turn the knob slightly on any one of these and chanting crowds are guaranteed to appear in the streets. Turn it further, and a sea of humanity will pour into the city, burning, killing, and ready to be killed with the full jazba-e-shahadat.

This Pavlovian conditioning has drained away vast amounts of emotional and nervous energy from the people, consumed a huge amount of psychological space, and reduced sensitivity to pressing problems. Human nature is such that people can get angry or worried about a few things but not everything. A state and society that constantly perceives itself in mortal danger and under active siege cannot get excited about education or clean drinking water. True, creating a besieged mind-set produces a sense of unity that is momentarily satisfying. But it is purely ephemeral, and the price is the will, energy, and enthusiasm to effect reform in society. This is why the ghosts keep winning and Pakistan keeps losing.

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