

Culture of Complaint

I have been travelling in rural Pakistan, meeting with humble, hard working, mostly illiterate people. They brave harsh weather and live austere lives of unrelieved scarcity. Women can be seen here out in the fields. Kneeling, crouching, tool in hand they look up occasionally at the passing strangers, their sunburnt beauty a witness to the unceasing labor which feeds this country and pays for the extravagances of its ruling elite. Children, as little as eight and ten years old, can be seen carrying water up a steep hill, grazing animals, cleaning homes, and looking after younger siblings. Lean, muscular men gather around to answer the visitors' questions. They tell of the difficulties in getting an old mother or a stricken baby to a doctor, wife to a gynecologist, and children to school.

They describe their situation stolidly, as one does a natural disaster or a terminal illness. They thank Allah for what they have and blame no one for what they do not. The ironic reference to shoes in the Prime Minister's pre-budget address the other evening, led me to ask about shoes: "How many pairs do you and family members own?" None of the 25 men present and their family members owned an extra pair. They would buy another when the existing pair can serve no more. Can they afford to pay an extra 15% for shoes? Silence! When I persist, "Yes, I think so", says one man, qualifying his thought: "If we need only two or three pairs this year." Families average ten persons; there are eleven members in his family. Unlike the upper and middle classes these people have no savings. Rise in sales taxes shall cut further into the margins of their survival.

It is painful to witness the poverty of Pakistan's overworked peasant and working people. They sustain this society, feed it, and fund its governing elite's obscene luxuries. Less than three percent of this country's privileged people own seventy per cent of its wealth. The working majority suffer the pain of having their surplus taken away by various means including outright expropriation and indirect taxes. They undergo the fundamental injustice of having to subsidize the excesses of this society's parasites without being able to feed their own. Modern communication, migration to cities and to distant lands, and market forces have made these people aware of the possibilities especially in health, education, and access to such necessities as electricity, gas, kerosene, and clean water the world offers and owes them. They know that their poverty and underdevelopment is ordained not by God but by governing elites and their governments; and know also that fate is not a divine edict of pain but a window to alternatives. They feel trapped, nevertheless, because they are powerless and the system is rigged against them. As one old man, a soldier who had fought in two wars, said in a matter-of-fact tone: "We do not have the keys that open doors. No power, no money, no education!"

Given the level of sophistication and consciousness, one is surprised by this people's stoicism. Why don't you complain? I would ask. "To whom?" they usually ask, and occasionally: "We have so much work to do." Complaining takes a listener and leisure they seem to be saying, and they have neither. I find their stoicism unexpectedly pleasant because it contrasts so sharply with the gentry's culture of complaint. Their privileges are greater than those of the middle and upper classes in advanced capitalist countries. Spaces always pucca, often marbled beg for occupancy call it post-colonial space if you wish. Gadgets abound in these homes; servants come and go bearing trays of tea, patties and pastries. Often the automobiles outside carry stickers in the rear windows announcing the American college or university which the children of their owners attend. Yet in the 'drawing rooms', the conversation consists largely of negations and complaints.

There is much to complain about: crime, congestion, bad government, poor conduct of politics, horse trading, inflation, corruption, load shedding and, of course, servants. On any given evening or afternoon, all these topics come up, for a carp. Except for the bit concerning servants, all the complaining is unexceptionable. Who can question the value of condemning corruption, conning, horse trading, drug running, and dog chasing? The appearances suggest that even though the country drowns in venality we wish ardently for Pakistan to be a land of the pure. In this watan-i-aziz, as the poet Jalib used to call it, Eliot's famous lines would paraphrase thus: In the hall women (and men) come and go ... Complaining! Naturally, it doesn't rhyme. So look at who is complaining?

They are an educated lot in the sense that all are English speaking, and many if not the majority among them have foreign degrees. Yet their education precludes a life of mind. Things consumable things and people-you-know occupy the intellectual space. In the last seven years in this country I have heard or engaged outside a very tiny circle of friends in less than half a dozen serious conversations. In a country fundamentally poor and underdeveloped there is precious little discussion here on the causes and remedies of poverty or underdevelopment. Equally excluded from those endless social evenings are books and ideas. Serious book shops do badly in this country. You shall not find two good book shops in any of our cities. When an enterprising bookman opens a shop, as Najam Sethi did Vanguard in Lahore and Islamabad, he discovers that text-books are in demand not books, that shop lifters outnumber buyers, and trash outsells the serious even in literature. Gradually, they give up and go easy on good books.

I am reminded of a conversation, thirty years ago. In 1964, I returned to Pakistan to visit family and to look for a teaching position as I was close to completing graduate studies. One day in Lahore, I ran into a friend, Tom Brady. He had covered for the New York Times the Algerian war during all its seven and a half years. He was in the airplane with four of the FLN's 'historic chiefs' Ben Bella, Boudiaf, Ait Ahmed, and Rabah Bitat when it was hijacked by the French Air Force in mid-air between Morocco and Tunisia. A veteran war correspondent, Tom reported on Algeria fearlessly and with great moral courage. We became close friends. After the war ended in 1962, he was posted to Delhi as the Time's bureau chief for South Asia. He had been in Pakistan several times when we met in Lahore. "How do you find this country?", I asked him. The jovial old man looked unusually serious and said: "I am worried about it; and about your returning here." He went on to explain:

'I have seen wars, poverty, famine and corruption but nothing like the social schizophrenia I see here. At first, I was very impressed by the moral outlook of Pakistan's educated and affluent people. They talk about corruption and nepotism, waste in government, ostentatious extravaganzas, the treasonous levels of venality. They talk of these things obsessively as though little else interests them. Gradually, I started to see that the same people are engaged during the day in perpetuating the evils they condemn in the evenings. That's very dangerous, awful', Tom said. 'Okay, it's awful', I argued defensively, but why is it dangerous. He had replied: 'Because a whole class of people, educated people are engaged here collectively and individually in self-incrimination; daily, hourly.'

'So what?', I persisted 'these classes do not bring reform or revolution in society.' 'Don't kid yourself', Tom had shot back. 'This is not an industrialized, complex social structure for you to look for leadership elsewhere. It has to come from the intelligentsia as it did in China, Cuba, India, your own country'. 'But that is always a conscientious minority that issues forth from the upper and middle classes', I had argued. 'That's the point', he said 'but this process of collective self-incrimination can only prevent that minority from being born. Self-incriminators deprive their children of character, strip them of commitment, wed them to easy comfort, raise them to distrust themselves as much as others.'" We argued without agreeing. Tom belonged to that generation of Americans which produced

muckrakers like Jacob Riess and Lincoln Steffens who came to believe that double speak was worse than the foul word, that dynamic and productive crooks were less harmful to society than liberal and populist parasites.

Many years later, another friend Raza Kazim argued similarly over what he calls, more accurately I think, the Pakistan gentry: "It is a class without an internal dialectic. It has no dynamic of its own." When I first met him some twenty years ago, he called this "gentry's" latest the "BCCI generation", and still taunts me occasionally with "Are you still searching for reformists in the BCCI generation?"

I remain a little more optimistic than Tom Brady and Raza Kazim. But hope has been receding steadily. Each year's budget, for example, pulls some more ground from under my feet. It is discouraging to think that Pakistan shall in all likelihood enter the 21st century without genuine land reforms, or that in 1994-95 Sindh's landlords shall pay less than ten million rupees in taxes while the Awami government shall collect no less than seven billion rupees from the hapless awam. I cannot calculate as to how much of Pakistan's revenue shall come from the tax on shoes but know that not a fraction of it shall benefit Pakistan's barefoot majority. It is also certain that, as day follows night, the disinherited people's stolid silence in which I found some ironic comfort shall someday end, and a culture of resistance shall overcome the culture of complaint.

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