**[‘An air that kills’](https://www.dawn.com/news/1737071/an-air-that-kills)**

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THE air during Lahore’s winter kills. Terrible, terrible air. Nothing more terrible embraces you in Lahore during the winter than the poisonous air of the city. Air that causes not just melancholy but terrible sickness for millions of residents — many of whom are not guilty of causing it. Poor air, amid an air of economic distress, leaves no joy for young or old.

Our leaders brag about their pride in the city and its people. As I, and scores of others, battle sickness and the bad economy, I wonder what pride they brag about. Either all that bragging is pretentious or it’s delusional. Because if you truly feel pride in your city, you care about it: you make it better, not worse. Think about it. Our cities have been congenial to our leaders; have our leaders been congenial to our cities? Our cities have increased the opulence of our leaders, have our leaders increased the opulence of the cities?

After the recent floods, arguments were made to seek foreign aid for climate justice. We want aid to fight for climate justice. Fine. But we show no concern for the bad climate of our cities and for the effect of bad climate on our people. How is seeking justice from foreigners just when for the same cause you whip your own people?

Talking about justice, one wonders whether the lack of access to clean air is not a violation of a fundamental human right? The air in a city is a property common to all its residents. Isn’t your fundamental right blatantly violated when you can’t breathe good air in your city? No city can claim it delivers justice to its people when it violates fundamental rights so brazenly.

What is the duty of the state?

If a state can’t protect the fundamental rights of its citizens, of those who are the very reason for its existence, then the question arises: what is the duty of the state? No clean air and water, no speedy justice, no good and inexpensive education, no pure food, no cheap housing — all this the state doesn’t or can’t arrange. What, then, is the duty of the state?

The state and citizens have a contract, according to which citizens submit to the law and, in exchange, their rights are protected. This contract is violated if citizens submit to the law but their rights are seized. If you as a citizen submit to the law but your parents’ and your children’s rights are violated every day, what is the duty of the state?

Our country spends a pittance on our public health; so our health system totters. Any general sickness, one cause of which is the negligence of the state, would further cripple such a health system. People already being crushed under economic stress would be crushed further.

Sickness also causes the loss of productivity. If millions of people get sick for even one week, and we assign a paltry monetary value as their hourly wage, the loss amounts to an eye-popping figure. Improving the climate of our cities can also improve the economy of our country (which is rarely not in dire straits).

For a good climate and a good economy, the powerful have to act now. Nothing reveals the hunger of power and the callousness of our elite more than their inability to sit together to solve problems for the people. To act now is a necessity. To not act can unleash horror and cause the abandonment of all hope.

The state disappoints when it gives up for the poor but not for the rich. The poor rarely abandon the state but the state abandons them. On the other hand, the rich find comfort — alas, comfort also finds only them. In the end, what awaits the rich? A cushy London flat or a heavenly chateau. What awaits the poor? Misery.

Pertinent to this is King Noushiravan’s counsel to his son, as narrated by Sheikh Saadi: “Cherish the poor and seek not thine own comfort. The shepherd should not sleep while the wolf is among the sheep. Protect the needy, for a king wears his crown for the sake of his subjects. The people are as the root and the king is as the tree; and the tree, O son, gains strength from the root.”

Comparing the above with our present predicament, you’re left searching for answers to some stinging questions. Doesn’t our state cherish the self-indulgent elite and seek their comfort? Don’t our shepherds sleep while the savage wolves are among the sheep? Don’t our kings wear their crowns for the elite and not for the poor? Don’t our kings consider the elite as the root?

Sometimes it feels as if our leaders live in a different world where they are least troubled by problems that afflict the rest of us. Their fancies run opposite to those of others. As Ghalib said:

(You — and your adornment of your curls/ Me — and my extensive fears)  
Our leaders continue to adorn themselves while the rest of us continue to drown in fears for our survival.

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