**Smogged Nation**

**Lahore is now officially the world’s most polluted city; what more are we waiting for?**

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Smog has sounded the alarm; but we, like pigeons, sat with our eyes closed. Now, pollution has introduced a new season along with the traditional four; we might call it “smog season.” Our response, as usual, is limited, so we’ve decided to close schools, colleges, and universities in Punjab’s smog-hit areas until November 17. Lahore ranks among the most polluted cities globally, enduring pollution levels 40 times higher than the WHO’s standard. The situation worsens daily, with hopes that the government will take action; possibly installing smog towers like China’s to reduce pollution in affected areas. This step should have been taken a decade ago; as China has been addressing this issue for over a decade. We should have sought help from Chinese experts, yet our approach to combating smog remains as short-sighted as restricting double-riding on motorcycles or prescribing Panadol for every illness.

Our nation’s tragedy is a refusal to address issues at their root; choosing instead to apply temporary fixes. My report from November 2016 on this smog crisis, published on a leading news channel’s website, warned of the severity of the situation. Had we understood the urgency then; things might have been different today. Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad are filled with enormous vehicles that worsen traffic jams. Avoiding such vehicles could have saved us the need to build countless flyovers and underpasses; while also significantly reducing pollution. If we had curbed the use of oversized vehicles in other cities; we wouldn’t have to close schools and colleges now.

It’s hard to understand why we run desert-ready vehicles on city streets; or why we suffer from such a colonial inferiority complex. The British left; yet they left behind a mindset of mental subservience that continues to hinder us. Escaping this may require moving to Mars; a place free from colonial aftereffects, where we might think without being tethered to the absurdity of this societal structure.

We are people who love holidays, especially government servants who eagerly await their days off and mourn if a holiday falls on a Sunday. While the world continues its business; our country sometimes celebrates extended holidays, leaving our economy to join in the festivities. Our obsession with holidays is such that we’ll seize any excuse—a festival, a game, even made-up occasions—to skip work. It’s ironic because our country’s founder urged us to work, work, and only work; yet we interpreted it to mean rest, rest, and only rest. In this “lively” nation, sometimes it feels like no one works. We have two-day weekends, yet we are far behind in research, and our schools, colleges, and universities remain closed on every occasion. Teachers are ready to strike at the slightest hint of a demand for higher pay, and doctors routinely shut down hospital emergency rooms. It seems public employees wait for holidays more than for any real opportunity to serve.

So, if the government has decided to close all educational institutions for a while to combat pollution; does it even matter? We already know how little we value education. Our only priorities seem to be sleeping, eating, and entertainment; as if referencing Europe’s two-day weekends justifies our lack of productivity. Their contribution to global research is unparalleled; they truly earn their two-day break. But here, we want a holiday every other day without lifting a finger.

Here, every ailment seems to be addressed with either Panadol or Disprin. Instead of addressing pollution by reducing large vehicles or stopping the conversion of fertile farmland into concrete jungles; we continue adding flyovers, underpasses, and sprawling urban projects, trampling over lush fields and historic sites. Perhaps, had we acted more responsibly; we wouldn’t find ourselves in this predicament. There’s still time for the government to focus on environmental issues if they can spare a moment from political manoeuvring.

Lahore is now officially the world’s most polluted city; what more are we waiting for? The government needs a clear strategy for this issue and should inform the public. We love to talk, but action is rare. If we approached smog as an emergency, like we did with dengue, and brought in experts from countries that have successfully tackled smog; we could take steps to reduce it. This needs to happen immediately; as smog poses a severe health risk to people in affected areas.

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