On billboards and bumbling

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Isn’t it so edifying when one’s provincial minister for culture makes it known exactly what he thinks of culture, and it isn’t what one would expect? It really shakes things up for the average citizen who inclined towards the cultural. Usually “culture” and “cultural activities” include things that usually contribute towards the intellectual and artistic growth of the people involved in their creation and audience. Dance, art, theatre, music, so forth. In Pakistan our cultural activities would also include regional festivals like Basant or Uchaw for the Kalash; sporting events like the Shandur polo, or kabaddi in Lahore. We are lucky, in Pakistan, to have such a diverse array of wonderful ways to bring communities together in positive, celebratory activities that have the potential to unite us all across religion and caste.

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Only for a certain Mr Chohan, culture has been distilled to one essence: smutty stage shows. In a recent public meeting, recorded for posterity by someone’s phone camera, Mr Chohan does a spot of improve comedy, cracking jokes about ‘indecent’ billboards outside cinemas that feature scantily clad women. It’s the billboards, he says, that encourage people to go in and watch smut in the cinemas. Bravo! Mr Chohan has hit the nail on the head. Of course the billboards are advertisements for the films cinemas are showing. But how dreadful, how awful, how absolutely ear-touchingly horrifying that they should be there, outside cinemas for all to see! This epidemic is so bad, this rash of people being tempted to watch smut by smutty billboards, that one must address this itchy situation immediately by banning the billboards. Mr Chohan knows how the mind of the average smut-watcher works, and when the half-dressed painted ladies are removed from sight, then with them will automatically vanish the smut that cinemas are showing in broad daylight to whoever would like to pay a ticket.

Mr Chohan knows that the problem is not that cinemas are playing dirty movies, or that lots of men (presumably—one doesn’t suppose these ‘matinees’ are female-friendly) go to see them. The problem is the billboards, and the ladies! Because ever since Adam and Eve, the problem has always been the temptation of wicked ladies, not the lack of impulse control in men. I am awfully intrigued, I must admit, by these jezebels. There must be a cabal of conniving, vulgar women who run the film industry, making lewd movies they then hire women to paint billboards for, featuring women. It must be women who run the cinemas and display said advertisements so that eventually all men are tempted to join the dark side, and thus the triumph of the wicked ladies will prevail across the land! Mr Chohan suggested a course of treatment to rehabilitate these roguish women: making them fast all year, or sending them to perform a pilgrimage. That will teach them not to profit off the voyeurism of men and permissiveness of a society that turns a blind eye to men’s lechery!

In true style, the ladies Mr Chohan used as examples promptly issued statements warning him to mind his words and show some respect. It makes perfect sense, of course. You don’t clap with one hand, and the actresses in question made it perfectly clear. Bravo them, because satire aside, it is ludicrous how crass some public servants can be. What’s more, they continue to be, their behaviour excused by their colleagues as merely impetuous remarks made by an inexperienced minister. Give them time, we’re told. Time to what? Time to be casually sexist, openly vituperative and insincerely sorry? Time to use public office as their practice-ground? One would expect that only seasoned politicians were appointed to important pubic offices. Knowing how to deal with crowds and what language to use appropriately is hardly rocket science for a politician, whose very job depends upon their ability to employ rhetoric in a convincing and engaging way. And when it comes to a politician who has a history of using bad language in various situations, one would expect he would undergo some kind of etiquette training before being unleashed onto the public like an overindulged toddler who thinks that everything he says is wonderful.

I am full of admiration for Nargis and Megha, who know full well what it means to be a performer in a country like this, full of self-loathing people who will pay to watch their shows and damn them in the same breath. They might not be the Meryl Streeps of their time, but they are women who do not deserve to be mocked and ridiculed by the same people who have been consumers of their work. Every man who was guffawing in the video of Mr Chohan’s speech is obviously a man who got the joke—ergo, was familiar with Nargis and Megha. Let he who is without sin cast the first stone then, because this is not a move to enrich Pakistani culture or elevate the tone of Punjabi theatre—this is just misogyny and women-shaming, just to make you look good.

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