ThinkFest thoughts

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN | 1/16/2020

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| NOBEL Laureates are advised to bring their own multimedia equipment when lecturing in Pakistan. At the two-day ThinkFest 2020, held in Lahore recently, the victim was Dr Venki Ramakrishnan, winner of the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 2009 and currently president of the Royal Society.  Valiantly, he tried to operate the projector from the stage. Eventually, he controlled it manually, from the foot of the stage.  Subcontinental by birth, he understood that incompetence is the ineradicable element in our genes that will take centuries to modify.  Dr Ramakrishnan, a structural biologist, first obtained a PhD in physics before migrating to chemistry, in which he began ab initio at the undergrad level and continued to gain a PhD in that speciality as well.  Dr Ramakrishnan, in his keynote address, introduced his book Gene Machine: The Race to Decipher the Secrets of the Ribosome ( 2018 ).  For a Lahori audience, he might as well have been talking about Japanese netsuke or Gothic architecture, but the genius of any genius is to dumb down without being condescending, to simplify arcane concepts into comprehensible elements. Dr Ramakrishnan left his audience wondering why had they not thought of his conclusions themselves.  The previous day, while opening the ThinkFest 2020, Sir Mark Lyall-Grant analysed the unscientific complexity of `International governance and the future of the nation state`. Sir Mark`s family lent its name to the former city of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad). Some wag suggested that he might lil(e to change his name reciprocally to Faisal-Grant. Sir Mark had spent eight years here in Pakistan, lastly as high commissioner before retiring as UK`s national security adviser. His views were authoritative, his vision global and then regional.  Another participant Mani Shankar Aiyar, a former minister and now almost a former Congressite is the last surviving Pakistani still living in India. Like some latter-day Vishnu, he is the ultimate preserver of Indo-Pak amity. To hear him speak whether on his experience as the minister of Indian panchayats or on the death wish of liberal democracy is to be educated in humanism by osmosis.  Among the many sessions on history, one that glowed was Supriya Gandhi`s introduction of her book Dara Shukoh: the Emperor that Never Was (2020). Supriya is the greatgranddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, and to the despair of BJP diehards, she has chosen, from the safety of Yale university, a Muslim Mughal as her might-have-been hero.  The cruelty inherent in such Thinkfests and LitFests is that the audience is forced to decide between competing sessions. How could one choose between `Sarvarkar andthe origin of Hindutva` and `Pakistan and its economy: Why is it always muddling through?` Or sit simultaneously in a debate on `Where is Pakistan heading in the next 10 years?` and `Will the provinces bankrupt the centre?: Fiscal devolution post 18th Amendment?` Or attend both `Jis ki lathi us ki bhains: The rule of law in Pakistan` and `Defining national security?` To the credit of the organisers, they were able to attract a very high level of speakers from abroad. One stood out: Bruno Maçães (a former Portuguese minister and author of Belt and Road: The Sinews of Chinese Power) deserves a multiple-entry visa to Pakistan.  The ThinkFest even managed to get cawing members of the opposition and government songbirds to occupy the same perch. No one expects them to sing in harmony. That they could warble without fighting like angry mynahs was itself an achievement.  The ThinkFest 2020 functioned like a well-greased automaton. One was not aware of any prime mover, a mastermind, a behind-the-scenes Svengali. Certainly,there were volunteers who began and ended each session with discreet reminders of expiring minutes, but a conductor controlling this orchestra of disparate talents was hard to detect.  Those experi-enced in previous Thinkfests suspected such an ambitious enterprise could not have been conceived and launched without the benediction of official patronage. How else can one ensure limitless funding, the mandatory presence of busy government ministers, and an assembly of significant speakers? The fingerprint of any government agency, however, was missing, but perhaps that was to be expected of any self-effacing body that wants through films, television dramas and such Thinkfests to present a soft image of Pakistan. Contentious issues that have agitated the public the extension of the service chiefs or the verdict against Gen Musharraf were kept discreetly off the menu. Perhaps they have been left to mature, like game, for future roasting.  Lahore`s social calendar this season is overcrowded with such events. Even though they are held only annually, they are necessary reminders that we Pakistanis need to observe the norms of civilised interaction with other religionists, our neighbours, and most importantly with each other.  The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |