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**A festival of literature and love**

Part - I

An ideal example of how just a couple of youth supported by another couple of seniors can try to change the cultural landscape in society, and pretty well succeed in it, for the fourth time in Karachi.

For the fourth SLF, once again the Sindhi youth such Najia, Naseer Gopang, Sajjad Suhag and Zohaib Kaka, with support from seniors like Ahmed Shah, Akbar Laghari, and Noorul Huda Shah, pulled off a great show. As Naseer Gopang pointed out in his welcome comments, it was not Sindhi but Sindh Literature Festival embracing in its fold activists, educationists, and intellectuals from several languages and various corners of Pakistan. Such events with their broader scope and diverse sweep must come to notice across the country, but again I have my usual gripe about the mainstream media that give minimal coverage to such activities.

The recent Aurat Azadi March was also a case in point in which the media – electronic, print, and most of all social – was abuzz with negative comments, and even some otherwise sensible-looking people sounded the bells of alarm at an altered video clip that used objectionable slogans just to malign the march. Those folks did not bother to check the authenticity of that clip which was a botched attempt to communicate wrong messages about the march. That is one of the reasons why events such as the Aurat March and the SLF must come to attention across Pakistan to complement each other.

The three-day festival deserves multiple write-ups but here I will begin with just the opening day on Friday, March 12, 2021. It gathered a galaxy of liberal and progressive men and women who serve as leading lights in our society. Noorul Huda Shah carried forward the discussion that Naseer Gopang had initiated by again giving some background to the SLF and its rationale. She is one of the most respected writers of Pakistan with some brilliant plays to her credit and her words carry a lot of weight in the intellectual circles in Sindh.

Ahmed Shah is the leader of the Arts Council in Karachi and has been doing incredible work with his team. He offered his services to the organizers so that the SLF could move from a hotel to a better venue with more public appeal. In his remarks he reminded the audience that it was Z A Bhutto who for the first time in Pakistan had paid much attention to culture and its promotion. He recalled that many institutions and organizations came into being just by personal efforts of Bhutto so that most ethnic groups and their folk culture came to the fore.

Ahmed Shah also highlighted the point that the Culture Department of the Sindh government led by Akbar Laghari and the minister for culture, Syed Sardar Shah, have been fairly active in supporting such events. Imdad Hussaini, one of the most senior intellectuals of Sindh, stressed the point that all languages are good and people should love them so that they keep living and thriving. Dr Shah Mari had come all the way from Quetta and shared his thoughts about the cultural diversity of Pakistan and how important it is to have intellectual discourse.

Dr Syed Jaffar Ahmed in his keynote address dilated upon how societies move from culture to civilization. He clarified that culture has existed in all communities from the primitive to the modern age but civilization is something that plays a significant role in advancing society forward. It is acceptable to be proud of our ancient culture and old traditions, but it is even more important to appraise those traditions given the realities of the modern age. Our historiography talks a lot about Mohenjo-Daro and the Arab invasion, making us look like a nation stuck in the past.

Dr Jaffar suggested that an even more important question now is not about how old we are, but about how modern we are. We need to compare and contrast not only our ancient civilization with other ancient civilizations. We also need to do the same by looking at our present cities and towns and ask ourselves where other civilizations stand in the 21st century. While other countries have many thriving centres of art, culture, dance, and drama, where are our centres that we can show to the world and be proud of?

Syed Sardar Shah took a clue from Dr Jaffar and agreed with the points raised by him. Sardar Shah talked about the apathy of the federal government in terms of promoting national languages. The bill for declaring at least four languages as national languages has been pending for ages and the federal government is not interested in recognizing languages other than English and Urdu. Since Pakistan has dozens of languages, the major ones such as Balochi, Brahui, Hindko, Punjabi, Pushto, Saraiki, Sindhi and Shina must be declared as national languages. If that is not possible, the four largest languages of the country should have the status of national languages.

The SLF did well by organizing a dialogue titled ‘Sindhi Samaaj Jo Jaizo’ (An evaluation of Sindhi society) that Dr Ayub Shaikh moderated. The dialogue was intellectually stimulating as it covered many aspects of Sindhi society. Beginning with activist and poet Amar Sindhu, the dialogue featured discourses by Naseer Memon, Mehtab Akbar Rashidi, Jami Chandio and Noorul Huda Shah.

Amar Sindhu focused more on the challenges of education in Sindh and lamented the fact that education is mostly now targeted at being able to get a job rather than any awareness raising. The thrust of her talk revolved around first of all defining what we mean by ‘education’. One could not agree more with her that essentially education should not be all about jobs. Its primary purpose should be activating the brains of children who should be able to develop their educational and emotional wellbeing. ‘We should be fighting against intellectual poverty, and not just building more colleges and schools’.

Renowned activist and community developer Naseer Memon was scathing in his appraisal of Sindhi society. To him Partition was no less than an earthquake that shook the foundations of the social fabric in Sindh. The migration of Hindu educationists, financiers, intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, and philanthropists depleted the intellectual resources of Sindh and the gap was filled in an unnatural way by migration. Over the past seven decades feudal attitudes have become stronger with no major land reforms, and apart from a couple of urban centres, the rest of Sindh was deliberately left behind.

Jami Chandio is another development expert specializing in federal systems around the world. With a host of books to his credit, he was the best person to start with a positive note and also give some hope to the audience that all is not doom and gloom in Sindh. He believed that Sindhi society is changing fast, and young people of Sindh read better books and material on politics to broaden their horizon. But still there is an intangible extremism in society which is even more harmful than the tangible one.

Mehtab Rashidi and Noorul Huda Shah spoke at length about how Sindhi women are reacting to these changes in society. Their talks stimulated the audience to review their own attitudes and responsibilities. Finally, Sadiqa Salahuddin brought her school kids to perform a marvelous play that highlighted the injustices meted out to girls and women in Sindh. It moved many to tears. Well done, everyone.

To be continued

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