**Let the Light In**

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“Scientific thought and its creation is the common and shared heritage of mankind”-Dr Abdus Salam

Knowledge is just knowledge! It cannot be compartmentalised into ideological factions. For example, it cannot be said that physics is related to Christianity, or chemistry is purely Jewish or botany is only for the Hindus and so forth. As mankind progressed from one stage of evolution to another, it also gathered within its fold awareness with respect to its surroundings. As this grew, the desire to know, investigate and deduce increased to a level that gave birth to innumerable branches of scholarship. Today, there are myriads of offshoots of different types of subjects that cover vast fields of knowledge which have become the focus of attention for researchers and academicians. Consequently, with technological developments, novel secrets of nature get revealed that in turn open new vistas of learning, which continue unabated. Even the sky is not the limit as studies have swept across outer space and into the oblivion of galaxies.

This never-ending flow of information that is sometimes analysed, sometimes filtered, and sometimes raw is what mesmerises those who are keen on delving into their depths in search of conclusive data that can quench the thirst of inquisitive minds that somehow remains unsatisfiable. Thanks to these scholars, we are where we stand today with umpteen inventions; fantastic innovations; amazing technologies and scientific advancements all blended; having an immense influence on our lives, our thinking and our understanding.

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Developing the argument that the field of knowledge is above all biases of race, caste, creed, colour and ideologies, one can confidently say that those who take on the responsibility of scholarship and choose to team up with others of their type in the quest for learning should be viewed without the spectacles of false prejudices. Why should it matter that someone is white, black, brown or yellow, or is the follower of one or the other ideology, or is from a rich or poor background? If they excel in certain subjects, they should be respected and provided all kinds of incentives to further improve or conduct more research. Full advantage of their know-how should be taken either for the purpose of spreading knowledge or productively availing it.

Unfortunately, observation proves otherwise. In the medieval period, Europe was submerged in a sea of ignorance (darkness) and controlled by superstitions coined to keep people at bay while the elites ruled the roost. Therein, scholars who dared to challenge the prevailing ideas or tried to question the existing theories were treated with disdain, made fun of and even punished for holding conflicting views. As Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) popularly known as Petrarch, who was an Italian scholar, poet and humanist wrote of the past: “Amidst the errors there shone forth men of genius; no less keen were their eyes, although they were surrounded by darkness and dense gloom.” In other parts of the world, scientists et al were also made to suffer for their thinking that defied the existing thought process.

We are aware that Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya Razi (865-925) was a physician who introduced western teachings, rational thought and the works of Hippocrates and Galen to the Arabian world. One of his books, Continens Liber, a compendium about medicine, had offended a Muslim priest who ordered the doctor to be beaten over the head with his own manuscript, which rendered him blind; causing him to terminate his practice.

Michael Servetus (1511-1553) was a Spanish physician credited with discovering pulmonary circulation. His book, which outlined his discovery, also contained some ideas about reforming Christianity that turned the Church against him. Escaping from Spain, he got caught up in the Protestant inquisition in Switzerland where he was arrested, tortured and burned at the stake on the shores of Lake Geneva.

The famous physicist and astronomer, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), was accused of heresy just because he insisted that the Earth revolves around the sun was against the belief held by the Catholic Church of his times that the Earth was the centre of the universe.

Henry Oldenburg (1619-1677) founded the Royal Society in London in 1662 for the promotion and publication of quality scientific papers. Since he had to heavily correspond with foreigners across Europe, he was declared a spy by the authorities, arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London for many months.

In the modern world, there are fewer instances of such persecution thanks to great strides in science and its associated arms. Besides, knowledge has gained supremacy over ideologies in at least the First World that encourages constant research because of which we see new discoveries surfacing and older theories getting outdated. Yet, in the world we live in, today there are some societies like ours that continue to follow the age-old traditions of judging great scholars on account of their faith or beliefs. In doing so, they deny the country of all possible benefits their endeavours could have been derived because of their work.

Dr Abdus Salam (1926-1996), a great scientific mind who had contributed considerably towards education and science during the country’s nascent days, was forced to take refuge in Europe. His efforts were rewarded by the conferment of the Nobel Prize for physics in 1979 for which people here bragged that he was the first Pakistani to have won the award. Following the country’s Chagai-1 nuclear tests, the government issued a commemorative stamp as a part of “Scientists of Pakistan” to honour the services of Dr Salam. Ironically, after winning the Nobel Prize, he wanted to fulfil his cherished dream of establishing an international centre for theoretical physics in Pakistan, but none in the government showed any interest-he ended up setting up “International Centre for Theoretical Physics” in Trieste, Italy, which was later renamed the Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics.

As we entered the twenty-first century, there was a flicker of hope that perhaps we would be able to mark some progressive achievements by setting aside all forms of prejudices. In 2018, a known liberal leader with great dreams about the country came into power. He wanted to engage the mightiest of brains to help him in making Pakistan a country to reckon with. Alas, in his very first attempt to beseech a reputed economist settled abroad to return to the country to turn its fate around, he was prevented by a group of ideologists based on the economist’s faith to which they did not adhere to.

The dark ages did not just end. Their shadows continue to haunt some societies and whether we like it or not, we have to admit that whatever transpires in our country is ample evidence of our reluctance to admit light into our lives.

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