Slough of Despond

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN | 1/23/2020

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| WE Pakistanis are a nation of kill-joys; we murder happiness for our sport.  Which nation throttles music with more malice than the ascetic emperor Aurangzeb did? Which nation breaks the legs of dance as an art form? Which nation regards choreography as akin to heresy? Which nation has public galleries that are inaccessible, moribund and a graveyard of ashen ardsts? Which nation has provincial Arts Councils where young talent bites its nails, eager, anxious for recognition? Which nation abjures festivals like Basant or the Horse & Cattle Show or public parades other than ones that boast our military prowess? Which nation bans English newspapers from circulation in areas where entry is filtered through a fist? Which nation allows a book written in English on an `accidental` aerial incident that occurred in 1988, then waits 11 years to see its Urdu translation emerge before decapitating it? Which nation welcomes a handful of patrees at Kartarpur but cannot oblige tsunamis of homecoming compatriots at our international airports? Which nation makes air travel such a Via Dolorosa, with stations of the cross manned by aggressive, impolite centurions? Which nation once inherited an extensive railway network with countless passengers, and now counts only its dead from accidents caused by human f ailure and obsolete equipment? Which nation has an airline that once taught others how to fly and is itself now grounded, its professional CEO`s qualifications questioned with insolent energy? Which nation has a system of parliamentary governance where one individual`s extension of service is more important than a deliberation on tedious national issues like population control, education, job creation, industrial growth, the propulsion of exports, the prioritisation of imports, the management of depleting water resources, the hope of a home, and the assurance of grave? Is the rancour of the preceding paragraphs an exaggeration? Is it an overflow of bile from a discontented malcontent? I believe not. I live in this country. I am a senior retiree. I jostle for place in a community where maturity is synonymous with superfluity. I am my country`s unburied past, marking time before yielding to an untested future.  In my years, I have seen it allor at least, I thought I had. My eyes opened (as did my political awareness) when Gen Ayub Khan declared martial law in October 1958. Since then, I have witnessed Gen Yahya Khan`s well-meaning mal-arbitration between West and East Pakistan. I endured Zulfikar AliBhutto`s vindictive forays into nationalisation. I hid my beardless face during Gen Ziaul Haq`s Islamisation. My head oscillated in the political tennis match between Benazir Bhutto 1, then Nawaz Sharif 1, back to Benazir 2, again a return volley to Nawaz 2. I hobbled over Gen Musharraf`s uneven interregnum.  Today, I find myself in a modern equivalent of John Bunyan`s `Slough of Despond` that swamp of despair, `where many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place`. I struggle to breathe air free of corruption, to grasp any reed of support that will rescue me from this morass of mediocrity. I burn with chagrin as my illequipped government fights more fires (most of them self-lit) than the ones that incinerated Australia.  And yet, I can also see bright lightning in the Hiroshima threatening our future. A fresh generation of young Pakistanis is making a name for itself in every field of endeavour, despite wearing manacles made in Pakistan. Our industries may be f ailing, butour individual industriousness is not. Our private sector excels not because of but despite a disinterested state.  What does the PM Imran Khan/COAS Gen Bajwa partnership hold for us over the next three years? It is clear that neither intends to leave the crease willingly.  Who is the neutral umpire, though, in a match where the umpire is himself on the batting side? There is no Pakistani who does not want Pakistan to succeed, no one who does not yearn for strong, sound, selfless leadership.  The English novelist E.M. Forster wrote of a talented poet that `he was an exceptional person, highly gif te d [,] a lof ty idealist`. But he made `the mistake of thinking that when a person is exceptional he ought to be a leader`.  Is there anyone attached to Imran Khan`s ear who can persuade him that he has still more friends than enemies, more admirers than detractors? Is there no one who can convince him that a leader is one `who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way`? Unless, of course, he has lost his way.  It is time for the prime minister to make yet another U-turn and lead us out of this slough of despond, instead of following us deeper and deeperintoit.m The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |  |