

Dr.  
Pak-Pol.  
14 Oct 2001

# A crow on the parapet

## THE WAY IT WAS



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*There are people who suffer from all possible ailments ranging from gout to being irritable and grouchy. The fools will not learn and insist on what is right and how things should be done and run. They will demand their rights and will neither accept nor extend a favour. Citizens with a manifesto like this have a sad future*

THE CROW IN OUR FOLKLORE DOES NOT have the negative sentiments that are associated with the raven in the west. A crow cawing repeatedly while perched on a parapet is taken to be announcing the arrival of a *mehman* (guest). Often, the lady of the house is not pleased at the thought of a guest. For her it means extra expense and the bother of additional work. When a crow goes *kaan kaan*, therefore, most housewives shout back *dafa dafa* (be gone, be gone). Says my mother:

*azmayee gal aye, kaan bole te mehman zaroor anda aye.* (It is a time-tested thing; if the crow caws, a guest will come).

Young women with husbands or lovers abroad experience an irrepressible joy at the call of the crow. At one time, the crow was actually considered a part of the household. It is not an alien to domestic life, like the raven nor is its *kaan kaan* regarded a bad omen — unless, of course, the woman of the house is a poor sport about uninvited visitors.

Another endearing character of the crow is its sense of commitment to the community, something we humans could learn from the bird. Whenever a crow stumbles upon some scrap of food, he makes a raucous din to draw the attention of his companions, summoning them to come and have their share. There was a time we, too, were better mannered. Before breaking bread a person would ask others around to join him in whatever he was going to have for a meal and he thanked the Lord if anyone did join him. It is said that God lends *barkat* to a person's reserve of grain if food is shared.

A person who "ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell", to use Shakespeare's words, "but like a valour's minion carves out his passage, till he faces the food laden table" and assaults it from the "nave to the chops" is a sorry sight. This is how many partake of their share of food at marriage feasts and public functions. Admittedly some have a large appetite but they need not proceed with such "disdain" to others' fortune.

In the Himalayas and its foothills people are stirred at daybreak by croaking of ravens. Unlike our crows in the plains that are grey around the neck and chest, the raven or the *dhodal kaan*, as we call it, is dressed in glossy black. When a raven strays into the plains it is a source of unusual interest. Raven is not a social bird and likes to keep aloof from the companionship of boisterous humans. The shrill croaking of our crows can be annoying to those who like their nap or don't have a dear one gone abroad. Those who like jazz songs rather like the raven's hoarse voice. Perched on a sweeping branch of *deodar* or

upper reaches of an elegant portal or a majestic chestnut, its deep resounding cawing diffuses into the entire valley. In a state of slumber in the hills I always experience a tremendous sense of well being in the morning, when distant cawing of the raven leisurely reaches my ears. I savour the moment and try to assure myself that it will linger on forever. "Please be up! Breakfast is on the table. It is too late to be still sleeping." I am thus brought back to the petty pace reality of everyday existence.

There is so much to do in a day. In the end in spite of best efforts hardly anything gets done. One has to go back to places and look over and over again into fixed faces resembling gothic gargoyles before ice is broken. The effort is exhausting and humiliating. A *Dhodai Kaan* definitely leads a pleasanter life leisurely gliding from tree to tree, flapping its wings from glade to glade.

TS Elliot measured some people's life by coffee spoons. It would be more appropriate and accurate for us to measure waste by the number of visits to government offices. There are people who have a much longer life than others. They have neither an unhealthy blood pressure nor diabetes. They don't even die of cancer. These are the ones who make the fewest visits to the government offices. They know how to get the jobs done. There are others who suffer from all possible ailments ranging from gout to being irritable and grouchy. The fools will not learn and insist on what is right and how things should be done and run. They will demand their rights and will neither accept nor extend a favour. Citizens with a manifesto like this have a sad future. They say a person who cannot oblige others is of no use either to himself or anyone else.

There were these members of a family who called on someone of their *baradari* and asked him to do a favour. The officer politely enquired if what they asked of him was *Jaaez* (fair). The old fellow with a big nose who seemed to head the delegation retorted, "If the task was *Jaaez* why would we come to you?" The real demonstration of authority lies not in following the dotted line of law but in finding

means to bypass it. The really powerful sons of the martial soil must demonstrate courage to spurn the law and not be slaves to it. The laws are made for the weak and the inconsequential; the people who have a poor bloodline, an empty pocket, who ride old vehicles with civilian number plates.

There was a time a person felt proud of being a Pakistani. Can a citizen today have the same sentiments when he is increasingly made to feel less equal than others. How could one feel an Egyptian when in the day he was made to work at the pyramids and at night fed on onions, bread and tepid beer, before being flogged to bed? Fortunately we are not slaves and this country belongs to us and not the pharaohs. But freedom and democracy is not something to ask for, but to experience and exercise. Some people will not feel enslaved in a cage; others may be free and yet chained by their own avarice.

Crows have become sparse in our burgeoning towns. Perhaps because our feelings are ravaged with trivial pursuits and we have no longings pricking our memory for absence of those we cherish or love. Moreover everyone is a tinkle away. Even our forsaken heroine doesn't have to solicit the assistance of a pigeon to reach a lover with her tale of woe:

*Wasta ay rab da toon jaween way kabootra,  
Chithe mairay dhol noon puchain wey kabootra*

I believe the role of a crow in the traditional folklore was more than that of a messenger. He was also a companion to the languishing lady in whom she could confide. She could also send him on an errand:

*Kaga rey, jaa rey, jaa rey,  
Ppiya ko sandesa mora kahyo ja*

Personally, I would rather not beg a *kaga* (crow) to take a message, especially to Islamabad for fear of its being shot down.

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