**The Dearth of Intellectuals**

[Aliya Anjum](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/aliya-anjum/)

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I often turn to social media if I have to gauge public opinion or listen to voices that shape public opinion. Pakistani social media leaves me horrified, to say the least. The dominant theme that runs across Pakistani social media is domestic politics or rather conjecture, the blame game and conspiracy theories surrounding domestic politics. The next theme running on social media is the supernatural. Almost every Pakistani is interested in black magic and Jinns because they are afraid that they are presently afflicted. Educated people are commonly seen asking for recommendations for a reliable spiritual healer.

Losses in business, a failed romantic or marital relationship, strained family ties and illnesses lead people to conclude that the cause is supernatural. The supernatural, which should be the last resort, is invariably the first resort. The failure of academia and a poor business culture devoid of ethics are often responsible for business losses. The low quality of doctors and their greedy and unethical practices lead to illnesses being undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. Strained family ties and failed marriages often spur from the poor upbringing dominant in our culture where ethics, boundaries and the rights of others are never taught or practiced.

Last but not least there is an underlying psychological drive behind the obsession with supernatural healers. If the average Pakistani goes to the rare authentic Mufti Taqi Usmani, he or she would have to face their inner demons and admit to their wrongdoings. Fixing the situations would require doing what is hard on the inner self or the Quranic Nafs, such as admitting to wrongdoing and seeking forgiveness from friends, neighbours and relatives. It does not just end there, as it also requires making amends towards the same people. This requires suppressing one’s ego, which caused the sins in the first place. Hence this logical route is avoided at all costs.

As opposed to this, when the same man or woman goes to a conman or magician – pretending to be a spiritual healer – the fake healer is foremost an expert in human psychology. The fake healer assures his clients of their victim status and feeds their ego by telling them that they are innocent victims of the evil of others who envy them. This ego trip is what truly earns the fake healer his livelihood. Seeing the successful businesses of fake healers, one can easily gauge the moral and ethical standards of our society.

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Everything eventually boils down to morality and ethics, which is something our society simply does not practice.

Just yesterday, I was watching a social experiment in Karachi on YouTube. Karachi, being a city of diversity, almost every ethnic group of Pakistan was included in the social experiment carried out in a public park. A young man pretending to be a beggar showed a USD 100 note to people asking about its value, as he found it while picking trash. With the exception of one man, every single person tried to cheat him by offering him small sums in exchange for notes ranging from Rs 200 to Rs 2000. One man in a fancy car forcibly took the hundred dollar bill from him. When the pretend beggar asked for his USD 100 bill to be returned, the man gravely insulted him then aggressively pushed him, and tried to drive away. Later, when the pretend beggar told him to wave to the camera since it was a social experiment, the man nonchalantly did so. His complete lack of shame at his despicable conduct was horrifying, as he knew it would be posted on social media.

Ethics is the foundation of progress and enlightenment. Ethics require seriousness and diligence. The absence of sobriety and hard work produces the kind of nation we are. Our men on social media are gossiping about politicians or fearing the supernatural or playing stupid pranks, which lay bare the vices of the nation.

Public intellectuals are non-existent in Pakistan, with the exception of Dr. Qaisar Bengali. These days, tongues are rolling against prioritizing agriculture simply due to the fact that this was initiated by the army chief. Gen. Asim Muneer has shown foresight and wisdom when he advised the prime minister to focus on agriculture because according to the Indian eco activist and scholar, during the Vietnam war, the United States stated that the use of food is the ultimate weapon of control. According to Dr Shiva, “The growth of agribusiness in the US has gone hand in hand with the US foreign policy……..Africa is the largest land per capita. Africa is an abundant continent and yet because of the deliberate policies it has today been turned into the continent of hunger.”

The hypocrisy of social media activists criticizing this initiative of the army chief is evident by the fact that the same Youtubers make videos about the destruction of mango orchards in Pakistan due to the army’s housing projects. Yet when the same military prioritizes eco-friendly policies to ensure that we are no longer food insecure and that our children and adults do not go hungry, it is still blamed.

If we lack public intellectuals and our academics are of poor quality this only means that we lack direction in policy making. Can a Pakistani lady make her mark in Pakistan through agricultural intellectual activism like the Indian Dr Vendana Shiva who pursued education in the field and has authored research-based books? She is very vocal about globalization, leading to trends in food that affect countries like India, initiating hunger.

Pakistani women appear on the media or social media teaching cooking, acting in dramas – which promote toxic behaviours – and singing or dancing for entertainment.

Even our men are not reading or researching. Newspaper readership and non-fiction book readership are almost non-existent, except for religious texts. Earlier in this column, I demonstrated how increased religiosity exists with a complete lack of ethics as demonstrated in a social experiment. When bearded men and burqa-clad women cannot be trusted, how can they be religious?

*The writer is an independent researcher, author and columnist. She can be reached at aliya1924@gmail.com*