

# Pantomime



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**T**his year, the budget panorama in Islamabad had an altogether new dimension. How to ensure that the savvy Finance Minister would get through his budget presentation without being drowned out by the rowdy MNAs. In a sense this one item of interest generated

more debate than the budget was destined to receive. Of course the government's special effects department went into action, using electronic blips to block the bellowing MNAs. Using filters and other electronic devices — I guess Islamabad has quite a variety of these since it's been eavesdropping on everyone for years, the opposition was effectively tuned out and the long, rambling monologue that is essentially the federal budget went its way. Like all visits abroad, this exercise in collective futility was declared a great success. Once more, miraculously, the common man came out smelling roses and squarely positioned in a win-win situation.

There probably never has been a budget that adversely affected the common man. I think that Islamabad is designed and programmed to protect the common man though what this protection is, remains a mystery. But of course not for the government of the day. Faqir Aijazuddin writing in a paper the other day, lamented the 10 billion dollar reserve we are constantly boasting about is a shame when almost 50 million have slipped below the poverty line. But because words can so often conceal the real issues, and in the hands of a dyed in the wool bureaucrat, well-oiled politician or a well-intentioned general, words can take on altogether new meanings, the truth remains hidden under tons of lies and misinformation. Thus words like 'poverty line' assume a sanitised character and lull many into believing that these issues concern others, not them. But the truth is that our policies born out of our mindsets have riven this country into thousands of bitter and violent camps that are constantly in turmoil, seething and spitting like an angry volcano. The rich are filthy rich and the poor are unbelievably poor. The contrast is so great and the chasm so wide that it seems hopeless to even dream that these divides will start to disappear, never mind disappear. Islamabad is, as always, happily oblivious and so are its various mutant forms that style themselves as provincial governments.

**I** think most of us have absolutely no clue how the poor survive and how they condition themselves to live with very, very little. The human species is a peculiar one. It may have learnt to walk on two legs, but what goes on inside and what forces drive it around, is not quite clear. This is very much a master-slave society and the poor are — and they have more or less always been, on the receiving end of things. Not all accept their fate with a smile and a toss of the head but because they are so disadvantaged, most accept their fate and carry on like the beasts of burden who doggedly survive the meanness of man in these airless, scorching days. Like the poor, they have little choice but to plod on because they are at the other end of the whip and the whip comes flashing down far too frequently. In the lives of each one of us, many poor people — very poor people, feature every day. The list is common and familiar. The hordes of servants we employ, most working for a pittance, the long hours they toil serving us, feeding us late at night, clearing up after we have retired to our 80 channels or long and rambling gossiping sessions on the phone with equally well-heeled friends elsewhere. And it's not much different during the day. Starting with the early hours of every working day, everything is done to ensure our maximum comfort. During the day, cars are washed and buffed, rooms hovered or swept, clothes washed, houses and gardens cleaned up, ironing completed and a thousand other chores attended to including preparation of at least three major meals a day, numerous tea breaks in between and other assorted tasks that are assigned without fail all day long. Lots of minions as we refer to them often, battle through long and fatiguing hours in our country's unbearable summers or cold winter months. And yet, so indifferent are we generally, that we leave our wallets and jewellery lying about, often in places where the temptation to steal can overpower some of the most loyal servants. I often wonder how many of us would display the most sterling qualities, were sums of money ten, fifteen, thirty times our take home placed in our path so to speak. How many of us would walk away from such temptations each time registering nothing but regal indifference?

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Here and there, some of us care. There are people who educate children of servants, see to their textbooks, their fees and some even spend time teaching and guiding them. The son of a friend's cook made it with flying colours through GC and works at one of those fancy banks, but everywhere else, the story is always different. Perhaps the problem lies not so much in our deep-rooted selfishness or concern for only our well-being, but in our inability to understand the power of collective action. Most of us do not understand that a small step is not just a small step. We wish to do things on a grand scale; not for us the little gains made day after day. Temperamentally we are not ready to wait, act patiently and remain focused. It has to be a clean sweep or nothing at all. And because the problems become larger every day, the tendency to shrug shoulders and throw up hands becomes more and more inevitable. Yet on that greasy and slippery pole of social placement, most of us are slipping and sliding and hanging on for dear life, while we are pummelled and pushed by others jockeying for a tighter grip in their drive to out-achieve their neighbours. That may be the way things have always been and will always remain — there will not be a great revolution that will make all of us equal because nothing like that happens in real life, but in Pakistan the disturbing thing is the stark difference between those who have so much of it and those who have absolutely nothing. Not only does this chasm widen by the hour, but the indifference to the plight of hundreds and thousands, multiplies even faster. Faqir Aijazuddin concluded with the Planning Commission's definition of the poverty line placing the royal sum of 2,350 calories as the deserving norm for a Pakistani citizen subsisting below that dreaded line. In 1971, the Geneva Convention provisions for POWs held by the Indians laid down a daily minimum ration of 3,491 calories — that's about a thousand calories above what we are allocating to our countrymen and women 32 years later. We all understand and relate to calories when we are into health foods and yet another crash diet regimen, but as more and more of our people slip further down, who is actually prepared to look without fear into the eye of that gathering storm that will sweep across this country? You see its manifestations already in the growing crime rates, in the casual taking of human lives over trivial issues, in the insensitivity of all our well-heeled owners who live in an altogether insulated and wonderful world where they are pampered all day long. We all understand too well that there is little justice in the world, but here in the land of Islam, it was hardly ever seen in the good days and now, it's as rare as a miracle.

Close on the budget, which miraculously did not affect the common man — he having vaporized into nothingness long ago, comes the news on reduction of the rate of return on National Savings. The 'reasons' advocated are so bizarre that they cannot be repeated, but all these farsighted reforms will achieve is bring more misery to more people. The only thing is that someone in Islamabad will call it a progressive move and the sycophants will chant that it's a step in the right direction. The poor will plod on.