**[Revisiting Javed Akhtar](https://www.dawn.com/news/1742666/revisiting-javed-akhtar)**

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AT the Faiz Festival in Lahore Javed Akhtar was asked to tell Indians that not all Pakistanis were terrorists. In response, he said two things. First, that the two countries needed to communicate more to dispel such misperceptions and that Pakistan was more closed than India. Second, that Pakistanis should understand if Indians were upset because the perpetrators of 26/11 were still roaming around freely in the country. The remarks unleashed a nasty storm on social media.

Javed Akhtar was criticised for one or more of the following transgressions: insulting Pakistan on Pakistani soil, embarrassing his hosts, and being undiplomatic. Along with this, any number of motivations were ascribed to his pronouncements: humiliating Pakistan, currying favour with the BJP, being an Uncle Tom, etc.

In all this, the focus on what he said was lost. It was revealed, yet again, that Pakistanis on social media lacked the ability for civil and reasoned discourse. They hid that weakness by raising their voices and hurling abuse — the classic tactic of avoiding the message by attacking the messenger.

We are used to this in Pakistan. Many issues cannot be discussed because those raising them are labelled anti-national or anti-religion. If needed, agents to whom violence has been outsourced can be sent after them. On other issues, discussion is precluded by declaring it a crime liable to punishment.

If we believe Javed Akhtar to be wrong we can debate and argue as Faiz would have wanted us to.

This suppression of dissent does not make the issues go away. Instead, they fester at a cost that is now undeniable with the country on its knees. It also erodes the ability to address issues even when the will is present. Unsurprisingly, cock-eyed experiments like the hybrid solution, by people who only hear their own voices, compound problems they are intended to solve.

The net result is that truths in Pakistan have assumed such overwhelming and scary proportions that they cannot even be acknowledged. Those on social media do not have what in Urdu would be called the ‘hausla’ to face them. They can only deny them by indulging in cowardly attacks and specious whataboutery. These ‘victories’ are self-defeating. The Pakistani ship has run aground and is listing badly though the social media crowd may not yet be feeling the pain.

Back to Javed Akhtar. His first claim is debatable and much evidence can substantiate a refutation. True, Lata Mangeshkar was not invited to Pakistan. Nor was Mohammad Rafi for that matter. But the reason for that may simply be that Pakistan does not have institutional platforms where film stars or singers could be invited as guests.

Where such institutions do exist, for classical music, literature, theatre, and social action, organisers are eager to invite Indian celebrities. Javed Akhtar would know that Shabana Azmi was invited not as a film star but to read letters in Tumhari Amrita. Kamla Bhasin visited repeatedly; her NGO counterparts could see her only in Kathmandu, Colombo or Dhaka.

From my experience, I know the number of Indian students, scholars, and professors invited to intern, teach, and participate in conferences in Pakistan. On the other hand, I can share with Javed Akhtar a directive from the Ministry of External Affairs to Indian academic institutions explicitly barring participation of Pakistanis.

Javed Akhtar’s second claim bears consideration. He could have conveyed it differently but nothing is gained by sugarcoating a message to the point of rendering it innocuous. Any non-innocuous version would have upset someone or the other.

This raises the big question. How are we to respond to those who get upset? The desire to placate comes with a price. The more the demands of the fringe are accommodated, the more it takes over the centre. This phenomenon was illustrated starkly in the 1940s in British India with the polarisation of both the Muslim League and the Congress attempting to keep their constituencies united. We are seeing it now on both sides with the continued takeover by religious and pseudo-religious fundamentalists who started out as extremists on the margins.

Javed Akhtar is not a diplomat who lies abroad in the service of his country. He prides himself on being straightforward. We need the backbone to be equally straightforward while paying him the courtesy of a civil discourse without doubting his motivation.

In thinking of his remark, consider the following analogy: Every morning your chowkidar throws stones in your neighbour’s house and you do nothing to stop him. On meeting the neighbour’s son at a festival, you ask him to let his parents know you love them. When the neighbour is sceptical, you are hurt and upset. Those who wish Javed Akhtar to tell Indians that all Pakistanis are not terrorists should reflect on whether they have even once reprimanded their chowkidars.

Javed Akhtar made his remarks at a festival to honour Faiz, the man who wrote Bol which begins with ‘bol ke lub aazaad hain tere’ and ends with ‘bol jo kuchh kehna hai keh le’ (Speak, for your lips are not sealed… Say all that needs to be said). What more appropriate forum to speak openly and what better tribute to Faiz who was never afraid to do so himself?

It would serve Pakistan better to engage with its history. If we believe Javed Akhtar to be wrong we can debate and argue as Faiz would have wanted us to. A good start would be for the Faiz Foundation to state it is not embarrassed. Rather, raising critical issues is precisely what it desires in commemorating the memory of the man who repeatedly went to jail for the courage of saying what he believed.

Nothing has ever been gained by hiding from the truth. And much has been lost by pandering to those who stifle dissent by raising their voices. It signals to them that they hold the cards and can shut down all debate just by ratcheting up the noise and the abuse. When that happens, it is impossible to wrest back the initiative and the battle is lost.

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