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**This place we call home**

What is this place that we call our home? It is a land where sometime last month, according to the still unconfirmed reports we have, the man wanted for some of the most heinous crimes ever committed on the soil of Pakistan apparently simply walked away from where he was being kept, or else possibly escaped during some mysterious operation. No one has told us the official version. There are those that have appeared on television even bizarrely defending Ehsanullah Ehsan.

We may never know the reality of his cases. Did he fire the shot that made its way through the head of Malala Yousafzai in 2012 himself, or simply give the orders? Does it make a difference? How precisely was he involved in the massacre of 134 children and around nine adults at the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014? He has admitted to this crime and to others involving the deaths of scores in Lahore, Gilgit and other places. There were no charges filed against him, though.

But the young students who protested for their rights in Islamabad still remain behind bars. Only a few political parties leaning left of centre have in any way called for their release. Some have been freed, others remain behind bars. Human rights activists, lawyers and others have been ‘picked up’ or placed on the ECL without their knowledge or information as to the reasons for this.

How many of us think of that grandmother who for years walked to the gates of the APS every day following the murder of her grandson, hoping he might walk out through the gates in his green blazer? How many think of the father who has insisted on dressing only in black since that day? Why has their been no justice despite promises from top officials at the time of the tragedy? What are we waiting for? Have we heard the warnings being issued about a Taliban resurgence in the former FATA areas? Are we concerned about it? Or are we more interested in locking away those who give out the warnings? This is something to think about.

There is also a great deal else to consider about what has become of the place we call our home. Till the early 1980s, Pakistan kept pace with India in terms of GDP growth balanced against the size of each country’s population. It has since fallen far behind and after the late 2000s, the pace of this decline has increased to a faster and faster fall down the ladder, leaving Pakistan as a nation that leaves economists wondering whether it can be saved or not.

Bank staff, who have little decision-making power of their own, struggle against a sea of clients making complaints over repeated biometric data collection and other new rules which simply make life harder for everyone alike. Small bank branches scattered across the country simply do not have the capacity to deal with the demands put on them, ostensibly in an effort to check corruption and meet FATF demands. The high pared persons placed to head the State Bank of Pakistan with their close links to the IMF should be considering solutions to these problems faced by people. But the guidelines they follow are not written for Pakistanis. They are written beyond the boundaries of our homeland to serve the purposes of others. Nations before us have noted precisely the same sequence of events.

What ordinary people deal with is the multitude of fraudulent housing societies which take away from them a lifetime of savings, offering nothing in return. There are others who must live the last years of their lives deprived of the pensions owed to them because the companies, the banks, the mills they have worked for have refused to deliver these in violation of rules. Cases have been continuing before courts often for years. Some of the plaintiffs are already dead. Others pass away even as the usual shenanigans of a court case continues, with lawyers failing to turn up or unable to provide required documentation.

The ruthlessness of companies, with some of the petitioners having put an entire life into work with them, is soul-destroying. Can somebody intervene? Will someone? It appears that we all basically know the answer, whether or not we choose to dwell on it.

In streets across major cities, we have children working, despite the laws which prevent this, there are fourth graders who go to school in the morning and then stand behind vending carts for the rest of the day to support families and bring home their small incomes. They are treated with scorn by city authorities who have again and again torn down small kiosks, pushed back vending carts but allowed plazas occupying acres of illegally obtained land to stand.

We have teenagers committing suicide due to poverty at home, due to domestic violence, due to the sheer unbearability of life and due to the pressure placed on them by anxious parents barely able to scrape together school fees. The change that was promised in 2018 as we open eyes in our ‘new’ country does not seem to be visible.

There are other quite extraordinary instances of courts ordering that the marriage of a teenage girl – provided she has reached puberty – is valid, even though there are specific laws which bar this. Under frequently abused laws such as the one on blasphemy, people continue to end up behind bars, often for decades, with little hope of escape. Even if they are freed, as Aasia Bibi was last year, years and years of their lives have been wasted behind jail cells and their children have grown up without them. Good deeds also take place. These are heartening. There are always people who as individuals or small groups work for the good of others. They include students, alliances of various kinds and simply goodhearted citizens who opt to help others, often at their own cost. There is also the heartwarming story from Zhob on the Pak-Afghan border in Balochistan of an elderly cleric handing back a 200-year-old Hindu temple to the Hindu community. A school established in the temple three decades ago has now been shifted with the help of this cleric. Hindus in the area have celebrated. Such instances are limited.

We can only hope there can be more small miracles of similar nature. But it will take more than miracles to make our home a place where dreams can be turned into reality, where suffering is limited and this can only happen if genuine control over policymaking is given to people who care and truly wish to turn their country around.

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