**Our collective callousness**

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As millions of hapless people grapple with the effects of the devastating floods, the ruling elite appears to be more interested in settling political scores and sparring over inconsequential matters. The apocalyptic natural calamity has killed more than 1638 people besides wounding over 12,865 souls. The tumultuous wave of destruction has also caused heavy losses to our infrastructure – partially or completely damaging over 2,049,482 houses, 13074 kilometers of roads and 392 bridges besides killing over 1,103,800 livestock and submerging over 9 million acres of land.

The disaster that affected more than 33,046,329 people, including 11 million children, hitting 84 districts of the country, still continues to haunt millions of people who are facing a spectre of disease outbreak. The looming hunger and starvation are two other possible phenomena that haunt those badly affected by these floods. With more than 44 per cent malnourished children, there are fears that the country is going to face an epidemic of malnourishment as staple crops like wheat and rice have been destroyed on a massive scale while millions of indebted peasants have further been pauperized by the devastation of farm lands.

The floods also affected the already crippling infrastructure of education. According to Save the Children, at least 18,590 schools were damaged or destroyed, dealing a blow to the education of 670,000 children. It is feared that the real number might be much higher than estimated. The global body for children's welfare notes: “With whole villages inundated, thousands of students across the country, who had been preparing for the start of the academic year, have found their schools completely submerged, with books, blackboards, chairs and tables floating downstream.”

The country is already burdened with over 25 million out-of-school children and it is feared that the literacy level will witness a downward spiral because of the recent destruction. The situation is going to be worse in Sindh where nearly 16,000 schools were damaged or destroyed and around 5,500 schools are being used to house the displaced. This is the province where education already lies on the bottom layer of priorities with more than 4000 schools either closed or non-functional for years.

With almost 10 per cent of the country’s health facilities damaged or destroyed, Pakistan is also likely to face a catastrophic situation in the health sector. The country's health infrastructure had already been in shambles for years with the provincial and federal governments spending a very tiny percentage of their budgets on health. The World Health Organization notes that tens of thousands of pregnant women have lost access to health facilities and services for safe delivery of their babies, increasing the risk of medical complications as their options are limited to delivery at home. Those needing medical attention for existing conditions will face diminished access, while tens of thousands of people, including children, need psychosocial support and mental health services to cope with the enormous losses they are experiencing and destruction they are witnessing.

The situation is grim but even these heart-wrenching scenes of emaciated children or malnourished women did not affect our ruling elite that is busy trading allegations against one another. Imran Khan, the self-proclaimed messiah for the poor, is still holding public rallies and gatherings, seizing this opportunity to lambast the government and his political rivals. The governments in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, GB and AJK are making hectic efforts – not to extend relief and succour to those affected by the devastating floods, but to appease their beloved leader who has been strutting around the country, spending billions of rupees on his political activities.

Amidst the devastation of these floods, the sheer indifference of the ruling alliance towards the people has also been exposed. Instead of coming up with a comprehensive plan to mitigate the hardships of the displaced, it is quarreling over the portfolios of ministries and positions in government offices. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who made an historic number of foreign trips within a short span of time, was accused of taking a large entourage to New York, allegedly squandering public money. While the ruling elite wants to set all the standards of austerity for the poor people by imposing unbearable taxes, it loves to inflate the size of the cabinet.

As if not enough, the elected representatives of the country expressed their love for the people by demanding to be exempted from toll tax on motorways because our impecunious parliamentarians clad in branded dresses and adorned with imported watches and necklaces cannot afford to pay this tax. Their altruistic efforts bore results and they were granted the exemption. Others did not want to be left out so they were allowed to import luxury cars.

This is all happening at a time when the country has already suffered a loss of more than $30 billion because of the destruction caused to our infrastructure during the catastrophic floods. Our prime minister and his tedious acolytes are roaming about the world’s capitals with a begging bowl asking international bodies to generously contribute to the funds that are meant to be spent on flood affected but ironically, from the prime minister to the foreign minister to Imran Khan to Maulana Fazl, none of them has contributed even a single penny. Bilawal is one of the richest parliamentarians while the Sharifs are also among the opulent classes of the country but the helpless masses are yet to see an iota of generosity from their beloved leaders. Our pious opposition leader and his cronies are also awash in wealth and opulence but no donation is expected from them.

The element of apathy is not confined to our politicians and government officials but our celebrities have also been oblivious of the fact that the country has been hit by a catastrophic natural calamity, rendering millions of people homeless, exposing them to various diseases, hunger and starvation. Except Hadiqa Kiyani, no prominent showbiz personality bothered to venture out. They rather chose to fly to a foreign country to attend the most crucial event of this century instead of extending any help and succour to the flood affected people. We expect Angelina Jolie and other celebrities to come and help us but shy away from demanding the same from our own people.

As far as our business class is concerned, it is already living on subsidies on gas, electricity and imports. Their economic empire lives on bailout packages and amnesty schemes doled out by various governments. So, how can they help? Yes, they can invest by lending helicopters to politicians or making election campaign funds in the hope of good returns, but what will they get in return by extending assistance to the wretched?

Our clerics are busy fuming over the Transgender Act while the public in general is more interested in staring at their TV screens, cheering at every ball and hit. For them, emaciated children and malnourished women are non-existent. They do not want to imagine the lives of these people of a lesser god who have been condemned to live under the scorching beams of the sun. Cozy rooms do not allow people to ponder over the miseries of these souls. This is all not a satire but a reflection of our collective callousness that seems to have turned us into unconscientious souls.

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