

RE-IMAGINING PAKISTAN

Mr. Jinnah's Pakistan Isn't Working. What Can?

[Commencement lecture by Pervez Hoodbhoy at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, 9 December 2006.]

It is indeed a pleasure to see the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture emerge as a thriving educational institution. I remember my first visit here around 1994 when it had barely come into existence. The Nusserwanjee Building in Kharadar had just been pulled apart and transported brick-by-brick to this site. Over the years it was patiently put together again, and this innovative experiment has now born fruit. To those who will graduate today from the School, I extend my congratulations. You are ready to set sail into the big, wide world as artists, designers and architects. Many of you will doubtless become rich and famous, and I hope all of you do.

But, as a general fact, the success of individuals does not always lead to the betterment of the larger milieu in which they live and breathe. Improving the state of society is a far more difficult and complex matter, and it involves much more than just increasing the consumption of material goods and services. Societies change when people change their ways of thinking. It is on this that we shall reflect upon today.

To help us along, let's imagine a film like "Jinnah". You die and fly off to the arrival gate in heaven where an angel of the immigration department screens newcomers from Pakistan. Admission these days is even tougher than getting a Green Card to America. You have to show proofs of good deeds, argue your case, and fill out an admission form. One section of the form asks you to specify three attitudinal traits that you want fellow Pakistanis, presently on earth, to have. As part of divine fairness, all previous entries are electronically stored and publicly available and so you learn that Mr. Jinnah, as the first Pakistani, had answered – as you might guess – "Faith, Unity, Discipline". This slogan was in all the books you had studied in school, and was emblazoned even on monuments and hillsides across the country. Since copying won't get you anywhere in heaven, you obviously cannot repeat this.

What would your three choices be? As you consider your answer, I'll tell you mine.

First, I wish for minds that can deal with the complex nature of truth. Without minds engaged on this issue there cannot be a capacity for good judgment. And, without good judgment a nation will blunder from one mistake on to the next. Now, truth is a fundamental but very subtle concept. The problem is that things are usually not totally true or totally false. Still, some things are very true and others are very false. For example it is very true that I will be killed if I stand on the tracks in front of a speeding train. And it is very false that the earth rests on the horns of a bull. But these are quite easily established; separating true and false is often extremely difficult.

Take art, architecture, music, poetry, or sculpture. They are so absolutely necessary that we cannot conceive of a satisfying or civilized existence without them. But there is no true or false in any of them, just shades of gray. Harold Pinter, the British dramatist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, emphasizes this in his acceptance speech:

The real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.

Pinter says it so well. Who wants to read a book or see a drama about absolute heroes and total villains? Or perfect beauty and total ugliness? These extremities do not engage our mind or sensitivities.

Truth in art is a subtle matter, and I am not a philosopher. At one level it appears to me that truth in art is really about preferences. Is it a truth that Ghalib was a better poet than Mir? Or that Mehdi Hasan is the greatest ghazal singer on the subcontinent? Is the renaissance neoclassical art of Raphael and others more true to life than the modern art forms that superseded it? Or that modern machine-driven architectural geometries are superior to buildings designed with columns, arches, and gargoyles of classical architecture? Surely, these are matters of taste.

At another level there is a question of honesty and truth that relates squarely to your profession: should someone, as a commercial artist, design a great advertisement for a bad product? Of course, some people will hold very strong opinions on these issues because, perhaps as a consequence of their education and socialization, they have accepted a certain point of view and acquired certain tastes. Fortunately, most will accept – even if grudgingly – that truth in art is unknowable. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, or between what is true and what is false. In effect, a thing can be both true and false. And here I will go happily along with post-modernists even though on other matters there is much that I disagree with them about.

But what about truth in matters of religion? Religion occupies a far larger domain of our national existence than art, literature, and the rest. Here there are still stronger opinions and people shy away from discussions on this everywhere. This is because there is usually a total conviction of where the truth lies. Every religion is convinced of its correctness and of the incorrectness of others. My deeply religious Catholic friend at MIT – with whom I shared a room during my freshman year – would kneel by his bed every night to pray for my salvation because he felt that, as a Muslim, I was destined to hell. His truth was different from mine, but he was such a sweet person, and so genuinely disturbed by what he saw as my ultimate fate, that I simply did not have the heart to tell him that his prayers were quite unnecessary.

We could, of course, avoid talking about religion and I could stop just here. But it is a fact that religion determines what large numbers of Pakistanis live for, and what they will die for, and – all too often – what they will kill for. So we cannot afford to avoid the subject when the stakes are as high as they are today. The choice is between conversation and violence.

So let us be bold and examine religion at its three different levels.

At one level religion is inspirational and emotional. Marmaduke Pickthal, who first translated the Holy Qur'an into English, wrote that the melody of its verses could move men to tears. Abdus Salam, transfixed by the symmetry of Lahore's Badshahi Mosque, said that it inspired him to think of the famous $SU(2) \times U(1)$ symmetry that revolutionised the world of particle physics.

At a second level lies the metaphysics of religion. This relates to the particular beliefs of a religion, including such issues as monotheism and polytheism, death and reincarnation, heaven and hell, prophets and holy men, sacrifices and rituals, etc. At both these levels, the absoluteness of a particular truth is obvious to the believer, but not necessarily to those outside the faith. Nevertheless, he or she is happy to achieve a sense of purpose in an otherwise purposeless universe. Of course, the particular beliefs held to be true – as in art and aesthetics – depend upon the individual's family background, education, and socialization into the wider community.

There is a third level: religions are prescriptive. You must do this, but not do that. Some prescriptions are very sensible. But several are understood very differently by different groups belonging to the same overall faith. Some differences are relatively harmless, such as exactly when you may break your fast, when to celebrate Eid, and whether your hands are to be folded or held down while praying. But other differences are deeply divisive and the source of bitter conflict: How much of her face must a Muslim woman cover? None, all, or half-way in between? If a man declares three times to his wife "I divorce you" adequate grounds from an Islamic point of view for a divorce? Or, to take another example, against whom and in what manner is the Quranic injunction for jihad to be followed? This question has pitted Muslim against Muslim in bitter disputation. Is it okay to set off a car bomb in Baghdad and, if so, in which neighborhood? Are suicide bombings un-Islamic? Was the 9/11 attack on America a crime by standards of Islamic morality? Is Osama bin Laden a good Muslim, or perhaps not one at all?

There are religious authorities on both sides of these divides. I do not wish to take sides on these issues here, but the very fact that there is serious disagreement even among believers of the same faith – not to speak of faiths hostile to each other – means that there cannot be only one single truth in religion. At best there is a plurality of truths, as in the case of art and literature. Some truths are more true, or less true, than others.

And what about science? Are its truths absolute? At the risk of appearing evasive, and of having to disappoint some friends, I have to tell you that my answer is both yes and no.

The good news is that, at the level of epistemology, truth in science is ultimately knowable. Post-modernists are up the creek if they think that all scientific knowledge is relative. A scientific fact has to pass rigorous tests before it is accepted. This means that different scientists in different laboratories at different times must be able to observe the same phenomenon. The nationality, sex, religion, or ethnic affiliation of the scientist is irrelevant. This is why scientists form an international community. Precisely because

their differences can be resolved on the basis of experiment, observation, and mathematical argumentation, they don't kill each other or condemn other scientists as heretics worthy of execution. I have yet to hear of a scientist equivalent of Salman Rushdie.

But there are questions that science will never be able to address. Nor is science a monolithic body of doctrine. The great scientist and visionary, Freeman Dyson, reminds us that:

Science is a culture, constantly growing and changing. The science of today has broken out of the molds of classical nineteenth century science, just as the paintings of Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock broke out of the molds of nineteenth century art. Science has as many competing styles as painting or poetry.

Well, the objectivity of scientific knowledge was the good news. The bad news is that the world's scientists are also responsible for some of the greatest crimes against humanity. They make nuclear bombs, germ weapons, polluting factories, and serve the narrow interests of their national, religious, or ethnic groups. As individuals they are no more enlightened than anybody else. Some brilliant scientists that I have known are mere morons when it comes to matters of society or of human relations. So, scientists will not save the world – or even Pakistan.

Who will? Only those capable of nuanced, balanced, critical thought can – and they don't have to be scientists. We can put our hopes only on those who realize the provisional nature of truth, and who do not claim a monopoly on wisdom. The dogmatist, who thinks he has a divinely provided blueprint to reform society, will only get us into deeper trouble. So this is why my first wish was for Pakistanis who can think.

This is not a hopeless wish. Students here should think back into what they were like before they came to this School, and how they changed because their teachers encouraged them to ask questions. You learned that good questions lead to good answers that, in turn, generate more questions and ideas. Those ideas helped you move forward. So, be critical, be thoughtful, and don't be satisfied until you are thoroughly convinced.

But I must move on because I still have two more wishes to make.

My second wish is for many more Pakistanis who accept diversity as a virtue. So I am not asking for unity, but acceptance of our differences. Let's face it, we're all different. The four provinces of Pakistan have different histories, class and societal structures, climates, and natural resources. Within the provinces there live Sunnis, Shias, Bohris, Ismailis, Ahmadis, Zikris, Hindus, Christians, and Parsis. Then there are tribal and caste divisions which are far too numerous to mention. Add to this all the different languages and customs as well as different modes of worship, rituals, and holy figures. Given this enormous diversity, liberals – who are rather good people in general – often talk of the need for tolerance. But I don't like this at all. Tolerance merely says that you

are nice enough to put up with a bad thing. Instead, let us accept and even celebrate the differences!

Nations are built when diversity is accepted, just as communities are built when individuals can be themselves and yet work for and with each other. If we want unity in the face of diversity, then the majority must stop trying to force itself upon the minorities. Most crucially, the state must stop acting on behalf of the majority. It is imperative that all Pakistanis be declared equal citizens in every way. The Constitution of Pakistan does not accept this. It must be changed to reflect this.

For sixty years we have feared diversity and insisted on unity. But Pakistan paid a very heavy price because our leaders could not understand that a heterogeneous population can live together only if differences are respected. The imposition of Urdu upon Bengal in 1948 was a tragic mistake, and the first of a sequence of missteps that led up to 1971. We have not learned the lesson even now, and the public anger today in Balochistan and Sind against Punjab stands as unfortunate proof. After the 80-year old Nawab Akbar Bugti was murdered by the Pakistan military, no Punjabi – even if he strongly disagrees with the actions of the military – feels safe in Balochistan. To my mind this is a terrible thing and undermines the very concept of Pakistanis being one nation.

Accepting diversity is something that we all learn, to a greater or lesser extent. I ask students to look at their classmates who come from different backgrounds. Here, as elsewhere you have different economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. But probably most of you have learned to work together. You acquired a set of values that allows you to work together, appreciate merit and honesty, and see the individual for his or her merit. Surely education is really about acquiring these values – not just learning technical skills.

And now for my final wish.

My third, and last, wish is that Pakistanis learn to value and nurture creativity. Creativity is a difficult concept to define but roughly I mean originality, unusualness, or ingenuity in something. If nurtured from an early age in children, it leads to great writers, poets, musicians, engineers, scientists, and builders of modern industries and institutions. No one can dispute that creativity is a good thing. But how come Pakistanis – with some important exceptions – have done so poorly on the world stage? Why are there only a dozen or two internationally known Pakistani inventors, scientists, writers, etc for a nation of 165 million people?

The poor performance comes because our society is not willing to pay the price for having creativity. Individuals are creative only when they are not subject to oppressive social control, when the intellectual space in which they can function is large enough, and when they have a sufficient degree of personal autonomy. It is therefore axiomatic that creativity runs counter to tradition and coercion. Authoritarian societies don't want the lid to be taken off because who knows what can happen after that?

There cannot be creativity in a society where students learn like parrots, where the teacher is an unchallengeable authoritarian figure “jo aap kay baap ki tara hai”. Except at a few leading universities, the written word – even if it is in a physics textbook – is slavishly followed. The students in our public universities are just overgrown children, including the ones who are in their mid- or late twenties. In fact they prefer to be called girls and boys, not women and men. For recreation they do not read books but walk aimlessly in bazaars and waste time in pointless chatter. Most have never read a single classical novel, either in Urdu or English. In my department – the best physics department in the country – their only contribution to what you see around is the huge birthday or “mangni” greeting cards displayed on bulletin boards. Teachers insult them, throw them out of class, and encourage deference and servility.

Wrongly, the cornerstone of our education is *itaat* (obedience), which is the very negation of creativity. It is to challenge *itaat* that Faiz Ahmad Faiz wrote:

*ab sadeeon kay iqrar-e-itaat ko badalnay
lazim hai keh inkar ka firman koi utarey*

I am done with my three wishes. May that *inkar ka firman* come sooner rather than later.

At this point I don't know whether I will get past the Pearly Gates or not. The first Pakistani to get through was, we are told, the originator of the call for Faith, Unity, Discipline. What I've put down on my form is quite the opposite, as you will have surely noted. But Pakistan is no longer what it was in 1947. Different situations in different historical epochs call for different solutions. So I'm still hopeful about my application for admission.

Now, of course, there must be many applications pending in heaven and it will be a while before I know how mine went. But meanwhile, there are lots of urgent things that you and I must seriously work upon.

First, we need to bring economic justice to Pakistan. This requires that it possess the working machinery of a welfare state. Economic justice is not the same as flinging coins at beggars. Rather, it requires organizational infrastructure that, at the very least, provides employment but also rewards according to ability and hard work. Incomes should be neither exorbitantly high nor miserably low. To be sure, “high” and “low” are not easily quantifiable, but an inner moral sense informs us that something is desperately wrong when rich Pakistanis fly off to vacation in Dubai while a mother commits suicide because she cannot feed her children.

Second, we must fight to give Pakistan's women the freedom which is their birthright. In much of rural Pakistan a woman is likely to be spat upon, beaten, or killed for being friendly to a man or even showing to him her face. Newspaper readers expect – and get – a steady daily diet of stories about women raped, mutilated, or strangled to death by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Energetic proselytizers like Farhat Hashmi have made deep inroads even into the urban middle and upper classes. Their emphasis is on covering

women's faces, putting women back into the home and kitchen, and destroying ideas of women's equality with men. The culture of suppressing women and excluding them from public life is spreading like wildfire. As our collective piety increases, the horrific daily crimes against women become still less worthy of comment or discussion.

Third, and last, we have to wake people up and get them politically engaged again. Young people have tuned into mindless FM entertainment and tuned out of participation in social causes. University campuses are empty of discussion and debate, and movements against manifest social and political injustice bring forth only handfuls of committed individuals. Millions demonstrated in the streets of London, Rome, Washington, and New York against the criminal American invasion of Iraq. But in Pakistan – where the anger was still deeper – the response was invisible. We have become cynical and think that nothing can be done. Today the military rules an apathetic nation.

This apathy must go, and can go. Last year's earthquake galvanized people across the country. It broke the myth that we have stopped caring for each other. I have never seen Pakistanis give so whole-heartedly of their money, time, effort, and energy. Ordinary people, students, shop-keepers, businessmen...just about everybody pitched into the huge relief effort.

So we can change for the better. We can be like other nations on this planet. We can make responsible choices for who should govern us. We can bring justice to our people. We can be a decent civilized, peaceful, well-informed, educated people. It's only a question of trying and getting our act together. That is the task before all of us, young and old.

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