

Hapless Dogs and the Lost Men

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On a hot lazy afternoon of the nineteenth day of the holy month of *Ramazan* when the whole town was under strict lockdown due to COVID 19, I was asked to get some fruits for 'fruit chaat'. During *Ramazan* errrrrrrr sorry *Ramadhan*, besides having dates, we Muslims love to relish 'fruit chaat' and basil seeds for '*Iftaar*'. The love for these two delicacies is not very old but the origin of this love is unknown. Yet we all know that these are what we call elite dishes; status symbols you can say. The poor still search for the cheapest possible dates which are rarely available. As the entire town was under siege and I had heard the stories of young and old being thrashed by the police so instead of going to the main market I preferred a small fruit kiosk in my area. Due to the privilege of our house being located in the periphery of the town, the lockdown was comparatively less severe. The main street wore a deserted look. Besides a few jaded policemen in their bullet proof jackets and leg pads who were leaning against the shutters of the closed shops, there were a good number of lean and flies infested dogs. There was hardly any human trace. The sight of these hapless dogs reminded me of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's

Ye galiyun kay awara bekaar kutte
Ki baksha gaya jin ko zauq-e-gadayi
Zamane ki phatkar sarmaya in ka
Jahan bhar ki dhutkar in ki kamayi

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Two teenagers who were probably playing some games on their mobile phones got up and wished me with utmost reverence. Before I could wish them back, the boys had already gone busy with their phones again. Most of the times teachers are respected, sometimes genuinely, in our society. For the overall drop in the respect graph of the teachers, the blame is put on the students and their parents. In return, the parents blame the whole teaching community for the overall moral degradation of the society. This blame is triggered by the lack of integrity and accountability among most of the teachers.

Raju welcomed me with an innocent smile. Raju who was hardly twelve was the eldest one among his siblings. His father was in jail for an alleged smuggling bid. Though Raju was almost illiterate yet he maintained accounts of his sale and earned well to feed his siblings and mother. He could calculate on his fingertips immaculately and bargain in the politest possible manner.

While I was buying fruits, two young boys appeared there. I could recognize them as they had been my students about a decade ago. One of the boys came to me and with a broad smile and in an ardent tone said, “Good afternoon, Sir”.

I replied, “Good afternoon errrrrrr....”

“Shahid, Sir,” He tried to remind me. “You taught me Physics,” he continued.

“Oh yes, how can I forget you? I hope you are doing well?”

With an exasperated sigh he said, “At least I am breathing.”

The other one whose name I could not reminisce was wearing capri pants with a faint round-neck T-shirt. His beard was finely trimmed into a French cut and he had an unkempt and spiky hairstyle. I further noticed that he was wearing big round spectacles and had dark circles around his bulged eyes. With a cigarette in hand, he was humming some Hollywood song. He stared at me in a way that should arouse both pity and anger.

Shahid talked to me for a minute or two. He told me that after his college, his father asked him to apply for a teaching vacancy at village level and thus he got selected as a government teacher which he never wanted to be.

He further lamented, “My monthly wages are lesser than a labourer’s. Now I buy and sell used cars and bikes to earn my livelihood”.

After sometime Shahid and the other boy left.

The two teenagers who were still engrossed in their mobile phones got up and came to me.

The taller one said, “The boy in capri pants is Absar and he has done masters in two subjects”.

The other interrupted and said, “He has earned a regular B.Ed degree from a college in Kashmir as well but he has never been to Kashmir”.

They giggled and then had a hearty laugh at this joke.

The taller one again said, “He appeared in civil services twice but failed. He also tried his luck for some other government jobs but he failed to crack the written tests”.

They further told me that after all these disappointments Absar was doing PhD now and that he had secured a position in class 10th and a distinction in class 12th.

As months pass on, I can’t stop thinking about Shahid and Absar. I ponder over the objectives of education, our examination system, the way we acquire degrees and our parenting patterns. I still ponder over Absar’s impish attitude and Shahid’s predicament.

