

An Interview with Ashfaq Ahmed

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Q: Do you think that our generation is mesmerized and overwhelmed by the West?

Before discussing the implications, I would like to emphasize that our young generation is unable to understand the 'cultural vacuum' that exists in our society. At a surface level, they may be familiar with our cultural heritage; for example, they may have heard about Bull-e-Shah or *Bhitai* without any profound understanding of their works. I feel that mere pace of the technological progress is at times too much to handle or absorb by our youth.

Let me try and further elaborate my point. I feel that 'humanistic' or 'spiritual' traditions and learning mechanisms that existed in our society were a product of deep thoughts and collective communal efforts. These traditions and societal mechanisms, in my opinion, are not really compatible with today's fast paced random systems of societal bonding and progress.

I also feel that there is an inherent and historical difference between the moral values of this part of the world and Europe or America. And I feel the difference has increased in recent times as Europe and America are leading so many regions of the world towards destruction and annihilation. I therefore feel sorry to add that where we used to send our children or youth for education to the west, is now like literally sending them to learn how to hate and kill other human beings.

It seems that the quest is now for material wealth and gain rather than progression in science and technology. I think that even science, which I thought was there to discover for the betterment of humanity, is falling in the trap of developing 'ultra sophisticated' weapons for human destruction.

Q: Generally speaking, do you feel that we are being 'modernized' or 'westernized'? In both cases what do you feel the implications are?

You rightly pointed out that 'westernization' is equated with 'modernization'. We failed to trace out the meaning of modernization in our culture and how to respond to the challenges of western modernization academically and more importantly intellectually. Unfortunately, we failed to develop our academia, which in turn would have developed a contextualized understanding of modernization through the lens of our cultural and moral values and systems. We do not have the human capacity to do such a job. Our renowned universities, such as *Jamshoro* University or Punjab University, are devoid of teachers who could point out that modernization existed in our society as well with all the necessary societal systems. Our public intellectuals, I feel, have let us down. They have shown no capacity whatsoever to respond to the challenges of social breakdown and apathy that I feel our youth is faced with today. I also feel that we have not done justice to our religion and its teachings regarding societal change.

Q: Do you think the family's role is much more important than school's in bringing about a positive societal change?

In a family, values and knowledge are transmitted throughout the course of a child's upbringing. Thus, it is a natural phenomenon-it is not necessarily told; but is practiced, observed and internalized.

Gradually, the cultural traditions of parents become a part of their children's lives. I believe that no matter what you say or how you project that you have liberated yourself from the bounds of

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your cultural traditions, it continues to play an important role in an invisible manner and one cannot completely be void of ones family or cultural values and traditions. I think the good values of a family – values that are based on the principals of fairness and justice do come in the way if one chooses to go on a path that is otherwise.

For example, when I returned to my village after completing my Bachelors of Arts, the old cobbler of the village, who had seen me grow and was guarding the societal norms and values, would find some of my actions inappropriate. When I would ask him as to why he thinks my conduct is wrong, instead of providing me with a 'scientific' rational, he would simply reply by saying, "this is not the way of your forefathers". The real questions then is, "what were the ways of our forefathers?" The ways were: respect the elders, help others, participate in one another's happy and sad moments, etc. He was obviously no Socrates. But my point is that is how the social system used to function.

Then came the school. A schooling system based on the philosophies and teachings of people and 'lords' like *MaCaulay* and Keynes. According to them, life is all about a quest for superiority by hook or by crook. The entire system of living will only be supportive to those who will 'gladly' relinquish their morality and spirituality or to those who have none of those to begin with. Now, these are the people who developed the modern schooling system and we are blindly following it. This one system i.e. the system of oppression imposed on my Buddhist culture, my Hindu culture, my Sikh culture, my Christian culture and my Muslim culture, is a system in which human being will succeed only if they were to bow down to greed, injustice and finally selfishness.

Q: You mean that the world could be much better if we were to rid ourselves from systems that are economically driven?

Yes, I think we live in an artificial world or a world that is artificially created by, what you call in the language of religion, Satan – an 'evil' called economics. This economic system forces you to impose an education on your child that motivates him/her towards maximum material gains. You no longer recommend your brother to go to the *Khurasan* University and learn poetry, or compare the works of *Khayam* with the modern poetry, or compare the 13th century poetry with *Bhitai's* poetry or with *Hyde's* or *Eliot's*. As I come to understand, the race for material gain at times is not a matter of choice for us-it is something that is imposed on us.

I can assure you that within the next 50 years, this so-

called democracy would loose its meaning and would totally dismantle. It would be replaced by an emerging and awful enemy called the 'multinational'. Multinationals would never let any form of democracy to grow. They have the 'money' and are based on money. Eight percent or perhaps more of the world's wealth is under the absolute control of multinationals.

My grandson usually corrects my pronunciation; he says its multinational (mul-tae-national) and not multinational (mul-tee-national), as I say it. When I tell him that we had gone to school years back and that is why my accent is obsolete, he gets nettled. So these multinationals have control over our lives. We are not living a life of our own choice – we are living a 'manufactured' life.

Nowadays, the propaganda on the media is that 'we' are protecting democratic values or rather we are protecting the civilized world. In reality, all 'they' are protecting is the interest of rich people and the multinationals nothing else! For example, there is a group of around two million people in Pakistan including doctors, writers, industrialists and journalists (we intellectual are also included in that group). Whatever happens in this country, whether there is democracy, dictatorship or army rule, we have little or no concern with it. As long as our air conditioners and geysers are functioning, we are comfortable. At times, we public intellectuals may seem very bothered and concerned about the plight of the people who are oppressed, but I believe that most of us only put up a pretence. I feel that at times our concerns are limited to mere talk and nothing beyond that.

I have met Mao Ze Tung, you must have heard about him. I was the only non-dignitary from Pakistan who has met Mao and shaken hands with him. Since I was his ardent admirer, I went to see him. But when I saw him, I was speechless. Although we had only about five minutes to talk, he was too nice and conversed with me for more than ten minutes.

He told me how dear Pakistan is to China and why, but that's a different story altogether. The most important thing which he told me was that whatever you may preach, unless it is not followed by a long march i.e. masses, you won't get the desired results.

Unlike Mao, we try to run our social and political movements and institutions from the top. We don't try to give an opportunity to the masses to become a part of the process. We entice people to do what we say by offering them incentives. In turn, people feel grateful to us and think we must be doing something for them

since we look well-dressed and sympathetic. They consider us their Saeen (master).

Ironically there is no common point of interest for us. A long march is a strange thing. It means to live with ideas rather than holding back on them – in other words, to live with the people at the grassroots and involving them in building social movements.

Q: We think that progressive thought exists in our society in pockets. By progressive thought, we mean thinking ahead of our time rather than submitting ourselves to the status quo and overlooking limitations of the present system. Why doesn't this progressive thought trickle down to the masses and shape up as an integrated intellectual/social movement?

Because we never meet people at the grassroots level. Let me quote my own example: I call myself a progressive person and yet I have not met so many living in distant corners of Pakistan. A cobbler living in some remote area may be very progressive in his own context. The local people are very progressive in their work and in the way they think. I cannot think the way they do. Their progressiveness is evident from their creativity – they create so many unique things. For example, I could never think of making *Ajrak* (a shawl manufactured in Sindh, Pakistan). I went to *Shahkot* to see the manufacturing process and my God, I was stunned! The whole procedure was amazing; based on creativity with immaculate precision and elegance. To me this is progressiveness, which we really need as human beings.

Today, we do have a lot of progressive ideas which we want to transfer to the grassroots but unfortunately these ideas are not indigenous—we have borrowed them from somewhere else. The reason why progressive ideas could not trickle down is because we did not try hard. We did not talk to people. We did not live with them. We did not march with them. On the other hand, interacting and living with people would have helped us recognize reality.

I want to tell you people a story – a real one. I went to college and after completing the first quarter I came back to the village. I was considered as an important person and had lofty ideas. I thought it was appropriate to act superior, since I was studying in a city college and made my fellow villagers feel ashamed because they could not achieve what I did. My mother asked me to go and visit our village cobbler. In our village, old men were addressed as *Taya* (paternal uncle). *Taya Qasim* used to repair shoes under a tree in our village. I

thought since I am a literate person and stand amongst the very few in the village, why do I need to go and visit a cobbler? But because my mother had asked me to, I went to him. When I met him, he praised me and wished me all the best for my future.

Taya Qasim then asked what have I learnt from the city? I asked him whether he knew of a subject called Zoology. Then I explained to him that it is the study of animals. I also told him that there is another subject about flowers and plants called Botany. Then I asked him whether he knew that a housefly has up to three thousand eyes. You see, the system in the eyes of a housefly is such that it can see things from multiple angles. Not believing me, he reconfirmed the number of eyes twice. After hearing my reply, he finally said, "damn the stupid fly; despite having three thousand eyes, whenever she sits, she sits on dirt". And I became speechless. To me, that was original and progressive thinking.

Q: Do you think that our schools, colleges and universities are making us arrogant? Not only that, they are taking us away from our own values.

Yes! In the context of education, we use a cultural expression *zaivar-e-ilm say aarasta karna* (decorating oneself with the ornament of knowledge). I advise people to alter this expression, because a person who would wear ornaments would invariably gaze at him/herself in the mirror. If you have adorned yourself with that kind of materialistic education, you would be self-absorbed and obsessed with yourself. You would try to be in front of the mirror all the time and will not consider others worthy of our attention. Therefore, I urge that let people be hungry, let them be illiterate but don't let them be deprived of self-respect.

I always advise my daughters and sisters to give due respect to women who come to work at their houses. The dignity of work must be upheld. It is fine to give them clothes and incentives but first of all, it is important to give them the respect they deserve as human beings and treat them as equal humans. Once we see them and view them as equals, we will be able to respect them and by that we will eventually be able to respect ourselves.

Again, you're absolutely correct in saying that contemporary and Eurocentric education turns human beings into very arrogant and egotistical creatures. Therefore, whatever is being taught, it should be aimed at helping individuals to become better people. In our society, we have many well educated people but not many good human beings—educated people with high

social and financial standing, coming out of their cars, considering themselves to be better human beings because they have a privileged position in society. But they cannot become good human beings unless they do not empathize with others and do not have a sense of justice within themselves.

Look at our traditional learning systems. We had *deray*¹ where a Saeen used to sit. *Bhit Shah*² is a glorious example, where people visited *Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai* for learning. Consider Buddha, who sat under a tree to share people's concerns and grief. Although he was a king of a huge dynasty, he relinquished his empire for the sake of seeking spirituality and being close to the common people. This is how heightened learning takes place. People like *Bhitai* and Buddha tried to go deeper into the human soul. This is how spiritual values are developed and shared. And I believe, that today our teachers and educators need to assume the same role in order to make our education system more meaningful.

Q: Do you think that the values embedded in the oriental cultures and religions could help us resist the Western value system – a system based on greed and materialism?

I see it in a different way. First of all, it seems very difficult because of the mere magnitude and the might of that opposing system. Unfortunately, we are not fully aware of the strength and potential that this system possesses. To be very honest, our society lacks the kind of intellectual rigor which is needed to confront the Western value system. We have to defeat the immoral systems, whether western or eastern, with a greater sense of morality. I have a high regard and deep respect for our religious leaders but when you discuss your problems with them, especially vis-à-vis this issue, you find them struggling for answers. They have nothing to offer in terms of intellectual guidance. I recently asked one of them about the current global political situation and he told me that '*Inshallah*' (God willing) everything would get better. I have no doubt that God will help us but we have to have a strategy to deal with our situation.

Q: Why don't we have such an alternative system?

Because our intellectual class (*tabqa*) and the education system is westernized. No matter what our people do, they are unable to deconstruct fully or detach fully from the western reference points that have been shaped by the western educational institutions. Interestingly, when a youngster goes to the US for studies, he starts offering his Friday prayers in the Islamic Center. He would usually not pray in his own country. Although he would become a better Muslim ritualistically (as far as

performing religious obligations are concerned), as he would feel that his identity is under threat. Ironically, in all other ways he would try to become an American.

Let me tell you that our conflict with the West is not based on rituals. They have no problem if you say your prayers seven times a day instead of five or you fast for two months instead of one. However, they have a problem with the kind of lifestyle you follow i.e. your ideology that is based on higher principles of morality and spirituality – an ideology that motivates you to challenge injustice.

Q: Do you think that the present situation is becoming hopeless?

No, I don't think so. Honestly speaking, I cannot give you an explanation in words because there is another side of the reality which can only be experienced and for which words would not suffice – it is something that relates to Sufis. I belong to a religion and a school of thought which believes in the dominance of wisdom (*danai*) and intellect (*aqal*) and which commands its followers to reflect upon the universe by using one's intellect.

God clearly indicates to humans, in the *Quran*, to explore the universe and seek His signs in it. I believe this is what education is all about. I am not a pessimist. The presence of 140 million people in this country and the existence of billions on earth elevate my hope. I strongly believe that our existence has a meaning. No matter how powerful evil is, truth will keep on resisting it. Not the truth which we try to fabricate but the truth that reflects our inner selves. This would emanate from all of us. This truth is delicate like a spider's web and yet it is so strong that it cannot be easily splintered. If this was not a reality, I would not have had hope. I am talking about metaphysics; I believe that we have so far explored the known world. We have not yet ventured into the 'unknown', which is infinite.

¹ A place usually isolated, like under a tree or a hill where people would gather around a saint for seeking knowledge and spirituality.

² Dwelling of famous Muslim Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai in Sindh, Pakistan.