

DEBATING FESTIVALS: DO WE NEED MORE?

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In the last few years the big cities of Pakistan have witnessed a new season: the season of literary festivals. It usually lasts from December to February but some late spells can be seen as late as March. All the major cities like Lahore, Karachi, Quetta and Peshawar now have a literary festival to their name. Other than the literary festivals there is Faiz Festival, Asma Jehangir Conference and Think Fest, which organise public dialogue on literature, history, law, politics, environment and governance. While Lahore Literary Festival (LLF) has been around for a decade, the newest additions to the mix have been Pakistan Literature Festival (PLF) and Econfest in 2023. Even though every festival promises to be distinct and they are quite different in their scope, organisers and agenda, all of them can still be clubbed under the umbrella of public dialogue. Another common theme in all festivals has been a focus on reaching out to the young population and reflecting on the future of Pakistan. The festivals have been successful in attracting large crowds but at the same time they have been criticised for being exclusive, elitist and existing in a bubble. With all their failings, the festivals offer much needed platforms of public engagement in the absence of a functional public education system.

Festivals have been around for long enough to provide ample opportunity for evaluation. Although we generally don't wait too long to criticise anything, there has been a repeated critique of these public events, which awards it merit to be considered. The events have been called out for being exclusive, elitist and divorced from reality. Every year like clockwork, we see the same critique in print and online, along with dismay over some controversial opinion shared in one of the sessions in any of the events. While I don't outrightly reject these claims, I also find it lazy to reject any project of public engagement without deeper introspection.

We will first talk about the 'exclusivity' of these events. In economics there is a concept of public goods, which are non-exclusive and non-rivalrous. In simpler terms, you cannot obstruct anyone from consuming these goods and consumption by an individual will not diminish the amount of goods available to others. Imagine a self-replenishing public pool of water. In principle any event that has free entry is non-exclusive. However, there can be invisible barriers to entry. As Ahmed Shah, the organiser of Pakistan Literary Festival, shared on bringing the inaugural edition to Lahore,

"If there's an event about poetry at a five-star hotel, even if it is free, a poor man would think twice before going to it. They'll feel weird about it," he said. "That hesitation is what I wanted to lose with this event."

While I agree with his point of view the events can exude exclusiveness even more subtly than by just their location. The major point of exclusivity in my opinion is the discussion. If the topics are obscure or the medium of discussion is only English, then it's quite possible that the organiser does not intend to open the event to everyone. While the entry is indeed free, there seems to be gatekeeping in the choice of panellists. If one looks at the lineup of all festivals you can clearly carve out a new profession, 'serial panellists'. Regardless of the location or scope of discussion, you will find 70% of similar faces in every festival. The festivals will mention the young generation in their agenda, speeches and discussions but you will hardly see any young people leading the discussions. This not only makes young people feel left out but also reduces the exercise to a dining table discussion between family elders.

Another repeated point is that these festivals are an elitist exercise. Again reiterating the point made earlier that any event which is open to 'public' can't be confined to one class. This also holds true for the diversity of audiences at these events. I can only vouch for the Faiz Festival, where there is considerable participation of students from public universities, families, and people from the different echelons of society. However, you don't see this diversity on stage. From the panellists to the management there is absolute control of people from an English speaking upper middle class. There are no sessions on trade unions, student unions or farmers' collectives. The only permanent participation of students in the event is in the form of a classical dance performance of Lahore Grammar School. It is heartening to see students from public universities in the audience but isn't it condescending to limit them to be passive recipients of the wisdom and art shared by the elites. Perhaps due to this 'elite capture' of Faiz, there is a parallel celebration of the poet and his work at Bagh i Jinnah, every year under Faiz Aman Mela. Zooming out of the literary events, another criticism of these events is that they are divorced from reality. One of the most common arguments against any intellectual exercise is pitching it against the darkest face of reality. There would always be someone complaining about dedicating time and resources to a discussion on the latest trends in

poetry when millions are struggling to be fed in the country. I think this debate will always be there but some of these discussions do become hollow when there is a deliberate attempt to circumvent certain topics. All events have very clear redlines not only regarding the panellists but also the topics of discussion. If these events are also going to be subjected to the same censorship as the media, then what is the point of having these live discussions? In the past, we have seen speakers were uninvited at the last minute, or discussions were interrupted in the middle or panels were cancelled after being advertised. This is one of the reasons that young people don't look favourably at these events because the scope of the discussion is limited in ways similar to the mainstream media. It is part and parcel of organising an event in urban centres with active participation from the government.

If the issues with these events look obvious and have been present for years then why do we not see any effort from the organisers to fix it? I believe that results of events can only be tested against the objectives of the organisers. We can hold these events against our own ideals of inclusivity but maybe it is not the concern of the organisers. We have to consider that any event open to the public doesn't necessarily make it a public good, and organisers being private individuals only have their own best interest at heart, which can be projecting Lahore as a literature city in the international world, to showcase their own work, to expand their network, or to simply talk about the things which they deem important.

The state has the responsibility to curate inclusive platforms for public engagement. Similarly, the universities are the right place to hold debates and discussions on matters of public and intellectual importance. The public universities are busy cutting costs under reduced funding from the Higher Education Commission and policing the lives of students. The private universities as any other private business are focused on reporting profit at the end of the year. The mainstream media is completely overtaken by power politics. In these circumstances these festivals are an exception.

It is most heartening for me when I see young people attending these festivals. If not anything else, they are at least learning how to amicably listen to an opposing view and hold contradictory positions in their minds without clutching to any extreme. With more than 64% of the population under the age of 29, Pakistan is heading towards an uncontrollable crisis of youth management. If anything we need more such festivals to engage our young people in non-violent activities. However, this doesn't mean that there is no room for improvement in the ongoing festivals. They must make an effort to include young people not only as an audience but also as active planners and speakers.

How can we attempt to address the problems of youth if we don't listen to them or give respect to their opinions as valid? The younger people also need to take more responsibility than cancelling everything on the internet.

They can also organise to curate alternate platforms for sharing art and opinions on cities, politics, history, environment and law. They don't have to create something on the same scale but anything which is more inclusive and participatory for groups who are otherwise not represented in these festivals. It would be amazing to see smaller festivals in villages or little towns organised in the local language with a focus on local artists and issues. We just need to stay true to our vision as Sahir Ludhianwi said,

لے دے کے اپنے پاس فقط ایک نظر تو ہے

کیوں دیکھیں زندگی کو کسی کی نظر سے ہم

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