

# DR NADEEM'S APOLOGY AND Our Responsibility

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Amongst the comparatively well-known economists of Pakistan, I've always found admiration for Dr Nadeem-ul-Haque's work and his ideas. The first time I heard of him was in the corridors of Block 'Q' (Finance Division) and Block 'P' (Planning Commission), where colonial minded, high-browed bureaucrats discussed his thoughts and proposals with contempt. That immediately interested me in his work since my experience with bureaucracy had taught me a valuable lesson: what they usually hold in contempt is actually something valuable!

His Framework for Economic Growth (FEG) was first of the readings, and since then, his writings have been a must-read, leading me to challenge what I had known and thought about economics. It's always a refreshing experience to listen to him since his talk does not follow the typical, trite rhetoric centered on few chosen macro indicators like taxes, expenditures, monetary and fiscal policy, etc. Now at Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) as its Vice Chancellor (VC), he has re-invigorated an institution that had faced challenges in the near past. His honesty has ruffled quite a few feathers, and rubbed status quo people the wrong way. But despite all the push-backs, he has admirably managed to keep persisting for change.

It was not a surprise, then, to read his honest apology for the legacy that his generation had left for the ones to come. Further, it's not a surprise either that none of his compatriots from his generation had the guts to do the same. In the following lines, I will recount my own experience with this colonial legacy and lay out some of the challenges that my generation encounters.

**M**y first brush with economics was in my BA classes.

As an avid reader, I was always on the lookout for interesting books on various topics. In the long drawn out summer days of those times when there was no twitter, face book or like social media to help time pass by, books were a really handy thing to have. One specific Sunday, when Rawalpindi and other cities have their book fairs, I managed to find Robert Heilbroner's 'The Worldly Philosophers'. Never before had I thought about economics, and never after reading it have I left it! Although there were many terms that were difficult to comprehend, it inspired me enough to take up economics at the bachelor's level.



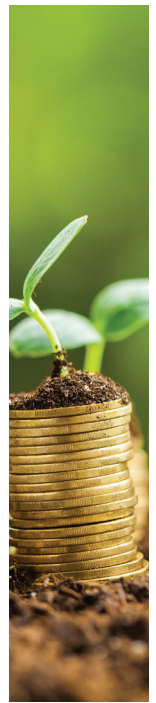
What followed, though, were two disappointing years where I had my first brush with the destructive legacy that Dr. Nadeem mentioned. Our teacher, like most teachers in government colleges, was more inclined towards discussing politics than economics, kept endlessly complaining about his official grade and pay, and was always active in a teachers' union. He would dictate us lines that we had to write. Even in those early days of computers when it could take ages to connect to the internet through telephone lines, I found out that most of what he used to teach (and make us write) was false, and that the recommended book on economics by a Pakistani 'professor' was basically a ditto copy paste job from an older western text.



In one of the classes, I managed to gather the courage to respectfully point out a mistake in a diagram. The rather polite, respectful effort resulted in me being asked to leave the class. Entry was only regained after strenuous efforts of my friends, and only after profoundly apologizing for my 'mistake' in front of a coterie of teachers. One of them, who had nothing to do with economics, advised me that 'zyada shokha hone ki zaroorat nahee'. After that lesson, I closed my mind to anything aside from what the teacher taught us.

It was only the education and the overall atmosphere of learning in US that re-opened my mind to real learning and a world of endless possibilities. Back in Pakistan, though, it was back to 'normal' again. Consultancy in government departments has mostly to be done with unimaginative minds. Full of political intrigues, cesspools of corruption and unethical behavior, and having all the work along the lines of 'look busy, do nothing', there is not much chance to learn or think productively. The interest was always on maintaining the status quo, getting as much leverage with leading politicians as possible, impressing donors for getting a stint at donor agencies, and correcting English rather than work that could benefit people. In one particular program that was founded in the name of 'alleviating poverty' and to be run as a social safety net, there was anything but an effort to work towards the stated goal. It was all rent-seeking and corruption. Whoever dared raise a question or a query could get his marching orders.

One fine day, the Secretary called me to his office, asking me why I wanted to ruin my career when they were paying me well ('tumhe achee tankhwa dete hae. Chupp kar ke apna kaam kyu nahee karte?'). The particular matter, amongst many for which I had been asked to stay quiet, concerned channeling Rs. 64 million to an accounts whose very existence was dubious. Refusing to budge, the marching orders were delivered to me a few days later. As fate would have it, that case later became part of what is now known as the 'fake accounts' case, whereby billions of taxpayer amounts were transferred into fictitious accounts.



I stood vindicated, but had to pay a very hefty price. Unemployment haunted me for half year, driving me to penury. There are no words to describe the mental torture that I had to go through while also taking care of a very young family. Suffice to say that my wife has never forgiven me for that time, maintaining that it was my mistake rather than anybody else' that brought such terrible misfortune upon us, given the gall to query which is never a welcome proposition in Pakistan, especially in government circles.

What was narrated above was not for the purpose of garnering sympathies for myself, but to demonstrate the power of the status quo system that we still encounter. It was only slowly, but gradually, that courage to query and think critically returned, all the while treading carefully lest I be made to regret again. It is in this regard that I cannot thank Dr. Nadeem enough because he has provided me the space to speak up without the fear of reprisals, a first in my professional career.

In some ways, the situation in Pakistan is comparatively better in that there is way more ideas disseminated asides from the trite discussions on a few chosen topics. There is, for example, increasing recognition (thanks mainly to Dr. Nadeem's work) that roads are no panacea to our mobility woes, and end up causing more harm than doing good. Similarly, the recognition of doing away with horizontal sprawls is more widespread than ever before.

But our age has brought its own formidable challenges. Above all, we live in an increasingly polarized society with attitudes that tilt towards the extreme. Criticism is not taken lightly. Asking questions can invite dreadful repercussions; physical torture, threats, citizens vanishing without a trace for years, etc., are nowadays a common occurrence in Pakistan. This is on top of the same colonial construct that we've been encountering since independence, which has only gotten more powerful with time. The brick-and-mortar model of development, for example, motors along un-interrupted. Majority of individuals in my generation have the same longing for power as before, either wanting to join the armed forces or becoming civil service officers. The situation, In that sense, I am afraid that the situation has not changed much even now. In times of increasing economic uncertainties, the 'flight to safety' (government jobs) phenomenon is even more compelling for the younger lot!

This intolerance and increasing censorship tendencies explain why I get frequent reminders from newspapers about 'not to be too critical' in my content and say a few good words for the government of the time. A few TV channels had me appearing as a commentator on economic affairs for a while, but that ended when they were instructed to remove me from their list over (fair) criticism related to economic policies of the time. The program hosts apologized profoundly, but also insisted that they had to take care of their own jobs.

I'll conclude by thanking Dr. Nadeem for rendering an apology on behalf of his generation which failed in bringing an end to the colonial ways of working. Let me assure him that there are many in my generation who would keep resisting the status quo and perpetuate intellectual discourse to bring change. At the same time, though, we all will also have to accept the reality that the forces resisting change are still formidable, and unforgiving.

Let us see if we can succeed where Dr. Nadeem's generation couldn't!

