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IN A LA-LA LAND

Some of the most popular Urdu Columnists in Pakistan seem to function in a world of their own creation—it challenges rational thinking.

For the past five or six months I've been reading fairly regularly the web pages of three Urdu newspapers from Pakistan: Jang (http://www.jang.com.pk/), Nawa-i-Waqt http://nawaiwaqt.com.pk/ and the Express (http://express.com.pk/). I glance at the headlines cursorily then immediately turn to the columnists. Most days, each of the three carries a minimum of six columnists. Some of them are big names; they frequently appear on TV shows, get regularly invited to the President's residence, and travel with the Prime Minister on important trips. These gentlemen never let you forget all that. One or two even give details of the food served on such occasions—there is always plenty of food served, not just a cup of tea, when they visit with any dignitary.

Some of them repeatedly tell us how uniquely they know the "history" of everything—how things actually happened, be it in Pakistan of here and now or any country in the past. They also inform us that had their advice been properly understood or taken, the disaster that followed in many cases could have been avoided. None of the sages has ever made a serious error of judgment. And if one of them ever makes a rare acknowledgment of that nature, it is always as a charge of betrayal on the part of some other party.

Conspiracy theories naturally abound in these columns, with three dependable conspirators: America, India (i.e. Bharat in Urdu; never Hindustan), and Israel. The labels may change and become CIA, RAW, and Mossad, or *Nasara* (the Christians), *Hunud* (the Hindus), and *Yahud* (the Jews), but their axis of evil remains unchanged. The alliteration of the last two—*hunud* and *yahud*—makes them a favorite and indivisible pair; they generate an assertion that no one questions in Urdu in Pakistan.

In these columns one discovers that M. A. Jinnah and Muhammad Iqbal were never correctly understood by except the particular columnist. They also offer amazing bits of 'history'—often with a grand flourish. You can be sure to face something remarkable soon if the paragraph begins with the words: "*Tarikh gavaah hai*" "History is My Witness." Fairly often a column might appear to have been written, not to communicate some idea or information, but for the sheer joy of writing those pretty words that, for plenty of Urduwalas, make it the "sweetest" language in the world.

Urdu newspapers—or for that matter, the English language ones—do not seem to employ fact checkers or copy editors for their columnists; they seldom carry any correction except of the most minor kind. One, in fact, wonders if their editors read them. As for the English newspaper editors and columnists in Pakistan, one can be quite certain that they don't read them, not even if they appear in a sister publication brought out by their own

publisher. In my limited experience of reading the columns in the *Daily Times* and the *News* fairly regularly—and in *Dawn*, infrequently—I have not come across any column in English that commented in any fashion on some Urdu column or columnist. But the Urdu columnists are certainly read by a huge number of people, who save them and treat them as gospel truth. Recently one of them published a call for people to send him their saved cuttings of his column so that he could put together a book; in no time he had more than enough.

I must now offer some illustrations. But first I must hasten to add that not ALL Urdu columnists in Pakistan write in that manner. Quite a few—Hameed Akhtar, Zaheda Hena, Munno Bhai, Tanwir Qaisar Shahid, Asghar Nadeem Sayyad, Abdullah Tariq Suhail, Kishwar Naheed, Rafeeq Dogar, to name my own favorites—consistently write with clarity, sober reasoning, and in a manner that is both eloquent and passionate. As for the others—the majority—meet a few below.

Hamid Mir writes a regular column in *Jang*; he writes with passion but is usually quite careful. I was taken aback when I read his column on April 27. He gave it the title "Children, True of Heart." In it he described a meeting he addressed where school children were present, and where one child stood up and told him something that he had not known before. The child pointed out, Mir wrote, that America was such a sworn enemy of Pakistan that when Pakistan was born in 1947, the United States refused to recognize it for two years. The U.S. did so, according to the child, because it expected Pakistan to collapse and disappear any day. Mr. Mir was so moved by the child's fervor and knowledge about Pakistan that he decided to write a column and acknowledge his ignorance of the truth that even a child knew. (In fact the U.S.A. recognized Pakistan on August 15, 1947, and opened an embassy the same day; the first American ambassador arrived six months later.)

Dr. A Q Khan of Kahuta fame writes regularly in both *Jang* and its sister English journal, *The News*. In his Urdu column on April 29, Dr. Khan claimed that President Obama had no authority of his own, that he was in fact totally controlled by the white men who stood to his right and left in photographs. He then asserted, without naming his sources, that President Obama had once asked that the Ka'ba should be destroyed, for that would put an end to all the conflicts the world was faced with. When I checked the English version I found it contained no mention of the Ka'ba. On inquiry, an editor at *The News* informed me that it had been deleted because it was based on hearsay. Apparently, hearsay was all right so long it was in Urdu.

Safir Ahmad Siddiqui, not a regular columnist, wrote a piece in *Jang* on May 17, denouncing any possible attempt on the part of the government to allow transit facilities to India in its trade with Afghanistan. Mr. Siddiqui reminded the readers: "what the Indians did to the Pakistanis POWs after the war of 1971-2 was of such cruel nature that historians forgot what Hitler and Mussolini had done in their prison camps. He then presented an analogy whose logic, not to mention factual accuracy, was mind-boggling. According to him Pakistan should learn something or other from Hitler and Poland. According to Mr. Siddiqui, Hitler wanted back his two lost seaports Alsace and Lorraine

from Poland—no, I'm not making it up—and resorted to force only when Poland refused him even transit facilities. Therefore, Mr. Siddiqui concluded, Pakistan should also refuse India any transit facility.

The difference between the Urdu and English sister papers nurtured by the same family of publishers also stood out in stark contrast with reference to the reporting on a fatwa issued by some convention of Sunni 'Ulema on May 17. According to *Jang*, the learned men of God had declared that it was *haraam* to commit suicide bombings, or cut the throats of Muslims. According to *The News*, however, the Sunni scholars had "termed the suicide attacks and beheadings as *haraam*." The sages most likely meant what was said in English, but the Urdu version carried its own slant recklessly and never made it clear that the *fatwa* covered the necks of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Abdul Qadir Hasan is a top-slot columnist in *The Express*—despite the name the paper is in Urdu. On May 17, he wrote:

> "In 1948, 1965, and 1971, and now again in 2009 we are fighting a fourth war with India. In this war we fight not only India but also its two patrons, USA and Israel. This triad is bent on destroying us. And this war is much more dangerous the first three wars. In those wars, armies faced and fought armies, but this time it is a clandestine war, in which one side consists of Bharat-trained and armed guerillas, i.e. Taliban, and facing them on the other side stands the regular soldiers of Pakistan."

This theme, common to so many columnists, was given its most perfervid interpretation five days later (May 22) by Dr. Ajmal Niazi, who is a top-slot columnist in *Nawa-i-Waqt*. He entitled his column: "Pakistan will be the battlefield of the Third World War." He made three powerful assertions—he did not use the word *mubayyana* ("alleged") anywhere. (The word is rarely, if at all, used in Urdu columns.).

Seymour Hersh, Dr. Niazi claimed, had disclosed that Benazir Bhutto was killed at the orders of Vice President Dick Cheney, and by a death squad commanded by Gen. Stanley C Crystal. He further claimed that Z. A. Bhutto, Murtaza Bhutto, and Benazir Bhutto were all killed by the Americans. Finally, Dr. Niazi claimed that Benazir Bhutto had given an interview to Al-Jazira on Nov. 2, 2007, in which she had said that Osama bin Laden was already dead, and that he had been killed at the orders of Shaikh Umar Sa'id. But the Americans ordered [whom?] to have the remark deleted, because if bin Laden were already dead they—the Americans—would have had no reason to do what they did in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Having thus established to his own and his readers' satisfaction a chain of reasoning, Dr. Niazi concluded his column with a scary flourish.

> "The Western and American media are in an uproar over Pakistan's nuclear bombs, but they should also listen to me. I'm telling them that if the nuclear weapons of Pakistan were put in any danger the third world war will immediately start. Then both India and Israel will cease to exist. What will the United States do then? The battlefield of 'World War III' will be Pakistan."

Then there are the wonderful “insider’s exclusives” about the great ones. Here is Mr. Majeed Nizami, the chief editor and owner of *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *The Nation*, in a letter to his main rival *Jang* (May 23), explaining a remark he reportedly had made.

> “The bomb-exploder prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif had called a meeting of some 60 or 70 journalists and editors to seek their advice before deciding to have the nuclear tests. Many people of I. A. Haqqani’s ilk opposed the idea, and tried to frighten him by warning of America's wrath. He clearly seemed to waver. At that time I was indeed forced to speak to him firmly. ‘Miyan Sahib,’ I said to him, ‘explode the bomb otherwise the nation will explode you. We will explode you.' And Almighty Allah gave him the ability to explode the bomb. But before that could happen President Clinton phoned him five times, offered millions in bribe, and [finally even] threatened him [personally].”

And here is a charming vignette from one of Mr. Mahmud Sham’s columns—I regret my failure to note the date; it was sometime in May—that contained excerpts from his book of interviews.

> “Dr Fahmida Mirza has vacated her seat for me and taken another chair. Now I'm seated on the chair next to the Daughter of the East, the first Muslim woman Prime Minister in the Muslim World, the Life Chairperson of P.P.P., Honourable Benazir Bhutto. Also present are other senior journalists, TV anchorpersons, newspaper proprietors, and her party's senior leaders. She wants to know if she should take part in the elections... It's a good thing that she is seeking advice from people who are outside her party. Most of us want her to take part in the elections. She is asking each person individually. The tea has come, together with *Chaat*. She herself enjoys *Chaat*. Her *dupatta* keeps slipping, but she never lets it fall. I'm seeing her after many years and so my feelings are intense.”

In this la-la land of column writing in Urdu in Pakistan three names stand out in my view: Irfan Siddiqui, Dr. Aamir Liaquat Husain, and Haroon-al-Rashid. All three are regular columnists for *Jang*. The first two surpass everyone in finding ‘facts’ where facts may not exist; they also write with great verve in an Urdu that has all the flourishes and graces required in a ghazal. The third, Mr Haroon-al-Rashid, is in a class by himself. I cannot put into English his pyrotechnical Urdu and his riffs of free-association. He must be read in the original. But here is one sample each of Mr. Siddiqui’s and Dr. Husain’s insightful writings.

In a column in May—I apologize again for not noting the date—Dr Husain first defended himself against the charges of faking his doctorate degree, then wrote:

> “Those who invoke the name of the Qaid-e-Azam should first show they have the same *nafs* [“lower self” in mystical thought]. He was educated in England, grew up surrounded by Western culture, and started his political life from the platform of a secular party. But when he became the leader of 'those who were his own' he

> never took removed his cap from his head or took off *sherwani*; he did not let his *nafs* rule over him for a moment; he did not use the broom of greed to sweep the yard of his desires (sic). He knew he was the leader of the Muslims, and so he always looked like them among them. He knew how to wear a suit much better than many who wear suits; he knew how to cross his legs and smoke cigars. He had seen such scenes many times in the durbar of the British, but he also understood that millions of people oppressed by the Hindus had whole-heartedly claimed him as their own. And so he gave all his wishes and desires the name of Pakistan, and never looked back to that Muhammad Ali who perhaps had some personal desires too."

And here is Mr Irfan Siddiqui on a topic that was hot for a couple of days in May. He wrote in his column in *Jang* (May 23):

> "President Zardari was in Washington. A schoolmistress named Hilary Clinton had him and the Clown of Kabul sit on her either side, and then lectured them. In every gathering, every meeting, and every function it was specially arranged that Hamid Karzai should be on the right hand [of the American dignitary] and President Zardari on the left. I do not recall any occasion in the past when an American Secretary of State conducted a meeting of two presidents in such a fashion."

Finally, since I come from India, I must point out that Urdu newspapers in India are in no way better. Their columns and editorials carry similar feats of conspiratorial thinking and convoluted reasoning. And in rhetorical passion they can match any Pakistani columnist. I have written about them in the past, most recently in 2007 in a note concerning the treatment meted out to Taslima Nasreen at Hyderabad (http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?235288).