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## Features

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### House of wisdom

#### Taymour Soomro From his perch in rural Sindh, Taymour Soomro reflects on the state of the Islamic republic

The water will arrive tomorrow, someone says, and the following morning there's a muddy slough in the broad channel that crosses our land. It swells over the coming days into a shallow pool – then a brown stream – that crawls unhurriedly across the bed and trickles into the narrow courses that branch out along the fields. Our farmers wedge makeshift dams of earth and stone in places to stop it seeping onto the land as it rises.

The scrawny boys usually chasing goats and buffalo into the brush are sliding backwards down the steep canal banks, splashing heels-first into the water. And the stray dogs otherwise guarding the towpaths – barking at the windows of our jeep – are gamboling muddy-pawed by the bank or wading in after them.

The farmers are preparing seedbeds for the paddy season. They have marked out small beds in the soil and laid the tops with paddy straw. Driving from Jacobabad to Shikarpur one evening the air is thick with smoke – rising from a low, blustering fire in the fields ahead – drifting townwards – following the roads into the city. They burn the straw on the seedbeds, flood them and rake the ash with the soil to form a wet mulch in which to sow the paddy seed. After the seed has germinated and sprouted it is transplanted from the bed to the field. The burnt straw mulch provides a loose envelope from which the roots can be easily removed.

We have used as seed the threshed paddy from our last crop, from the paddy least affected by the rainstorms earlier this year. We worried that the quality of even the best seed from the previous crop might produce an inferior yield but our farmers thought otherwise. And they seem to have been right. The seedbeds are lush with a dense turf of green shoots. Good fortune or the wisdom of



A view of the Noor Wah canal



Village women transplanting seedlings



Regulator gates at canals control the flow of irrigation water



A farmer collecting seedlings



experience? A little of both perhaps. What locals are lacking though is the benefit of scientific rigour: systematic study, analysis, research – an alternative basis for rational decision-making, one that doesn't require a generation of trial and error. There's an institute for agricultural research a short distance from town, but, like the schools, health centres and low-cost housing built here by one government or another, it's abandoned. A product of the ribbon cutter's model of governance: conspicuous development expenditure but little interest in lasting development solutions.



**Village children standing outside a non-functional government school**

It's a symptom of a particular malaise. We've forgotten the value of learning. It doesn't exchange favourably with the local currency. Our lower and middle classes looking for indicators of upwards mobility won't find education prevalent amongst them. In the public sector certainly it isn't much more than a certificate. In the private sector too the prescriptions of safarish exert an influence that excludes or demotes merit from consideration. The lesson from the top is it doesn't matter what you know – no matter how technical the job. Friends in Jacobabad insist the system won't change. By refusing to exercise whatever indirect influence I can muster to accommodate them in it, I'm being uncharitable, they say. Questioning its legitimacy is a luxury they can't afford, looking for jobs in a market which values neither skill nor intellect.

In the Islam versus the modern world debate that has framed or been framed by global conflict in the twenty-first century (depending on your perspective), it's fashionable for the Islamist moderate to evoke Islam's intellectual past, "civilization's debt to Islam" (as per Obama). The Abbasids, the Fatimids, the Umayyads, the architects of Islam's Golden Age, prized scholarly achievement and their advances in the fields of astronomy, geography, mathematics, and medicine framed the modern world. They built the first universities, public hospitals and lending libraries. The medieval patrons of academic study reputedly paid the best translators monthly stipends of their weight in gold. They recognised that investment in learning paid dividends and the world is reaping the benefits of that wisdom still.

That Golden Age has passed but its message endures: Islam is not militancy, it is not oppression, it is not tyranny. We were the voice of the modern world, before the world was modern. We were poets, architects, artisans, theologians, astronomers, geographers, scientists, philosophers, mathematicians when you were barbarians. We were the House of Wisdom.

What does any of this have to do with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan? Very little, unfortunately. "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it," thought Santayana. In that context, we have neither learned nor repeated and our lack of respect for learning, for merit is reflected by our welfare. We don't know how to build our roads, how to manage our schools, how to run our railways, how to balance our books, how to provide our energy, how to clean our water, how to dispose of our waste, how to protect our health, how to run our state and we won't learn, no matter the cost.

Two weeks later, the water dries up. Ahmed Shakh, the distributary which irrigates our land, is a mud slick. Our farmers wave us down and petition for water in worried clusters. The seedbeds are turning yellow. Those who transplanted their seedlings earliest, who were the most efficient, are suffering the most. The irrigation officer for Noor Wah, the canal which feeds Ahmed Shakh, accompanies us to inspect the gates at the Begari canal which regulate the inflow into Noor Wah. During the half-hour journey each way, he receives a call every two or three minutes from farmers asking about the water shortage.

There is a sluggish stream in the Begari canal. It quickens as we approach the regulator, sluicing and eddying under the half-raised gates. A group of men are taking turns – jumping – yelling – from the overhead bridge into the rushing water. The gauges are unreliable, I'm told, and we measure the level against the concrete steps leading down from the opposite bank. It should be allowed to rise to the second step, my grandfather and the officer agree. When we return the farmers are rejoicing. "Illahibukhsh Soomro zinda bad!" But soon after we learn that the water is being diverted downstream in Noor Wah rather than into Ahmed Shakh. Farmers with Kalashnikovs are guarding the regulator gates. They stand down when confronted by my grandfather and lower two of the gates downstream but as soon as we leave, they raise the gates and resume their vigil. Our managers don't seem particularly worried. "There's always a fight for the water when it comes. Everyone needs it at the same time and is afraid there won't be enough. But it's here now at least. God is merciful."

In a society where religion dominates, faith can be a smokescreen for ignorance or ineptitude. Will the ploughing be done by tomorrow? God willing. Will the seed produce a decent crop? God willing. Will there be enough water for the paddy season? God willing. Undoubtedly. But a response which examines the factors that cause water shortages in our irrigation system and predicts those shortages well in advance would be more valuable – particularly if it is coupled with efforts to control the outcome. To the extent that the scientists and engineers responsible for irrigation and water supply are appointed as favours to them or their patrons as opposed to their expertise and education, the performance of their duties will suffer and as a result the livelihoods of many of those who depend on those public services. The government fails to provide basic public goods and services – security, health, education, infrastructure – precisely because its individual components are acting in their own interests rather than those of the community. Even when its intentions are good, it has perpetuated a support structure so devoid of merit that it cannot function.

Over the coming weeks, during the critical phase of transplantation, the water supply diminishes. At best, it comes on alternate days. The armed vigil at the regulator gates continues in our absence, diverting water downstream. We ask the local irrigation department what we should do. "Send your own guards," is their informed advice.

Our farmers tell us they want their children to go to school. There's a school building in each village. A ramshackle house of wisdom. But there aren't any teachers. So they teach themselves as best they can. Allegory is integral to the local dialect. The answer to every question I ask is prefaced with, "Let me tell you a story..." And then, whether the question relates to an agricultural matter or a legal matter or a family matter, my questionee tells me a story about a helpless bird and the expulsion of Adam from Eden and a king who invites a beggar to supper and the time he fought with the man who sells samosas on the corner. And by the time he reaches the end of the story, the afternoon sun has sunk behind the high wall of the house, the electricity has come and gone twice and I've forgotten what I wanted to know but ahead – on the faded lawn – in the lengthening shadows there's an obscure sense of something learned. n

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