

BADMASH ELITE

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12th of February, 2015. Syed Murtaza Shah succumbed to the injuries sustained in a fight with fellow students and their mercenary force of free-lance thugs. At the time of his death, he was a mere 16 years of age. He was also a student of mine.

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Murtaza's presence at the scene of his murder might have been coincidental – but he was not a stranger to such situations. He wasn't always the aggressor, but like many other children, he understood violence as a necessary tool for his survival in the brutish environment of school life.

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Of course, by saying this, I do not want to imply that Murtaza had it coming. Nor do I wish to insinuate any flaw in his upbringing: he was a funny, thoughtful and well-groomed boy. I simply wish to bring attention to broader questions of class and violence: Have our children inherited a well developed value-system in which violence is not only acceptable, but necessary?

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In my personal experience as a teacher in some of Pakistan's most elite schools, I have come across hundreds of petty and pointless fights. Whenever parents of a participant are informed about such incidents, they can be relied upon to act in a number of predictable ways: They either blame playground violence on the disappearance of traditional values or on schools for failing to do their job properly. Some beat the living daylights out of their children in order to teach them the virtues of non-violence. Others make excuses for their children, perceiving them as innocent victims of unruly, self-entitled badmash children.

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It is hard for them to acknowledge that 'good' children, like Murtaza, often have to do 'bad' things to fit in. The problem goes beyond the absence of traditional values. In fact, violence in schools is not a reflection of values being abdicated, but rather a reflection of elite values being integrated.

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A few years ago, Murtaza's school introduced a course called 'Comparative Religion' at one of its branches. TV presenters falsely accused the school of replacing a required Islamic studies course with a comparative religion class. The infamous Mubashar Luqman claimed these schools were committing "a moral genocide" against the youth of his country.

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Parents protested: this would diminish our children's understanding of Pakistan as a Muslim country. A few days later the government ordered a confiscation of all related materials and placed a ban on the course. Various religious groups issued threats. The school backed down.

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As I grieve the loss of a student, I cannot help but regret how we have failed our Murtazas by never putting our own values to the test. We teach our children to attack the values of others, without teaching them how to defend their own.

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Our cowardly surrender has spelled out the worst lesson for the children we claim to educate. And what are we surrendering to? The idea that education must not make us doubt our hubris?

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When the Quran says "Let there be no compulsion in religion, truth stands out from error", what does it promote? A religion that panders to the rabble of identity politics? Could it not imply that faith with doubt is optimism, and faith without doubt is nihilism?

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Teaching, if you take it seriously, is an odd but character-building job. Most mornings, I enter a room full of 30 kids who have made it their life's purpose to annihilate me. The impact of my contributions is never clear, because immediate validation is a rare miracle in my line of work. I rely solely on the hope that one day these students will use my experiences to question their own. That they will become aware of the world's complexities, and bring new worlds into existence.

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The point of studying comparative religion is similar to the point of all education, namely to appreciate different points of view, to look at the world through the perspective of difference rather than identity.

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That one day something will click in their minds; that one day they will embolden the collective experience of humanity. But with Murtaza's heartless murder, I am left with one mind less, one world less. Be it Malaala, the victims of the Peshawar massacre, or Murtaza: the only way to honor our students is by protecting our faith in their potential to co-exist in the midst of intellectual differences. If we wish to nurture this vision, we must pick up the pen, and stab the system that produces their assailants.

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