

The Houbara Republic

Future historians would find it immensely puzzling to understand how a small migratory bird became the greatest symbol of a country's ideology, foreign policy, lawlessness, loss of self-esteem, constitutional violations, cruelty towards animals and degradation of its eco-system. What did the innocent bird do wrong? Why did all the state institutions collapse when it came to protection of the defenseless Houbaras. While we will never be able to fathom the entire truth, we can attempt to look into the facts and motives that make our country appear as if it was a Houbara Republic.

The Mid Eastern Princes, not entirely known for their contribution to science, did however develop two unique sports – both based on deriving personal pleasure (read cheap thrills) by delivering cruelty to animals, birds and children. One is to engage in camel racing with small under-nourished 5-6 years old boy tied on the camel's back. The other is to unleash hungry falcons to prey upon the beautiful houbara bustard — a graceful migratory bird whose meat, they believe, contains aphrodisiac powers. Interestingly both these commodities (the impoverished children and the beautiful Houbaras) are readily available from the neighboring Republic.

For decades, royal Arab hunting expeditions have traveled to the far reaches of Pakistan in pursuit of Houbaras, Taxonomically classified as *Chlamydotis Macqueenii*. While it is difficult to estimate how many of these migratory birds are killed every year by the Arab predators, a safe estimate would place this number to be anything between three thousand to four thousand. No Pakistani official has the courage to check much less count the carnage. In a rare display of courage Jaffar Baloch, the Divisional Forest Officer of the Balochistan Forest and Wildlife department Chagai reported killing of 2100 Houbaras by just one Arab Prince in a span of 20 days. The Prince continued the hunt while the Inspector was quietly eased out to a desk job.

A clever crime diluting mechanism is contrived for issuing hunting permissions. The Foreign Office (FO) receives a nod from the Prime Minister and issues a letter to the concerned embassy, allocating areas and defining code of conduct. The FO has no jurisdiction to issue either the permission or the code. A dissenting note by Qazi Faez Isa, a Supreme Court judge in the Houbara Bustard review petition brilliantly sums up the FO behavior – “I may observe that it is a matter of grave concern that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is facilitating the transgression of the Act, which is a Federal law, and the wildlife laws of three provinces.”

The Constitution of Pakistan unambiguously declares, “ all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law”. The state by its behavior has demonstrated that it does not believe in its own constitution. If it is illegal for Pakistanis to kill these endangered birds how come the Arab Shaikhs are allowed to rampantly indulge in this barbarity? No person including the Caliph is above the law. While the constitution of Pakistan is emphatic on this principle, there is no institution that can prevent the state from blatantly discriminating between ‘dignitaries’ and the ordinary people. This is the biggest invisible damage caused by the Republic’s Houbara obsession.

There is yet another negative fallout of this illegal and immoral yearly carnage. At the end of each killing season, there are scores of unregistered and non-duty paid vehicles carrying foreign number plates that the affluent visitors leave behind as gifts, bribe or charity to the local hosts and officials. The interest of the government, officials and the local facilitators in receiving these ‘goodies’ far supersedes their interest in protecting the nameless Hobaras. Thousands of these gifted ‘houbara vehicles’ driven by their new local owners proudly continue to ply on Pakistani roads without ever paying any tax or changing the foreign number plates. The police does not have the courage to check an impersonating ‘shaikh’s vehicle’.

Besides its own laws, Pakistan is also bound by International Conventions such as Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna

(CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) to preserve and protect the dwindling population of Houbara Bustards. Pakistan has not just failed to do so but actively allowed and encouraged their extinction. These are serious considerations not just for the courts but also for the collective conscience of Pakistani nation.

Will the people of Pakistan raise their voice to impress upon their rulers that a self-respecting and lawful behavior towards both Arabs and Houbaras will only improve our national stature. Countries that use gimmicks like declaring houbara bustards as the cornerstone of their foreign policy can neither be respected nor trusted as sane nations. Perhaps this is what Dr. Iqbal had in his mind while writing his famous verse, "Jo Shaakh-e-Naazuk Pe Aashiyana Banega Na-Payedaar Hoga".