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Strength, sacrifice, triumph

Pakistani bodybuilders Rameez Ibrahim and Abdul Majeed overcame immense challenges to achieve gold at Mr Universe 2024

By Nabil Tahir

Building a strong physique is a dream many hold, but only a few achieve it through relentless dedication, consistency, and sheer determination. For those who aspire to be competitive athletes in bodybuilding, the journey demands far more than just gym sessions and protein shakes, it requires extraordinary physical energy, mental grit, disciplined routines, and a heart that can endure setbacks without breaking. The path is lined with sacrifices, financial strains, and battles against doubt, magnified when undertaken without the financial and moral support that athletes in many other countries take for granted. Yet, when all these hurdles are met head-on and a medal is finally secured, the joy and pride are on an entirely different level, transforming each struggle into a badge of honor.

This is the story of Rameez Ibrahim and Abdul Majeed, two Pakistani bodybuilders who recently claimed gold medals at Mr. Universe 2024. Rameez bagged a gold medal, Mr. Universe title and earned a pro card in the Men's Physique category. Majeed on the other hand bagged two gold medals and the Mr. Universe title. Their achievements symbolize more than personal victories; they represent the spirit of resilience that characterizes Pakistan's athletes. The path to success for both was fraught with huge challenges.

Every rep in the gym and every meal they scraped together represented the weight of the sacrifices they had made. Majeed juggled a full-time IT job with rigorous training sessions, working up to 14 hours a day to fund his passion without burdening his family. Ibrahim, on the other hand, selling all he have, bet everything on a dream that seemed impossible without sponsors or government backing, embarked on a solo journey from Karachi with no coach or support team, facing visa rejections and extended travel delays.

But standing on the international stage, with the Pakistani flag behind them and the national anthem ringing through the venue, they knew every hardship was worth it. Both men were driven by a desire not only to excel but to uplift their country's standing on the global stage. The lack of proper coaching, resources, and financial support did not deter them; instead, it fueled their resolve. Competing internationally revealed to them the disparities between local and international standards, but their determination to learn, adapt, and push beyond their limits was unyielding.

These victories at Mr. Universe are more than medals, they are proof that with grit and an unshakeable will, even the toughest obstacles can be overcome, inspiring a new generation of Pakistani athletes to dream big and persevere.

> "When I emerged victorious in the US capital, the Pakistani flag waved high, and the national anthem echoed through the air. Overcome with emotion, I fell to my knees in prostration

Rameez Ibrahim's journey

Ibrahim's remarkable journey in the world of bodybuilding is a testament to his firm dedication, perseverance and passion for the sport. With 26 titles and championships under his belt, including national, district, city, Karachi and Pakistan-level wins, Ibrahim has been making Pakistan proud on the international stage for eight years, without any sponsor or government support. His journey is a shining example of how hard work, determination and a love for the sport can lead to incredible success.

"I've faced incredible challenges, but I've been blessed with numerous triumphs. With 26 titles and championships under my belt, I've conquered competitions at every level: national, district, city, Karachi, and Pakistan. For the past eight years, I've proudly represented Pakistan on the international stage, securing medals and recognition in countries like Uzbekistan, Dubai, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Despite receiving no sponsorship or government support, I've successfully brought pride to my nation, solidifying my status as a world champion," shared Ibrahim.

One of the most pivotal moments in Ibrahim's career came when he won the recent gold medal at Mr. Universe 2024 in Las Vegas. He recalls the emotional moment when the Pakistan national anthem played as he stood on the podium with tears of joy streaming down his face, marking a triumphant culmination of his hard work and dedication.

"When I emerged victorious in the US capital, the Pakistani flag waved high, and the national anthem echoed through the air. Overcome with emotion, I fell to my knees in prostration, tears of joy streaming down my face. The years of hard work had finally paid off. I am grateful for the blessings of God, the continuous prayers of my parents, the love and support of my wife, and the well wishes of my nation. It was a particularly challenging journey, but God's guidance and strength carried me through," he expressed.

As the owner of RK Fitness, Ibrahim is committed to giving back to the community and contributing to the growth and development of bodybuilding in Pakistan. His gym has been a hub for nurturing talent, and he takes pride in having prepared 100 international athletes who have won medals in Asian and Universe competitions. Ibrahim estimates that he has done 2000 transformations and 1000 female transformations, cementing his reputation as one of the most experienced and certified fitness experts in Pakistan.

"I own and operate R.I.K. Fitness, which has been a dream of mine for many years. At this point, I've consolidated my business to a single location where I invest my heart and soul into training my students," shared Ibrahim. "Over the years, my team and I have prepared international athletes who have won numerous medals in prestigious Asian and universal competitions. I take pride in having the most experience and certifications in fitness within Pakistan, and I am humbled by the significant positive impact we've had on the country."

He further added that he was recently presented with an opportunity to represent America, but he declined. "I chose to stay in my home country and continue to train and inspire others here. I am committed to raising the Pakistani flag and making my country proud on a global scale," he added.

Ibrahim recalls the numerous challenges he faced when he first started participating in international competitions. Despite his dedication and hard work, many doubted his abilities and made fun of him. However, he persevered and continued to work towards his goals.

"I faced harsh ridicule from my own nation when I first ventured into international competitions. Despite my dedication and hard work, many doubted my abilities. However, I persevered and steadily improved, placing 9th, 7th, 6th and 4th from 2016 to 2019. In 2022, I overcame more obstacles, changed federations and won three gold medals in the world championship, defeating India and securing the overall win. I became the first Pakistani to achieve this feat," he shared.

His most significant achievement to date is becoming the first Pakistani bodybuilder to win three world titles in Thailand. "I feel incredibly proud of my accomplishments. After 18 years of hard work, I have achieved what no Pakistani has before me. I am a world champion, a universe champion and hold two pro cards. I am humbled to be the first Pakistani to set this record and I will continue to make Pakistan proud," he said.

His journey to this stage was not easy, he had to face tough challenges and decisions of his life. "I sold my three gyms, my car and my house to pursue my dream, and today I have been rewarded with success and respect. I hope that my story will inspire the people of Karachi, Pakistan and Sindh to recognize that we have lions in Karachi who can achieve greatness with determination and hard work," he said.

Ibrahim's recent gold medal win at Mr. Universe 2024 is an evidence to his hard work and dedication. He recalls the experience as "not an easy task" but an incredible achievement that has set a new standard for Pakistan in the presence of big names participating from the countries like USA, UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, India, Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea and more.

"Mr. Universe, winning the gold medal in 2024, was a very difficult task. There were 45 countries, and all of them were top-class countries. There were very big teams. It was a very tough time. And this is the biggest success of my life. Because I have set such a history for Pakistan that no one could do it for many years," he said.

When Ibrahim was announced as the winner, he was overwhelmed with emotion. He remembers the moment vividly, reflecting on the numerous obstacles he overcame to reach the top. "My journey to becoming Mr. Universe was filled with numerous challenges. I embarked on this solo journey from Karachi to represent Pakistan. I traveled alone, without a coach, friend, physiotherapist or doctor. Every obstacle seemed insurmountable, from the delayed 27-hour flight that took 67 hours to reach its destination, to being rejected twice for my visa. I finally secured my visa on the third attempt and was given a very short time to prepare. Despite these setbacks, I remained hopeful and determined," he expressed.

He added that he faced tough competition from participants from different countries and had to overcome the challenges of finding suitable food and accommodations. Through sheer determination and hard work, he was able to overcome these obstacles and achieve his goal.

This achievement is a significant milestone in Ibrahim's bodybuilding career, and he plans to build on this success to reach even greater heights. "This achievement will have a profoundly positive impact on my future career. As the second-largest federation in the world, comprising 130 registered countries, my victory over 45 nations is a result to my hard work and dedication," he said adding that his next target is to reach the highest level, and hopes get it with the support of nation and government.

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WHERE FLAVOURS ENDURE

Through decades of chaos and change, some of Karachi's long beloved food spots have stood the test of time

By **FOUZIA NASIR AHMAD & MUTTAHIR AHMED KHAN**







Whenever a bunch of Karachi's die-hard foodies hang out, sooner or later, their conversation will drift to eating places in Karachi. Not only the ones that are up and running, but also the ones that were. Older food connoisseurs will hanker about Pioneer Coffee House and Alpha Restaurant in Saddar, Café De Khan in PECHS, Dehli-Muslim restaurant near M.A. Jinnah Road, and Dolphin and Sea Gull in Clifton, to name a few.

Karachi has seen its fair share of ups and downs. With all the political and economic challenges, it has faced, there are longstanding restaurants in this resilient city that have remained a hallmark of Karachi's food palette over decades.

More than just sizzling mutton leg and fragrant curries, Kaiser Restaurant has become a Karachi institution. For over seven decades, it's captivated a diverse clientele – from everyday foodies to prominent figures – with its rich family legacy and a powerful dose of nostalgia

It was established in 1953 by the present-day owner Malik Tanveer Ahmed's father, Malik Rasheed Ahmed Khan [affectionately referred to as 'Abbaji' by Tanveer]. Initially, the food was cooked by Tanveer's mother and brought to the restaurant. "All the recipes, to this day, are my mother's," says Tanveer.

Standing tall, Kaiser Restaurant, quite literally so, it boasts a brilliant blend of brave flavours and a brand that has been frequented over the years by the city's bigwigs such as General Zia, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, Nusrat Bhutto, Pir Pagarra, Pervaiz Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari, Nawaz Sharif, Kausar Niazi (his office and favourite hangout) and many more.

In an interesting story that Tanveer tells, a regular customer once brought over an American gentleman Larry Williams, the principle of a cooling tower company, who loved their mutton leg. Next, on a solo trip to Mumbai, Williams made sure to stopover in Karachi for the sole purpose of eating at Kaiser. The tradition continues as some foreign officials dropped by recently.

Maintaining that kind of standard is no mean feat.

"It is a consistent war to maintain quality because quality gives the right taste warna khana tau sab jagah banta hai [otherwise food is available everywhere]," insists Tanveer. "Our milk, meat and masala suppliers are the same since Kaiser's inception. Like us they are also in their second or third generations of running their businesses. They know that there is absolutely no compromise on quality." Tanveer has some fascinating stories to tell about Kaiser's legacy. Not many of us know that during the 1971 war, Kaiser would be open all night. The lights would be off and food was cooked and served to people in candlelight, with a blackout otherwise.

In 1986, when Javed Miandad hit a last-ball six to win the Austral-Asia Cup final in Sharjah, the Sheikh had celebrated by throwing a dinner party for the Pakistani team for which food was catered from Kaiser. "From nan to raan [mutton leg to kulfi, everything was put on a plane especially sent from Kaiser," recalls Tanveer.

In the past seven decades, Kaiser has seen plenty of good and bad times. Surviving in a volatile and rapidly growing city of Karachi couldn't have been easy. "In the 90s, there used to be three-day shutter-down strikes, everything would become isolated," shares Tanveer. "It was a bloody era and one of the toughest times to survive. Not just the food business, all businesses suffered and many people left the country."

So how are things now?

"Nowadays, this extremely high inflation is the biggest challenge for businesses to survive," he began talking with a smile that was soon replaced with a frown. "People use their disposable income for eating out and the food business runs on that. But the kind of inflation that we are dealing with today does not leave anyone with enough disposable income to spend on eating out. The few who do have extra money still spend it on family outings to eat out."

Another old favourite and most visited food outlet in Karachi that has stood the test of time is Waheed Kabab House on Burns Road. Established by Habibullah, with a limited menu and space in 1961, presently it has expanded in terms of space, carte du jour and infrastructure. Waheed's dhaga kabab, fry kabab and nehari have no match in Karachi. Habibullah's son Waheedullah took over the reins from him, but today the restaurant is managed by Irfan Elahi, his grandson.

Elahi believes that their restaurant still enjoys a huge clientele, but for some time now, the restaurant has been compromising its profits.

"The pandemic was the worst situation that we experienced business wise for at least three years," shares Elahi. "But these days too, it has become very tough to maintain our tradition of quality food at affordable prices, and we are compromising our margins to sustain our reputation and prestige."

Tanveer explains that with basics being so expensive, the prices go up on the menu. "At the moment, utilities and food items have become so expensive that survival is quite impossible," he says. "Since last year, gas prices have gone up by 600%! This is a basic requirement for homes, industries, tandoors and restaurants. Chicken, for instance, has gone up to Rs600/kg from Rs 200-Rs250 a year or so ago. Similarly, mutton is now Rs2400/kg. Prices of onions, tomatoes and flour which are the basic requirement in every kitchen are sky-rocketing. But you still can't increase the prices to the point that it becomes completely unaffordable. Consequently, the business owner takes the cut and slashes the profit that he makes."

Is that what's happening everywhere? "No, not everywhere," he points out. "There are food businesses that have not only raised prices, but also reduced quantities and have not taken any cut in their profits, to the extent that it has become obvious. I have observed this in restaurants because being in the business I understand what is going on. Once, I even communicated to the manager that it has gone to the point of being unfair to the customer but in vain."

Come what may, Karachiites remain fierce foodies. Not just dinner and lunch, for them, breakfast and tea-time are also well-defined and elaborate meals. Which brings to the mind Fresco Sweets and Bakers, a name one instantly thinks of for samosas, jalebis, dahi barray and mithai, and ofcourse their breakfast fare of halwa-puri and keema kachoris.

Established by Muhammad Fareed, in 1952, with a limited menu, it has now grown into a bustling sweet and bakers' outlet with a diversified variety of rich desi snacks. After Fareed's death, the management was passed on to his son Muhammad Saleem who, being elderly, now rests at home while the business is being looked after by Fareed's grandson Muhammad Imran. However, the day-to-day affairs are managed by Javed Khan since the last 45 years.

Amid the struggles of running a food business with scarce government support and never-ending everyday challenges, entrepreneurs such as Elahi and Khan share the frustrations and resilience that come with working in a tough environment. "We have seen and survived many ups and downs such as strikes, law and order lapses, socio-political and ethno-lingual clashes, etc.," says Khan. "Nowadays, it is difficult to run a food business because of the impediments created by the official machinery for running fair trade. But then that is probably true for all businesses."

"Our government does not support us like the state organisations do in the developed world to promote flourishing local businesses internationally," Elahi agrees. "On the contrary, it only creates issues for the business community."

Khan believes that Fresco's consistently flourishing business is because it has maintained a certain credibility and standard that their clientele can trust," he says.

Discussing how trends change with time and people are more health conscious than they were in the past, Khan says, "Initially, people would take desi sweets as gifts for festive occasions, but now, cakes have replaced mithai. Times change, so again after some time, mithai will take precedence. For health reasons, people prefer to gift fruit over confectionary and sweets. But on the other hand, people prefer desi ghee to refined oils so they come to us because we use pure desi ghee in our food despite sky-rocketing costs."

Karachi's food scene, much like the city itself, has endured its fair share of challenges—political unrest, economic instability, and the constant struggle to maintain quality despite rising costs. Yet, through all the ups and downs, beloved institutions such as Kaiser Restaurant, Waheed Kabab House, and Fresco Sweets have remained cornerstones of the city's culinary heritage, serving generation after generation with the same passion and dedication.

In a city where food is more than just a meal — it's a way of life, a comfort, and often the only form of entertainment—Karachi's eateries reflect the resilience of its people. As Tanveer says, "In Karachi, eating out is the only entertainment." Despite everything, the city's food culture thrives, reminding us that no matter how tough things get, Karachi's love for food never fades.

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"Just as I made history by becoming the world champion and winning three gold medals in 2022, I have now become Mr. Universe, setting a new benchmark for Pakistani athletes," he added

Abdul Majeed's Journey

Majeed's story is one of passion, dedication and perseverance. As a former IT professional, Majeed had a successful career, but his true passion lay in bodybuilding. He recalls how his IT career helped him manage his bodybuilding expenses. "I was working in two jobs, eight hours in the office and six hours in the gym. This is how I managed my bodybuilding expenses."

For five years, Majeed worked simultaneously at The International School and Core Karachi Gym in Clifton. He saw how many bodybuilders in Pakistan struggled to manage their expenses, often relying on family support or selling belongings. Determined to avoid burdening his family, Majeed worked hard to manage his expenses independently. His IT career provided him with the resources to fund his bodybuilding endeavors. This allowed him to pursue his passion without financial stress, enabling him to focus on his goals.

Majeed's experience competing in local and national competitions was vastly different from the international stage. He notes, "Competing locally and internationally is totally different. Our coaches don't have enough experience compared to international coaches. You have to stay updated with your experience. Our coaches are more into old school methods."

Despite these challenges, Majeed learned valuable lessons from interacting with international players and coaches. "This exposure helped me prepare for the international stage. The gap in coaching standards highlighted the need for us, the Pakistani bodybuilders, to adapt and learn from international best practices," he said.

Majeed's journey shows how necessary it is for Pakistani bodybuilders to gain international exposure to excel on the global stage. He stresses the importance of learning from experienced coaches and adapting to new methods, saying, "I learned a lot when I interacted with international players and coaches. This growth mindset enabled me to navigate the challenges of transitioning from local to international competition." His ability to learn and adapt not only improved his performance but also equipped him to make a mark on the international stage.

The World Fitness Federation played a crucial role in supporting Majeed's journey to Mr. Universe. He acknowledges, "The World Fitness Federation provided me with a platform for this opportunity on the international stage, where we competed along with 42 countries' players, and we raised our flag. I am thankful to the World Fitness Federation for this opportunity."

This support was essential in helping Majeed achieve his dreams. "I hope that organizations like the World Fitness Federation and the Pakistani federation will continue to support and empower Pakistani bodybuilders, providing them with opportunities to shine on the international stage," he added.

Majeed's reaction to being crowned Mr. Universe was a mix of emotions. He recalls the moment as "unbelievable," unable to put into words the feeling of having a dream come true. He remembers being overcome with happiness and tears, and his first request was for the Pakistani flag. The feeling of representing Pakistan on the international stage was a proud moment for Majeed.

"Officially, my reaction was unbelievable, can't explain in words. That was a dream come true. Happy and crying at the same time. First, I asked for the Pakistani flag," he says, reliving the moment.

Preparing for the competition was no easy feat. Majeed describes the six-month training period as "tough," with increasingly intense workouts and a strict diet plan that had to be followed meticulously. He had to manage his full-time job with his training, which added to the challenge. Despite these obstacles, Majeed was determined to succeed.

"It was tough, but as you get closer to the competition dates, it keeps getting harder and harder. You have to manage everything with a hard workout and diet that should be 100% according to the plan. Everything should be proper measures on the scale, which was tough. I had to manage all of this with full-time work also," he explains.

Majeed's pro card and Mr. Universe title mark a new chapter in his bodybuilding career. He recognizes that competing at the pro level will bring new challenges, but he is ready to take on the next level.

"A pro card is a dream for every bodybuilder. When you turn into a pro athlete, everything is next level. You have to be up for the next level, where you will compete with pro athletes, so it will be challenging, but I am ready for it," he says confidently.

With his newfound status, Majeed is poised to take on the world of professional bodybuilding, determined to make a name for himself and inspire others along the way.





Bodybuilding in Pakistan

Bodybuilding in Pakistan, while rich in talent and passion, is a domain still navigating through a labyrinth of challenges. For bodybuilders like Ibrahim and Majeed, the journey to success is not just about physical strength but an arduous test of resilience against systemic gaps, financial constraints, and the lack of structured support. This backdrop forms the reality of countless athletes striving for recognition in a sport they consider not just a passion but a testament to their sacrifices.

Ibrahim, reflecting on the current state, paints a vivid picture of the obstacles inherent in the sport. He underscores that despite the international achievements brought by athletes, recognition and support at home remain elusive. "The development of Pakistan bodybuilding, can only be such when the people of Pakistan unite, stop pulling each other's legs, support each other, and appreciate any success from any platform," Ibrahim passionately explains.

This lack of unity extends beyond the athletes and penetrates deep into the administrative frameworks. Ibrahim's experiences highlight how entrenched individuals without the relevant expertise often control positions in governing bodies. He calls for "removing these black sheep," those who lack any substantial international or professional bodybuilding achievements and yet hold influence over critical decisions.

Majeed, who balanced his IT career with intensive training to achieve the Mr. Universe title, echoes similar sentiments. "Unfortunately, in our community, there are lots of obstacles in terms of unity—too many groups, federations, and politics," Majeed shares, emphasizing the fragmentation that prevents a collective advancement.

He longs for a time when the community can rally under one platform, supported by government efforts and equipped with a structured system to nurture new and existing talent.

The infrastructure deficit is also evident when comparing local facilities to international standards. Ibrahim voices the need for widespread gym development and better resources, "Educated trainers should be hired, gymnasiums should be prepared in all grounds, and they should facilitate the public with the best equipment and facilities. Such improvements would not only elevate bodybuilding but also foster a culture of overall fitness that benefits all athletes."

Financial strain is a recurring theme in both athletes' stories. The commitment needed to prepare for competitions, measured diets, precise training routines, and the management of expenses, often falls solely on the athlete. "Despite such sacrifices, bodybuilding is 30 years behind on the world stage," notes Ibrahim calling for a comprehensive overhaul akin to the structure of the Pakistan Cricket Board, proposing the creation of a dedicated Pakistan Bodybuilding Board (PBB). "If I am given this command, I will bring Pakistan's bodybuilding forward 30 years in just three years," he confidently asserts, laying out his vision for a revival.

Both Ibrahim and Majeed emphasize that real progress hinges on systemic support and international exposure. Majeed, who also worked as a coach and competed at the local level, knows firsthand the value of international standards and practices. "Competing local and international is totally different. Pakistani coaches still lean heavily on outdated methods, lacking certifications and up-to-date knowledge that could otherwise lift their athletes to new heights, shared Majeed.

Both athletes believe the government and private sectors hold the keys to unlocking this potential. "Government and other institutions should help athletes manage their expenses through a proper system with audit and check and balance," sates Majeed. Ibrahim adds that hosting international competitions and inviting foreign teams could transform the sport's visibility and economic benefits for Pakistan. "This will benefit Pakistan; business will also benefit. The whole world will know that Pakistan is not a terrorist country but a place where people from all over come to play sports," Ibrahim elaborates.

The vision both bodybuilders share goes beyond individual glory. For them, it's about cementing Pakistan's presence on the international stage, promoting unity, and fostering a new generation that thrives without the same struggles they endured. "I would love to help my community and see our players on international stages raising our country flag," Majeed says, revealing the drive behind their relentless pursuit, not just for personal victories, but for a future where the next generation of athletes can stand taller and prouder on the world stage.

THE MDCAT MAYHEM



For the past two years in Sindh, consecutive MDCAT paper leaks have compromised fairness in one of Pakistan's most competitive exams, leaving aspiring medical students disillusioned and questioning the credibility of the examination process

By **ALI RAZA MUGHERI & TUFAIL AHMAD**

Samina, a 42-year-old housewife, reflects on her unfulfilled dreams and sacrifices. "I was only 18 when I got married, and in the middle of my studies, dreaming of becoming a doctor. But I had to let that dream go." She hopes her four daughters can achieve what she could not. However, the recent Medical and Dental College Admission Test (MDCAT) paper leak casts a shadow over those dreams."

Samina's daughter scored 179 on the 2024 MDCAT, but their hopes were dashed due to the paper leak and subsequent cancellation. "Students known for poor performance in mock tests somehow scored above 190," she says. Her younger daughters, who had prepared for years, have abandoned their medical aspirations. "We're opting for chartered accountancy. It feels safer, and less at the mercy of corruption," she concludes.

In 2023, her eldest daughter scored 186, but when the paper leak surfaced and results were cancelled, all her hard work was wasted. "She was devastated," Samina recalls. Although her daughter excelled again in the re-conducted test, the emotional scars remain. "We now live in fear that another leak will shatter her dreams. It's not just about exams; it's about trust which feels fragile."

For Samina and families like hers, the MDCAT paper leak is a breach of faith in a system meant to reward merit. This issue impacts every student who deserves a fair chance in a good college, undermining hopes for a bright future in a country burdened by fierce competition and limited resources.





The MDCAT is a crucial, standardised exam for aspiring medical and dental students in Pakistan. Administered by the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), it serves as a key determinant for admission to public and private institutions. In 2024, the PMDC assigned six universities across the country to oversee the exam, with centres abroad in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. This year, over 164,000 candidates competed for 17,615 MBBS seats and 3,837 BDS seats nationwide, including 1,691 open merit and 254 self-finance seats in Sindh.

On September 22, 2024, a written test was simultaneously conducted at Karachi's NED University, Ojha Campus, as well as in Jamshoro, Larkana, Nawabshah, and Sukkur, where over 38,000 candidates from Karachi and other parts of Sindh participated. Out of these, 13,000 were from Karachi alone. These candidates appeared in the written test for 858 seats in medical and dental colleges.

The MDCAT examinations for admissions to medical and dental colleges in 2024-25 were to be held under Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences, Jamshoro, but the children of several senior faculty members of the said university were to appear in the examination, therefore, Liaquat University faculty refused to conduct the exam after which the government again directed Dow University of Health Sciences (DUHS) to conduct the exam and prepare the September 22 test paper. After which, images of leaked papers started circulating on social media and DUHS had to face various allegations in connection with the conduct of the exam.

For many students, protests were a moral necessity. They faced dismissive statements from (DUHS) officials, and some were even labelled as "troublemakers." Snap judgments about these students obscured the root issue: an exam process marred by negligence and an education system unwilling to admit its flaws. The real scandal, it seemed, wasn't the leak alone but the response or its lack, from those in power.

After this situation, candidates filed a petition in the Sindh High Court (SHC) in September, following which the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) conducted an inquiry that revealed that the paper had indeed been leaked. The report identified one candidate, stating that during the investigation, it was found that he secured 194 marks out of 200 in the MDCAT exam, while his inter-science was from Nawabshah and domicile was from Sanghar. It is practically impossible for any student to score such high marks. The FIA's Cyber Crime Circle has summoned the candidate to their office on November 1 at 12 PM. During the inquiry, the candidate may also be tested. If the candidate fails to appear, the agency may initiate legal action against him.

Farhan, a candidate who appeared in the exam in 2024, alleged that why the papers of the MDCAT exams are leaked in Sindh, while these exams are also held in other provinces of the country, but there is no paper leak. The paper leak, then the probe, then the re-conduct of these exams pushed back the academic session of the students by 6 to 8 months, causing a significant age gap in the student's post-graduation and public service exams and employment.

This year, following a surge of petitions, the Sindh High Court intervened, on October 26, nullifying the results and ordering a retest within four weeks. The court's intervention, however, highlights a deeper issue: the urgent need for systemic reform in Pakistan's examination security. As students deal with mounting stress and uncertainty, the flaws in these processes highlight the critical need to restore integrity and transparency to Pakistan's educational assessments.

Timeline

The issue of MDCAT paper leaks has a troubling history, particularly in Sindh. In 2023, Jinnah Sindh Medical University (JSMU) conducted the MDCAT exam, quickly engulfed in scandal with allegations of a paper leak. The Sindh government formed an inquiry committee, which confirmed the allegations, leading to the cancellation of the results, and the test was reconducted by DUHS. However, controversy persisted when allegations of another leak surfaced, sparking widespread protests from students, parents, and civil society. Despite these protests, the interim Sindh government declined to launch a new inquiry. In contrast, the MDCAT exams held in 2019 and 2020 were conducted under the Pakistan Medical Council and no complaints of paper leaks were reported during those years. In 2017, large-scale protests erupted across Sindh over paper leaks during the MDCAT exam conducted by the National Testing Service, but the results were upheld.

After the 18th Amendment, the responsibility to conduct the MDCAT exams were delegated to the public sector universities of the provinces. Each year, different universities in the province conduct these exams. However, since the exams commence in the public sector universities of Sindh, there have been continuous complaints in connection with paper leaks.



In this regard, the Pakistan Medical Association has expressed its concerns through a press conference, stating that this year, papers have been leaked from districts from interior Sindh. On the other hand, the National University of Medical Sciences, which conducted this year's MDCAT exam under the federal Ministry of Defence, denied any incident of paper leaks.

A message was sent via WhatsApp to the spokesperson of DUHS to get his stance for the Express Tribune representative, and multiple calls were made regarding the paper leak, but no response was received.

This issue is not limited to Sindh. In Punjab, a significant controversy arose in 2017 when a paper leak forced the reconduction of the MDCAT exam and suspects sold the exam paper for Rs 1.2 million or Rs 2,000 per question. Similarly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, a viral video claimed a leak had occurred, prompting the chief minister to order a cancellation and a fresh test. KP also faced a similar controversy in 2005 where paper was leaked before the MDCAT exam and test reconducted.

Meanwhile, a total of 2,450 seats are reserved for MBBS in the public medical colleges of Sindh. There are 12 public medical colleges and 7 public dental colleges across Sindh, along with six public medical universities. In Karachi, Dow Medical College has 350 MBBS seats, Dow International Medical College has 150 MBBS seats, Jinnah Sindh Medical University has 350 MBBS seats, Liaquat University of Medical Sciences in Jamshoro has 350 MBBS seats, KMD College has 250 MBBS seats, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Chandka Medical College in Larkana has 250 MBBS seats, Peoples Medical College for Women in Nawabshah has 250 seats, Khairpur Medical College has 100 seats, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Lyari Medical College has 100 seats, Ghulam Muhammad Mehr Medical College in Sukkur has 100 seats, Gambat Medical College has 100 seats, and Bilal Medical College for Boys has 100 seats reserved. The academic session for MBBS and BDS will start in January 2023.

Students' reaction

The MDCAT paper leaks have inflicted profound emotional and social turmoil on aspiring medical students. Years of hard work and dedication are rendered meaningless when systemic failures overshadow meritocracy.

For 18-year-old Asfand Ali from Hyderabad, September 22 was meant to mark the culmination of years of dedication to becoming a doctor. After a smooth MDCAT test day, he felt relieved and hopeful. However, that hope crumbled when he discovered alarming posts in his study group on Facebook. Screenshots of questions identical to those he had just answered were circulating, fuelling rumours that the MDCAT paper had been leaked before the exam.

Initially, Asfand couldn't believe the news about the leak. "I gave it my all in that exam, but now it feels like none of it matters," he laments. "We've worked so hard to secure a place in MBBS programmes, only to hear the paper was leaked on exam day. It's devastating."

"With leniency in cheating in board exams, and rampant paper leaks in pre-entry tests, students don't study hard," says Israr Ali, another aspirant. He shared that countries with strong education systems focus on quality teaching, updated syllabi, and strict exam culture.

A question of ethics

"Parents, desperate to secure a medical future for their children, often resort to unethical means like paying for leaked exam papers," says Dr Kainat Balouch, an expert on the social, political, and religious dynamics of Pakistani society. "This behaviour teaches children that success can be bought rather than earned, normalising dishonesty and diminishing the value of hard work."

The societal consequences of such behaviour are far-reaching. "This perpetuates a cycle where dishonesty becomes the norm, eroding public trust in academic institutions," says Dr Balouch. "It is not merely about exams, but about the values we instill in the next generation."

> **The MDCAT is a crucial, standardised exam for aspiring medical and dental students in Pakistan**

She questions whether becoming a doctor is truly the only valuable profession, emphasising that parents, teachers, and the government are collectively failing to provide young people with diverse career options. Just as children inherit names, caste, or family connections without choice, they are often imposed with the narrow parental expectation of becoming a doctor. "This must also change," she argues, advocating career counselling to empower students with information on modern, globally relevant degree programmes across various fields.

Accountability

The lack of penalties for exam leaks signals a lax approach to security, one that essentially encourages further malpractice. Establishing stringent penalties for individuals and institutions involved in such scandals would demonstrate a firm commitment to protecting the interests of students. This measure would not only serve as a deterrent but also signify to students and society that fairness and transparency are valued in our educational institutions.

"The true worth of any institution lies in its credibility," points out Dr K.B. Shah, a professor at the Institute of Business Administration. "Year after year, MDCAT finds itself entangled in the same scandal and accountability is sorely lacking in this scandal." While acknowledging human error or manipulation, Dr Shah warned that a failure to conduct serious inquiries in this matter and taking culprits to task will signal systematic corruption and unreliability within the system.

"Simply cancelling or reconducting the test, does not equate to true justice," he says. "Those responsible for the leaks should be held accountable."

Way forward

Dr Ali Gul Khushik, professor economics department of UOS proposed that the test should be conducted by private medical institutions or independent testing services, arguing that while the government's capacity may be significant, it falls short when it comes to ensuring transparency and integrity. Citing credible institutions like DUHS and JSMU, as examples, Dr Khushik believes that the root of the problem lies in the individuals managing these processes. "Temptations of greed — whether financial, political or fear of job loss— often compromise the system," he explains.

In contrast, private institutions are held to a higher standard of accountability, with performance-based incentives for their employees. As a result, they are better equipped to resist external pressures and ensure the integrity of the testing process. Private organisations in Pakistan, which oversee academic evaluations, rely on delivering quality results to attract clients and maintain their credibility—something public institutions, funded by taxpayer money, do not have to prioritise.

To restore integrity to the MDCAT process, a comprehensive technological and structural overhaul is essential, incorporating best practices from reputable institutions. "Digital platforms ensure that papers are only accessible at designated times, greatly minimising the opportunity for leaks," explains Professor Dr Naeem Ahmed Mahoto, a key member of the Pre-Admission Testing Committee (PATCO) at MUET Jamshoro, emphasising that transitioning to digital exams on secure platforms would enhance exam security. He advocates for biometric verification methods, like fingerprint or facial recognition, to prevent unauthorised access. Additionally, he suggests randomising exam questions from a large pool to deter predictability. He highlights the critical role of data encryption, even if exam data were intercepted, encryption ensures that it remains unreadable without the correct decryption keys.

"We conduct an annual pre-entry test for about 12,000 students, with 900 participants in one day, significantly reducing rush and long queues," explains Dr Mahoto, highlighting MUET Jamshoro's testing framework as a model for other institutions. "The digital format allows students to choose their exam date and time. After completing the test, students receive their scores immediately upon submission, enhancing transparency and feedback."

Dr Balouch criticised the current weightage system in the selection process for medical admissions, specifically the allocation of 50 percent weightage given to matriculation and intermediate results. She argues that this system creates avenues for corruption, as some parents resort to bribing corrupt officials in educational boards or leveraging personal connections to inflate their children's grades. "This manipulation begins as early as the 9th class board examinations," she says in conclusion. "The distortion of marks starts at a foundational level and continues through to higher secondary education. It undermines the merit-based system and exploits the rights of deserving, hardworking students, ultimately eroding fairness in academic competition.

Ali Raza Mugheri is a freelance contributor

All facts and information are the sole responsibility of the writers

No cure at home



Story by: **YUSRA SALIM**

Young doctors lose heart facing poor working conditions and low paid jobs in Pakistan, driving them to work in foreign countries. Can the troubled healthcare sector survive a depletion of skilled medical practitioners?

A worrying trend in recent years has been that many young doctors are leaving Pakistan in search of work and better working circumstances overseas, or they are struggling to find jobs in the country that suit their education and specialisation. Pakistani physicians are increasingly opting to relocate to the UK, the Middle East, and even North America to pursue jobs in countries that provide them with professional progress, fair compensation, and a sense of worth. However, where this trend presents opportunities for physicians, at the same time, it creates a crisis for the healthcare sector in Pakistan, as the migration of skilled medical practitioners is leaving a gap in medical services.

Why are young doctors leaving Pakistan?

Poor working conditions and low pay in the healthcare industry are among the main reasons behind young doctors opting to leave Pakistan. Even after finishing a demanding five-year medical program and numerous home employment assignments, doctors are frequently employed in low-paying positions. "When after a five year of rigorous education, a graduate goes out to find a job, they get a low paid job with extra working hours, they are disheartened. It only encourages them them to seek better options outside Pakistan," told Secretary General of the Pakistan Medical Association, Dr Abdul Ghafoor Shoro.

In most cases, junior physicians at public institutions frequently receive monthly compensation that is insufficient to meet their essential living expenditures. Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, on the other

> **Junior physicians at public institutions frequently receive monthly compensation that is insufficient to meet their essential living expenditures**

hand, provide organised professional progression prospects and competitive wages. "After four years of study, when I went for a house job, the offer letter promised me 85,000 rupees while we only got 45,000 rupees compensation. We were asked to sign the letter, or else we wouldn't even get 45,000 rupees," said Afsheen Ahmed, who graduated from a public dental college three years ago. She also shared that the entire system is involved in corruption, from the administration staff to the upper management.

Other than the pay disparities, many government hospitals have subpar working conditions. An overdemanding atmosphere is created by overcrowded wards, old equipment, fewer resources, and overwhelming numbers of patients. Despite putting in long hours, medical professionals are not very satisfied with their jobs. All these issues are made worse by the additional stress caused by understaffed institutions, which is why many doctors look for alternatives overseas where working conditions and hours are more controlled. "The main reasons are security, safety, better pay, and working conditions, or else why would anyone want to leave their home country," said Dr Shoro.

The insecurity of healthcare jobs in Pakistan is another reason young doctors choose to go abroad. In many public hospitals, contract-based jobs with little to no job security are commonplace. For physicians in the early phases of their careers, the recruiting procedures are frequently unclear and unstable due to their slowness, bureaucratic nature, and political influence. Young doctors in Pakistan find it challenging to invest in their professional development and plan for the future because of this lack of stability. "I graduated five years ago from a top-notch institute, but the working conditions made me rethink my decision to join the workforce. Also, the placement criteria are absurd where a doctor from Karachi will be posted in Kashmore, but a doctor from Larkana will be posted in Karachi. This doesn't make sense, and one should be inducted in their cities," said Muhammad Hamza Khan, who is now practising in a private hospital.

Many physicians are compelled to choose less popular specialties or are unable to get a position in their preferred specialty. Furthermore, earning a postgraduate degree in Pakistan can be expensive and time-consuming. In contrast, nations with stronger healthcare systems have better facilities, more defined job growth pathways, and organised training programs. "I am planning to leave by the end of this year to pursue my Masters abroad. I do not plan to come back because the future is bleak here and there are no job prospects, despite the patient-doctor ratio in the country," shared Hamza.

Young professionals, particularly doctors, who frequently face additional societal obligations, are under more financial strain as a result of Pakistan's

> **Lack of employment opportunities in the healthcare industry is one of the main problems faced by Pakistan's young doctors**

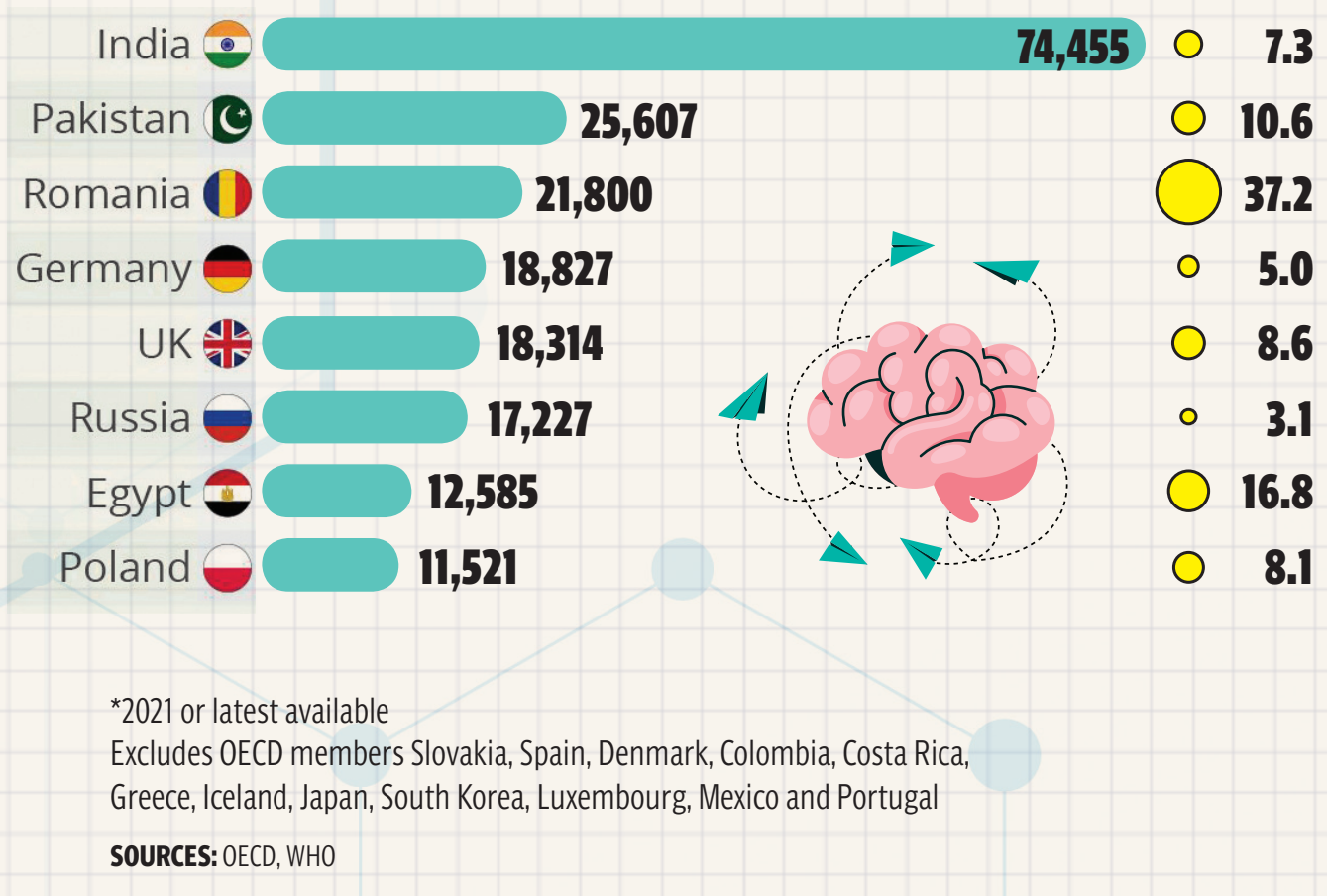
rising cost of living. There is an underlying cultural expectation that doctors would lead stable and successful lives because they have chosen a noble and challenging career. However, this is frequently not the case in Pakistani reality. The advantages of working overseas, which offer greater pay and a better lifestyle, become more alluring when young doctors are unable to meet these expectations.

Challenges in securing jobs

Lack of employment opportunities in the healthcare industry is one of the main problems faced by Pakistan's young doctors. Approximately 15,000 new doctors are produced annually by Pakistan's medical colleges, but the number of public sector employment openings has not kept up. To accommodate this flood of recent graduates, the public and private sectors have not made enough investments in

Countries Experiencing Doctor Brain Drain

Countries with the highest number of domestically trained medical doctors working abroad in an OECD country

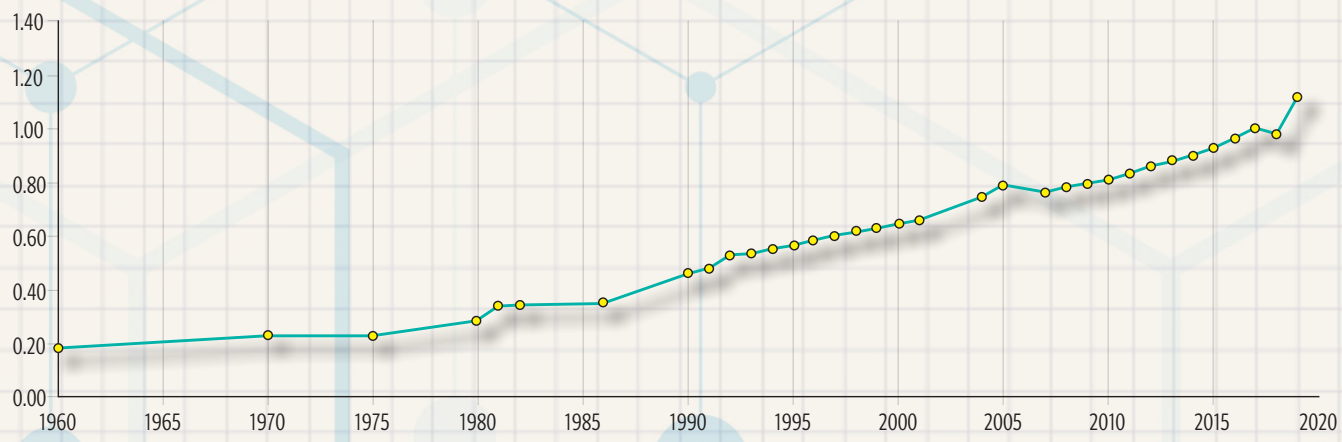


*2021 or latest available
Excludes OECD members Slovakia, Spain, Denmark, Colombia, Costa Rica, Greece, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico and Portugal

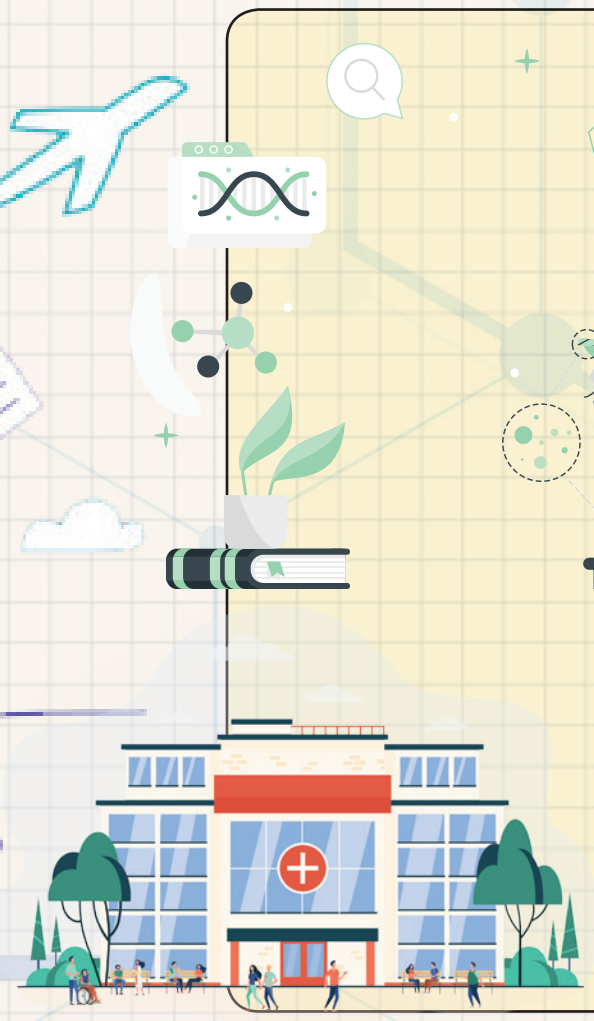
SOURCES: OECD, WHO

Pakistan - Physicians (per 1,000 people)

Physicians (per 1,000 people) in Pakistan was 1.12 as of 2019. Its highest value over the past 59 years was 1.12 in 2019, while its lowest value was 0.19 in 1960





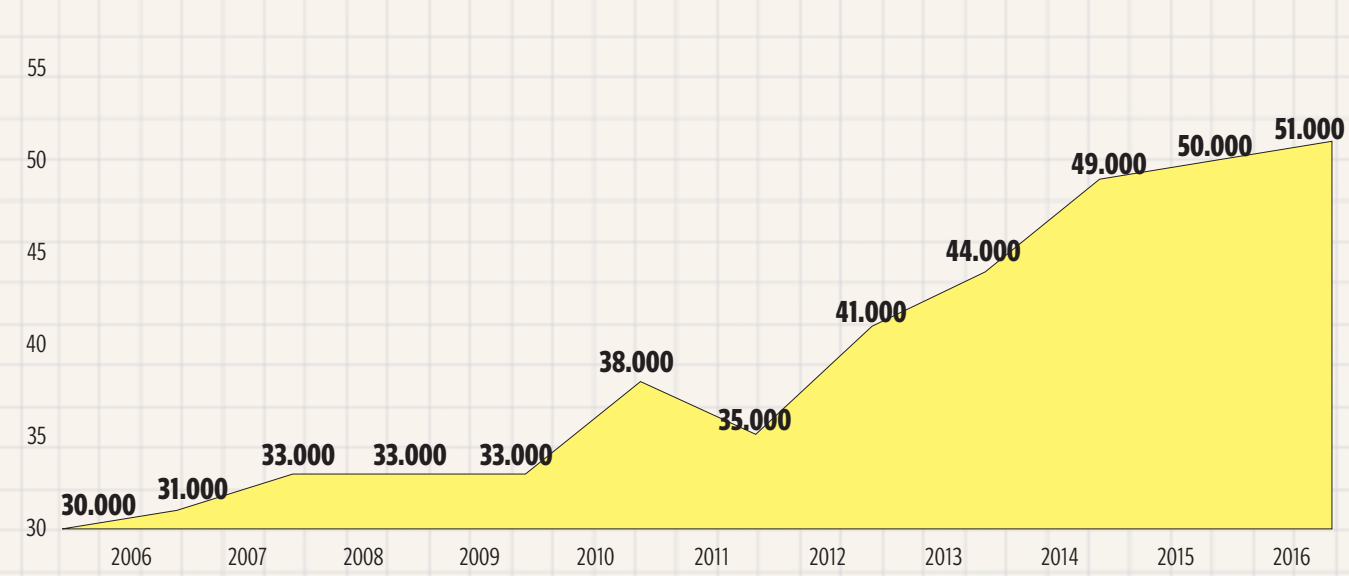


As of 2024, Pakistan has 122 medical colleges, comprising 48 public and 74 private institutions

These colleges collectively enroll approximately 15,000 medical students anually

Across Pakistan, about 12,500 - 15,000 medical students graduate anually from recognised medical institutions

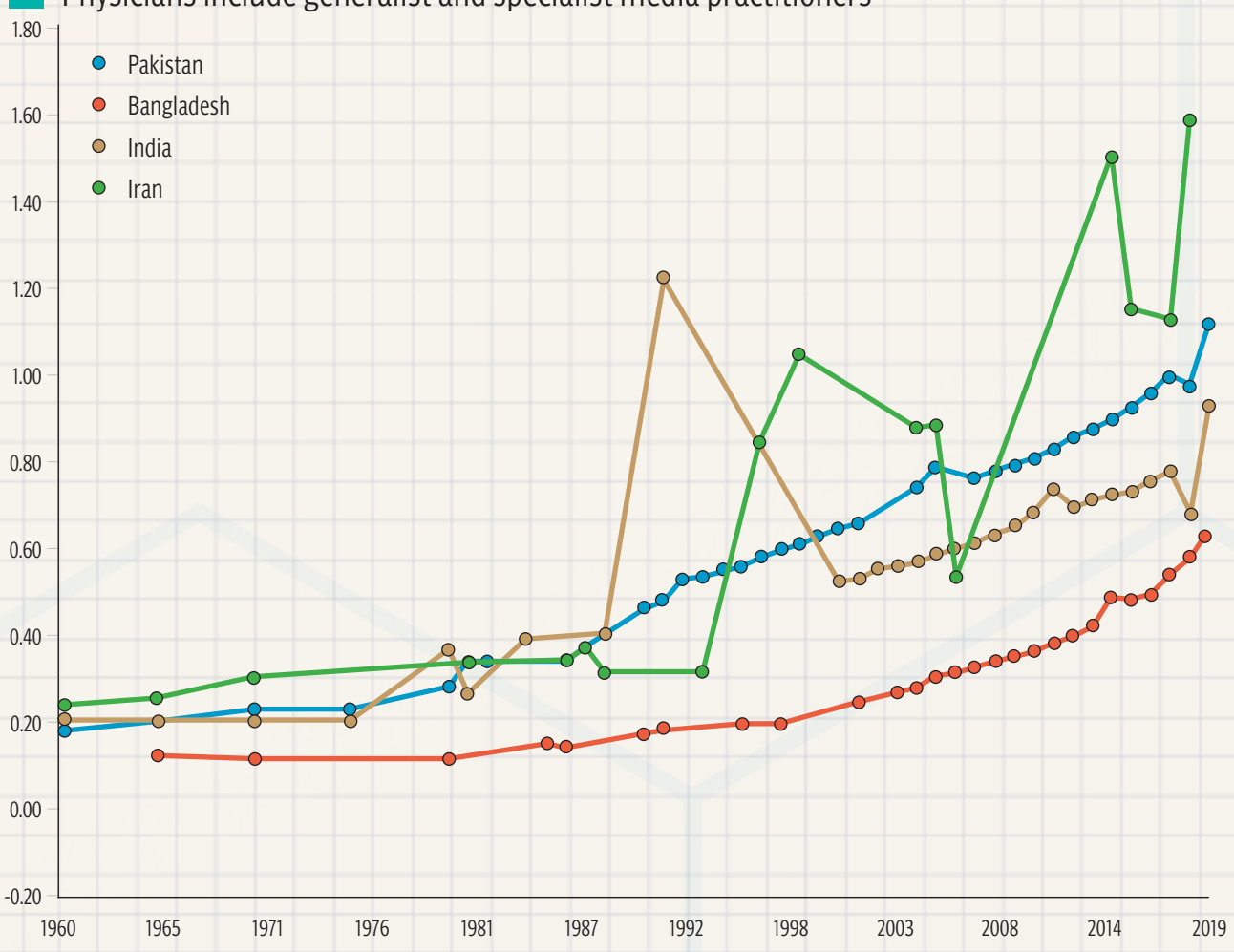
Pakistan's Number of Students: Professional Colleges: Medical from 2006 to 2016



SOURCES: WWW.CEICDATA.COM | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

Physicians (per 1,000 people)

Physicians include generalist and specialist media practitioners



Healthcare recruiting practices in Pakistan are sometimes tainted by political interference, which results in hiring decisions that are not always made based on merit

developing hospital infrastructure or healthcare services. As a result, despite the population's obvious need for healthcare experts, many young doctors are either unemployed or compelled to work in jobs unrelated to their field. "If there are 15,000 graduates every year from all over the country, the number of jobs hardly matches the number of graduating doctors. The government, on the other hand, cannot accommodate them due to finances and budget restraints, and that is where the loophole widens," explained the secretary general of the PMA.

Healthcare recruiting practices in Pakistan are sometimes tainted by political interference, which results in hiring decisions that are not always made based on merit, for young physicians who have put in a lot of effort into earning their credentials, nepotism or favouritism frequently results in missed career prospects. Even the most talented doctors look for jobs overseas because they believe their qualifications and abilities will be more respected there due to the perceived unfairness of the recruiting process.

To advance in their careers, recently graduated physicians need direction and hands-on training, but Pakistan's healthcare system frequently lacks the means to offer these services. "After getting out of medical school, we are on our own and have to navigate through either asking for counseling from seniors or relatives. There are very few teachers who mentor you and guide you to take a better option," said Ahmed, who is assisting one of her teachers at a private clinic. She also said that in public hospitals, most hiring is done through political involvement, and people with certain ways of speaking are given priority. Many young doctors feel alone and unsupported in the absence of formal programs or sufficient mentorship, which influences prompts them to look for better prospects for professional growth overseas.

With a national health spending that is much lower than that of many other nations, Pakistan's healthcare system continues to be underfunded. Young doctors have fewer career options as a result of underfunding, which is the reason behind fewer hospitals and fewer medical resources. The few hospitals that do exist are frequently overcrowded, poorly furnished, and run by a small group of physicians and nurses. Even if there are jobs available, they are frequently in difficult settings where it is hard for doctors to deliver high-quality patient care due to a lack of infrastructure and resources.

Doctor shortages in Pakistan's healthcare

Pakistan may see a significant shortage of trained medical personnel in the upcoming years if the current migration of young doctors continues. The consequences of this scarcity will be extensive, ranging from public health outcomes to patient care.

The patient-to-doctor ratio will rise in Pakistan as the number of active physicians declines. Pakistan's public hospitals are already congested, and this problem could get worse if there are not enough doctors. Reduced time for each patient leads to hurried consultations, a higher risk of misdiagnosis, and generally worse care. "We are not talking about a decade later, but in the next two or three years, the shortage will be obvious. Doctors have been leaving the country right, left, and centre for the last few years," said Dr. Shoro.

Patients may find it more challenging to get care for complicated medical conditions due to a shortage of specialised physicians. Specialists in disciplines like neurology and oncology are already in limited supply in Pakistan. Patients may not be able to get timely, specialised care in Pakistan if young doctors keep leaving, particularly in rural areas where access to healthcare is already scarce.

The strain on the remaining healthcare professionals will rise as fewer young doctors join the system. Increased workloads may be expected of senior physicians and other healthcare personnel, which could lead to a decline in job satisfaction and a rise in patient care errors. "Senior physicians will leave the field after a while, and then there will be a gap to be filled. Among the various reasons is the ratio of male and female students. Every year around 70-80% female candidates get enrolled in medical schools, and if the number is to be believed almost half of them don't practise at all," lamented the secretary general. He also added that male students do not apply for medical schools much, which is why the gap is widening year by year.

A lack of physicians may result in missed diagnosis, treatment delays, and generally poorer healthcare quality, all of which only increase public health problems. The country runs the risk of experiencing a shortage in the years to come if significant reforms and investments are not made in the healthcare industry. The current tendency may have long-term effects that negatively impact Pakistan's public health and standard of living if it is not addressed.

Pakistan may see a significant shortage of trained medical personnel in the upcoming years if the current migration of young doctors continues. The consequences of this scarcity will be extensive, ranging from public health outcomes to patient care

Design by: **Mohsin Alam**

THE MAGIC OF VIRTUAL REALITY



Confined to immobility by a genetic disorder, Mats Steen lived vicariously through his avatar in World of Warcraft for 10 years. The Remarkable Life of Ibelin explores the richness of his online life

BY **ZEESHAN AHMAD**

Let me slip on my nostalgia goggles for a moment. The Internet before cell phones and social media was a magical place. It was not yet dominated by the Silicon Valley 'giants' to the degree it is today. Your experience online was not yet corralled into the silos of Google, Meta and so on. There were corners of the old Web that made it feel like a virtual Wild West of sorts.

Yes, there were risks: you could never be entirely sure who you were interacting with or if they were really who they claimed to be. But in hindsight, that golden age of anonymity offered something precious. It feels as though people expressed a truer version of themselves on cyberspace, free from the constant fear of online faux pas leading to real-world consequences. Today, as online personas form a dominant part of everyday life, the Internet seems filled with 'public relations' versions of people, shaped by virtue signalling and the spectre of cancel culture.

Back in the day, the Internet was a haven for the outsiders when the outsiders were very much 'uncool'. Across chatrooms and online forums, and the earliest generation of online games, you could create genuine connections as someone who didn't quite fit in with others in the same predicament. As absurd as it was considered back then, I formed the most enriching friendships in spaces like those, some of which endure to this day. The friends I made online, people I still have never met in person, helped me discover and appreciate sides to me that I think much of our society in Pakistan still wouldn't accept. Most importantly, those spaces were where I met the woman I love, my partner of many years, for the first time.







At the time, when I spoke to family and real-life friends about those online friendships, I could always detect how incredulous they thought this notion was. As if only politeness stopped them from saying that it didn't count: "You've never met them in real life. How do you know they're real?" The idea of an online life was still absurd. When I visited my partner's country to meet her in person for the first time, some of my friends and family even feared the worst. The idea that I had developed a genuine loving relationship with someone I met online was that alien to them.

When I watched 'The Remarkable Life of Ibelin' (TRLI) on Netflix recently, some of that nostalgia came rushing back. An incredibly moving documentary, it explores the online life of a now deceased young Norwegian man named Mats Steen who in real life suffered from a degenerative muscular disease known as Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD). Steen's parents, wracked with guilt over their eldest child's condition, open the documentary by admitting their worst fear: that Mats would never make close friends or find love; that he would never be able to make a difference in anyone's life.

To make up for the opportunities and activities Duchenne would rob their son of, they reveal that they allowed Mats as much screen time as he wanted. From their vantage point, the older Mats grew and the worst his physical condition became, the more he seemingly withdrew into the world of video games. Wasting time that he could have spent outside, even if it was confined in a specially constructed wheelchair.

Before Mats passed away, he gave his parents the login credentials for a blog he started in his final few years. 'It was as if he wanted us to know," Mats' parents believe. After his death at the age of 25, when DMD had completely mangled his body leaving his frame unable to support his weight, the parents made a final entry to the blog: "The journey has come to an end."

They received a flood of extensive condolences in return, from people all over Europe and beyond. Each one recounted in detail how valuable a friend Mats had been to them in a virtual world called 'Azeroth'. For the last 10 years of his life, Mats had been making the most of his predicament through his virtual persona in the massively multiplayer online role-playing (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW).

The secret life

A 2019 article by Norwegian broadcaster NRK (republished in English by the BBC) first revealed the story of Mats secret life to the public. ""We didn't understand why it was important for Mats to be online late in the evening and at night... We thought it was all about the game... We thought it was a competition that you were supposed to win," his father Robert said when interviewed at the time. "In retrospect, I think we should have been more interested in the game world, where he spent so much time," he lamented. "By not doing so, we robbed ourselves of an opportunity that we didn't know we had."

As Robert noted in his eulogy for Mats, the latter had spent between 15,000 and 20,000 hours in WoW during the last 10 years of his life. "That's equivalent to more than 10 years' full-time employment," he remarked.

Far from time seemingly 'wasted', it was time Mats spent experiencing the little joys that most of us take for granted. As Ibelin (and another alter ego Jerome, not explored in the documentary) Mats cultivated close and meaningful friendships with other players that spent their time in WoW's fictional reality. Beyond partaking in the game's quests, it was time spent what could simply be described as hanging out.

The documentary touches upon two moving instances. We meet Xenia and her son Mikkel, both from Denmark, who credit Mats for helping them develop a close mother-son relationship. Mikkel, who lives with a form of autism, could not engage with people in a traditional way. Touch, especially, was something Mikkel says was unbearable for him, which in turn made Xenia unable to express affection towards her son. When Xenia, through her WoW avatar Reike, vents with Ibelin, Mats advice is simple: you both enjoy video games, why not connect through them. Later on, via Ibelin, Mats helps Mikkel overcome his social anxiety to an extent, encouraging him to become part of his WoW guild, named Starlight.

The film also introduces us to Lisette, who in her online guise as Rumour, appears to be Mats great love. Of a similar age to Mats, their avatars engage in flirtation, even a form of virtual dating. Lisette's avatar Rumour, described by Mats as a 'dark-haired, mysterious beauty', is shown via an animated sequence to steal Ibelin's hat. Their interaction builds up to a kiss on the cheek. "It was just a virtual kiss, but boy could I feel it," Mats writes in his blog, which serves as the documentary's first person narration.

Rumour, at one point, vanishes from WoW for days. Eventually, Mats learns that Lisette's parents, angry at the amount of time she spent online, had confiscated her computer. Mats addresses a letter to them, urging them to 'reach an agreement' instead of acting with anger.

The animated sequences, which feature the actual WoW avatars used by Mats and his friends, are created using 42,000 pages of logs that include conversations and character descriptions written by Mats and his friends in the course of playing the game.

One of those friends, in a condolence email to Mats father, remembers Ibelin as an 'incurable romantic' who 'always had success with women'. The film does not fall into the trap of portraying Mats as a selfless 'saint'. In WoW, he appears to have lived as something of a 'womaniser', a revelation his father admitted made him feel 'proud'.

Towards the end of his life, as his physical condition worsened, Mats as Ibelin starts behaving erratically, triggering quarrels with some of his friends. That period seems to have been partly motivated by a desire to remain anonymous, as other members of his guild tried to entice him into meeting in person.

It ties into Mats observations about his experiences with people in real life – how they spoke to him in a patronising manner and treated him as someone less than. "I'm not dumb," he notes in his blog. When Mats as Ibelin reveals he suffers from DMD to Xenia, he insists that she keep it to herself and that she keeps her 'pity' for him in check.

In his eulogy for Mats, a video of which is shown towards the end of the documentary, Robert expresses immense joy and pride at his son's resourcefulness: "You proved us wrong."

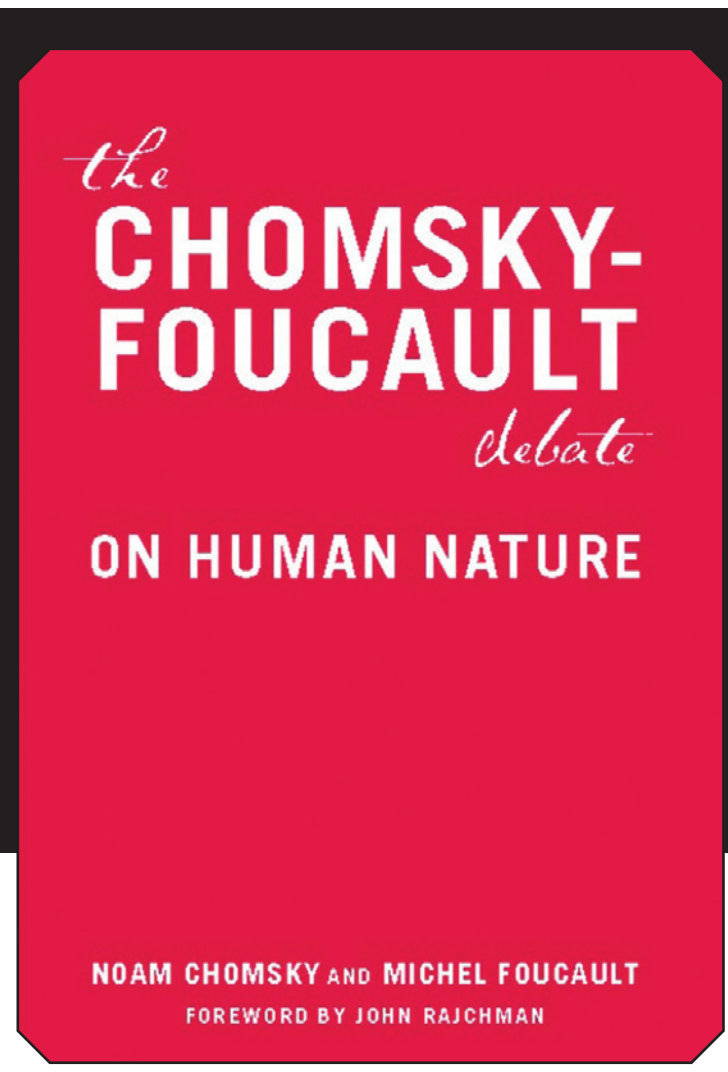
"Mats told us he was gaming with other people, but we felt they couldn't know him as they hadn't met physically," Robert admits in the documentary. "Yet I think if you move ahead 10 years in time, we won't even have these kinds of conversations, we'll not differentiate between the digital and physical. For younger people, digital or physical, it's all very much the same, the relationships they've established online are as important and natural as physical relationships. It's just my generation where this is strange, as we never experienced it growing up."

Testament to the strength of Mats' friendships is the presence of some Starlight members at his funeral. Not only that, the guild also holds an annual virtual remembrance within the game for Ibelin to this day.



THE AGE OF THE ALGORITHM: ARE WE READY?

The Chomsky-Foucault debate offers a timely and relevant discussion on the ethical implications of AI development and the need for responsible innovation



By **ELLA HUSSAIN**

In 1968, a singer named France Gall performed a song titled, Der Computer Nr 3 (Computer No 3). One could argue that the lyrics to the song are more relevant today than when she first ye-ye'd them on German television to a confused audience. During the same timeframe of the headiness of the '60s, Andy Warhol, famous for his 1967 Marilyn Monroe screen print which is still referenced today in advertising campaigns borrowing from the Pop Art movement, predicted, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." The brave new world Gall and Warhol prophesied over half a century ago is well and truly upon us. The question arises: As the nature of AI evolves, will Human Nature follow or lead?

In an attempt to better understand the question above, and in the absence of being able to answer it just yet, a closer look at the book, The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature (with a foreword by John Rajchman) is helpful. The book being referenced here is the paperback transcript of a 1971 televised debate between the two formidable intellectuals. This book review aims to glean lessons on Human Nature from the book format of the debate in light of the amorphous times we live in with discussions on AI capturing our collective imaginations.

John Rajchman opens his foreword with, "The initial exchange took place in Holland in November 1971. Noam Chomsky spoke in English, Michel Foucault in French, with the results broadcast on Dutch television." The transnational world is not an invention of the 21st Century; forgetting history does not alleviate us from reliving it. This big little book stands testament to the miracles of the technology of over half a century ago. One may marvel at the progress, or lament all that has been sacrificed at the altar of technological advancement. Either way, ignoring the zeitgeist doesn't appear to be an option.

The debate between Chomsky and Foucault was moderated by philosopher Fons Elders. He frames his first question to Noam Chomsky as follows: "So my first question is to you, Mr Chomsky, because you often employ the concept of human nature, in which connection you even use terms like 'innate ideas' and 'innate structures.' Which arguments can you derive from linguistics to give such a central position to this concept of human nature?"



In opening the floor to Chomsky, Elders sets the tone for the entire debate by way of framing it's opening exposition in a "what" question, as opposed to the "why" question the late, great, Foucault appears to ask in his works; works still available to the curious minded of our times.

To answer the opening question, Chomsky offers insight from his field, Linguistics, "...The child must begin with the knowledge that he's hearing English or Dutch or French or something else, but he does start with the knowledge that he's hearing a human language of a very narrow and explicit type, that permits a very small range of variation... I would claim then that this instinctive knowledge... on the basis of very partial data, is one fundamental constituent of human nature... And I assume that in other domains of human intelligence... something of the same sort must be true.... This collection (of) innate organising principles, which guides our social and intellectual and individual behaviour, that's what I mean to refer to by the concept of human nature."

One may deduce that the crux of human nature in this line of reasoning is the human ability for language. This is interesting to note because the current kerfuffle around generative AI's ability to not just mimic but even improve upon the human facility for language is what is giving sleepless nights to poets and teachers at one end of the spectrum and business heads at the other.

> **The transnational world is not an invention of the 21st Century; forgetting history does not alleviate us from reliving it. This big little book stands testament to the miracles of the technology of over half a century ago**

When the floor opens to Foucault, he asserts that he has a "mistrust" of the notion of human nature. In his own words, "I would say that the notion of life is not a scientific concept... In the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept."

This reviewer's (certainly limited) understanding of what Foucault's answer means is that the argument for human nature is a proxy for discussing abstract concepts, while (one infers from Foucault's life's work) the actual scientific answers lie in dissecting structures of power like state institutions. To connect this to our current times, this book seems to speak from the past to tell us that today's binary of AI versus Human Intelligence would be better framed as a binary between organised institutions and independent actors. If one were to link back to the AI question, the companies at the vanguard of furthering AI are no less exerting coercive power on the common employee than the state exerts on the common civic rebel with a cause. It is not difficult to predict which way the wind is blowing.

In another excerpt from the debate, Chomsky asserts, "Can we explain in biological terms, ultimately in physical terms, these properties of both acquiring knowledge in the first place and making use of it in the second? I really see no reason to believe that we can; it is an article of faith on the part of the scientists that since science has explained many other things it will also explain this."

Connecting this to present debates around Generative AI's eventual ability to "think," one may find in Chomsky's answer a hope that there is in fact an elusive human nature that distinguishes human output from, for the lack of better words, the mechanised churnings of AI cogs.

Foucault's role in the debate is to firmly and vociferously fight his corner of an arguably more glamorous political nature, "... I have in appearance at least, a completely different attitude to Mr Chomsky apropos creativity, because for me it is a matter of effacing the dilemma of the knowing subject, while for him it is a matter of allowing the dilemma of the speaking subject, to reappear."

To connect the quote above to the question at hand regarding whether human nature can outwit the potentially infinite power of AI, reading into Foucault may give us a perspective that is far more foreboding and gloomy than Chomsky's optimistic outlook and belief in the specialness of human intelligence.

Towards its conclusion, the debate meanders from the question of human nature to the question of Justice. Here, there is a timeless and relevant exchange between the two opposing parties:

Foucault: "So it is in the name of a purer justice that you criticise the functioning of justice?"

Chomsky: "... to imagine and move towards the creation of a better society and also a better system of justice."

Foucault (in response): "One makes war to win, not because it is just."

Just as the digital landscape evolves to win, not because it is just. One is reminded of Sun Tzu's The Art of War.

The question of whether human nature does in fact exist is for philosophers and academics to argue. The question of whether AI will outwit HI (human intelligence) is for engineers to dither over. For the common reader with everyday concerns, this book offers hope that the world being shaped is not entirely alien; that a read through history's archives will reveal that the world has always been spinning forward on its technological axis, from the original wheel to the wheel of EVs (Electronic Vehicles).

To end, here's an open question: when the flying cars do arrive, will the car be more stressed out about getting to the meeting on time than the human in it?

Because if so, that's perhaps a fair exchange!

Ella Hussain studied history and politics at University of Warwick, and has worked in the fields of TV, advertising and publishing

All facts and information are the sole property of the writer

T Magazine's picks

Binge this week: The Manhattan Alien Abduction

TV Show



Labelled on Netflix to be the most credible and contested alien abduction in recent history, this is the story of Linda Napolitano's claim that she was abducted by aliens in November 1989, from her bedroom in the middle of Manhattan, while 23 people witnessed her levitating in the air. Apparently, she was paralysed while aliens conducted experiments on her. Using clips from Independence Day, dramatic re-enactments, and archival footage from news reports and talk shows, the series for most part is pretty compelling, with a few holes here and there.

Follow this week: @Transnationalinst

YouTube



The Transnational Institute is an outstanding resource for anyone passionate about global justice. Founded in 1974, TNI connects a network of activist-scholars dedicated to analysing today's pressing issues, from militarism and inequality to environmental sustainability. Their work offers valuable insights and supports movements striving for a fairer, more democratic, and eco-friendly world. With a focus on public scholarship and no political affiliations, 17.1K subscribers and 371 videos, TNI fosters international cooperation. You could sign up for their newsletter to stay more informed and engaged with critical global challenges.

Listen this week: Sinking Boat by Infinity Song

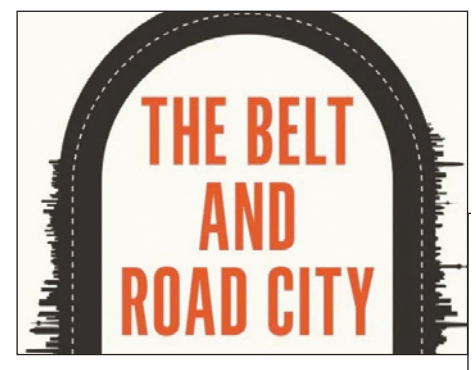
Song



New York City-based, soft rock band Infinity Song comprising four siblings effortlessly blend tight vocal harmonies, dreamy lyricism and sublime guitar riffs to create a transcendent experience for the listener. If soulful soft pop rock with the late 1970's vibe, a bit of Fleetwood Mac influence and built up acoustic guitar melodies is your thing, the song will come as breathe of fresh air. The lyrics also feel incredibly personal and reflective. As a family band, their signature smooth style, blended influences and similar tones hit a sweet spot.

Read this week: The Belt and Road City by Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus

Books



Over the past decade China has put infrastructural and urban development at the heart of a strategy aimed at the transformation of international order. The book seeks to revitalise and reconnect the ancient Silk Roads that linked much of the world before the rise of the West. Providing a new angle into the BRI story, it attempts to place China at the centre of this new international order shaped by Chinese power, norms, and values, and explores how China's specific investments in urban development are directly linked to its foreign policy goals.

HOW PAKISTAN CAN BE THE NEXT TOURIST HUB



Our country has immense tourism potential, but it is time to set aside discussion for concrete action

By **HASSAN AZHAR HAYAT**

Having spent nearly six months as MD Green Tourism, a relatively new company formed under SIFC to boost tourism sector, I intend to give my thoughts on where we stand and how to go about it.

On the formation of Green Tourism, I feel the biggest contribution by this company is to open a debate on tourism related issues, opportunities and challenges. Having met over 200 people in the industry, I feel it is a low hanging fruit and in the long term will provide rich dividends. However, we must act instead of too much discussion; we know the problems and their solutions. I also want to clarify that we may inherit some best practices from the world, but our environment is different and we must brand Pakistan as such rather than in comparison.

A lot has been written on the statistics available in the open market. I don't want to deliberate much on that but suffice to say that our statistics are not accurate due to lack of e-tourism, very low number of foreign tourists (nearly 49,000), poor passport ranking (98/101), meagre footfall of religious/faith tourism (only 15,000), poor WTTC Ranking of 101 that went down in 2023, bad indicators of Sustainable Development Goals and Pakistan is rated 137/166, among last three in Asia. This is even though in 2022, we were declared a most apt destination, which we are.

This clearly answers the question: "why Green Tourism?" What we lack and how to fill the gap is a question in everyone's mind. If our economic drivers are good at tourism and our growth is 8% of GDP, then tourism will become a market of $36 Billion in the next 10 years (or whenever it is achieved). As a society we should look at the positives. I can quote with conviction having stayed in China for over three years that we have superior culture, artifacts, history, civilization and religion, but need to know and believe in what we have. Pakistan has always been recognised for its geo-strategic location, but why not talk about the geo-strategic population – proximity to China, India and Southeast Asia means more than half of the world's population is in our neighborhood. And why not talk of geo-strategic culture (Buddhist, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Indo-Iranian and Indo Greek civilisation).

I have been attending seminars and symposiums where only potential is discussed; we have the best of geography, mountains, weather, hunting, archaeology, heritage, history, coastline and religious sites etc. In my opinion the most important thing to realise is that our local tourism has picked up and was recorded at 27 million tourists in 2023. However going into the genesis of why Pakistan has not been able to take off internationally, I have eight reasons to list:

- Pakistan's name became synonymous to terrorism and this old impression must be dispelled.
- Poor projection and branding in the international tourism market.
- Poor infrastructure and connectivity.
- Lack of policies and by-laws, and division between federation and provinces post 18th Amendment.
- The public sector lagged in services while tourism growth was driven by private sector.
- Lack of diversification of tourism – we spoiled the environment and summer highlands, and no new plan was offered.
- The rating system for hotels, tour operators and guides, and e-tourism remain underdeveloped.
- Non-investment friendly environment, no one-window operation, no ease of doing business, lack of encouragement in B2B, freelancing and tax/ duty concessions.

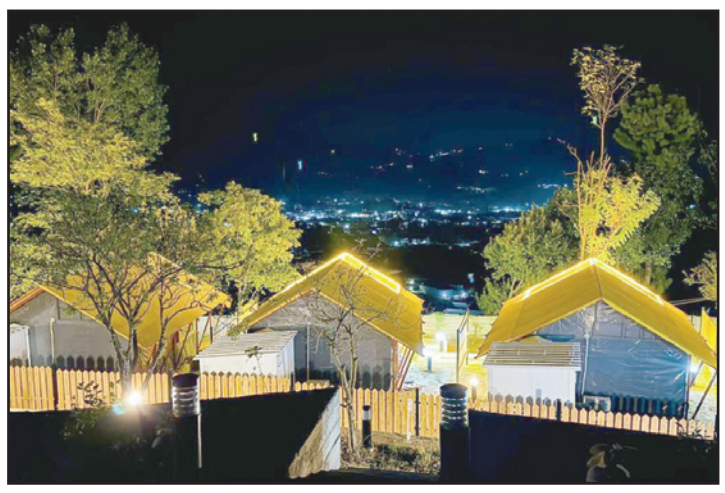


Domestically I would like to deliberate on these areas, which have retarded our growth in the tourism sector. Firstly, the lack of a centralised body: there are over 30 government organisations dealing with different facets of tourism. If we include private organisations the tally is over 50. After the 18th Amendment, tourism is a provincial subject, so I find a gap exists between the federation and provinces, which happens nowhere in the world.

Secondly the legal framework and implementation is flowing from point one: Pakistan Hotel Act/Regulation, Tourist Guide Act/ Regulation, Travel Agents Act and Antiquities Act cover these important aspects, but over thirty legal frameworks exist. Thirdly, issues of responsible tourism vs. rowdy tourism; we have not been able to resolve NOC, security issues and end-to-end tourism, thus perceptions around the globe are negative. We want to increase tourism, but everyone is self-centered. We need a change in social behaviour; it is not about literate or illiterate but a sense of ownership and awareness about tourism.

Green Tourism reaches grassroots level and will endeavour to bridge all these gaps. However, we are a private company and face challenges every day. Expectations are that we will fix tourism, but we have no power and we try to fill the gaps. We facilitate where gaps exist, we create and wherever we find private sector is better we try to empower it. It is encouraging to note that the incumbent government and Prime Minister have shown supportive intent and focus. If we keep debating the issues, we will find the solution. Green Tourism Private Limited, being a private company under SIFC is acting as a facilitator of all in the tourism industry. Our vision is: "Promote the tourism industry and become a significant contributor to the National Exchequer while creating projects for Foreign Direct Investment as well as Public Private Partnerships."









Our objectives in short are built on nine pillars. I am not shy to say at times we become tangent to bureaucracy.

- To build and support infrastructure (at selected sites) for tourism and provision of an exciting end-to-end experience.
- To support and facilitate religious tourism as a high yield component of overall tourist activity.
- To synergiae the ecosystem of tourism through green alliances involving Evacuee Trust Property Board, Board of Investment, Pakistan Association of Tour Operators, Parks and Hotel Association etc.
- To assist in upkeep and preservation of historical and archeological sites, utilising public private partnership (PPP) model.
- To direct efforts in opening avenues in the tourism domain (events, sports, beaches, wildlife/ bird watching, trophy hunting/ hunting reserve and medical etc.).
- To add in creation of jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in the tourism sector and generate supply of skilled work force.
- To participate in creating an enabling environment for sustainable, responsible and inclusive development of tourism in the country.
- To act as a bridge between all stakeholders of the tourism industry to accrue maximum benefits and target FDI.
- To project a soft image of Pakistan, create means and ways in target countries, with international branding the most important component.

Green tourism is promoting interests to be worked at policy level. Some of our initiatives include:

Debate on uniform laws and regulations without impinging provincial liberty – is there a need for the Tourism Ministry, National Tourism Authority, National Tourism Coordination Board or a Task Force? Case in point our tourism and other aspects being experienced in the contemporary world.

We need ingenious and imaginative ideas – Walled City of Lahore managed by Walled City Lahore Authority (WCLA) is an idea that brought a visible change. We need to involve the federal and provincial government in sustainable tourism. Big and bold decisions must be taken.

Introduction of new visa regime is a good step forward, but there must be a second phase to this, which needs to be spelled out, opening Pakistan up to the world.

Gilgit-Baltistan is our main repository of tourists and needs help to establish its policies. I can say reforms in tourism sector e.g. provision of electricity, monetary reforms, mountaineering reforms, community-based model, concept of preserved areas, waste management, opening of new air routes, Search and Rescue (SAR) 1122 for mountains, promotion of aviation and opening of Khunjrab to Hunza-Gilgit, besides building infrastructure.

Diversification of tourism has been our issue and we have not been able to open our coastlines. We envision cruises, riverine and lake tourism, and hope to open new areas to tourism.

Currently Green Tourism is developing understanding with over thirty hotels and resorts, airlines, TV channels, universities and aviation sector firms. We are also in negotiations with ETPB, WAPDA, CDA and Railways to negotiate lease/contract for promotion of doing business in this industry.

Green Tourism has completed 17 different sites as hotels and resorts, which were closed over the years. They have been aesthetically developed with add-ons to provide quality accommodation. In the next phase, twenty sites will be involved.

Green Tourism is also working on event and sports tourism. One event of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) held in Lahore brought 300 foreigners from over 20 countries and accumulated viewership of over 500 million. We need to brand Pakistan with such events and celebrities.

World over, the tourism industry gives opportunities to allied industries such as souvenirs and HR etc. We are working on this aspect and intend opening up shops at airports and resorts and create an international standard Human Resource institute with JV or PPP.

IT Industry plays a major role in tourism. Case in point is booking.com and other engines. Green Tourism is working on the Green IT Engine to enable tourists to find desired accommodation, guides and tours on their phone, and to create a rating system.

Like hotel accommodation, tour operators play a pivotal role in tourism. B2B is the best model. We need to resolve issues of PATO and provide opportunities to link them across the globe. Likewise important tourism festivals across the globe are to be attended with a purpose such as ITB in Germany, WTM in London and Travel & Adventure Show in New York and other important ones.

Pakistan has very few city hotels and our forts/palaces need attention. Some can be converted into five-star world class resorts.

We need 'Trailogy Concept' trails through Tour Operators. It's not all about eco-tourism but heritage tourism; Sindh has valuable sites, Punjab has wonderful lakes in Chakwal, K-P has heritage, AJK has scenic spots, Balochistan has Mehrgarh and mountain trekking trails, etc. We have a treasure of over 6,000 sites. We need to introduce trails for tourists to go and see with ease.

As foreign tourists see Pakistan from lens of UNESCO heritage sites, of which we have six, I think we must increase their visibility to become prominent in world.

Two issues that are very prominent in our tourism landscape are security and the behaviour of our local tourists. Let's not be afraid of these but find solutions. On security, I am a believer in openness, having been affiliated with security since 2009, I believe in opening up. If you open tourism to hard areas, it will soothe the region. Case in point is Swat and Kumrat where tourism has taken over security with the help of people.

The second issue is more apt social behaviour. I believe we need a national policy on social behaviour. It costs us nothing, as we need awareness. A special Prime Minister's ini-

