

Introduction of the Managing Editor

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Abstract:

This real story-based essay explains the role of education in poverty alleviation and reminds the moral responsibility to resource people and countries to offer helping hands to the people in need.

Keywords: Poverty, Health Issues, Moral Responsibility, Village Life, Education

Greetings wonderful people. I am Najid Ahmad, managing editor of the journal *Academics Stand Against Poverty*. Allow me to take this opportunity to briefly introduce myself, my relation to poverty along with my idea and vision about Journal ASAP.

I am from a very small village in the District Dera Ghazi Khan, Punjab Province, Pakistan, with a PhD degree in economics from Dongbei University of Finance and Economics in Dalian, China. Currently I am an Associate Professor at Hunan University of Science and Technology in Hunan, China, and a Global Justice Fellow at Yale University, New Haven, USA. In the past few years, I have won several awards and honors that include twice winning the prestigious Chinese Government Outstanding Researcher Award, an invitation from the French Government for global pollution reduction planning and an excellent-video award from Hunan Province for a video depicting poverty.

I'm a frequent traveler abroad for poverty seminars, research collaborations and meetings. Please allow me to mention that two of my siblings also have doctoral degrees and we are fortunate to be the first family among the three million residents of District D.G. Khan with three family members being PhDs!

I have initiated several small-scale projects for poverty alleviation in my village, including poultry projects where our poultry farms and incubation machines have a capacity for more than 10,000 chickens. Biogas plants and solar energy are other important projects to mention that meet the need for gas and electricity in the village which is short of gas and a proper electricity supply. A biogas plant can be built at a cost of \$150-200 and will then, with just cow dung and water, provide a family with a stable supply of gas (and, with addition of a generator, electricity) for 20 years. Similarly, the installation of solar panels to power pumps to irrigate our land does not only help us overcome the deficiency of the electricity supply but also offers a clean source of energy. For these reasons, I have formed a very positive attitude towards small-scale projects that, at little cost, help families escape poverty.

The above brief description looks cool, doesn't it? But life is never a bed of roses, especially for poor families. All sincere struggles for improvement require heavy efforts on the part of the candidate and his/her family along with the support of external partners who might be either sincere friends or external supporters offering helping hands in a situation where the

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candidate/family is stuck and needs a big push. This account fits my situation well in that, without such heavy efforts and support, my rural poor background in Southern Punjab would barely have allowed me to meet my basic needs and would have placed higher education beyond reach. Well, it is true that I started my early life in extreme poverty that one can hardly imagine, and the given pages are too limited to explain the situation. But it is also true that this gives me the opportunity to observe and understand poverty with first-hand experience and to help people in more affluent countries understand their moral responsibilities to respect and care with helping hands the people in need.

Allow me to provide a glimpse of my life of 35 years, beginning with living conditions. We didn't have proper, well planned, and constructed houses/apartments with water supply, toilets, laundry system, heating system and luxury AC in rooms to live in. Rather, we used to live in mud houses that are normally self-planned and constructed with mud rather than having big construction plans and bricks. Further, five to six family members living in one small mud room was quite common. I remember that if rain continued for two to three days, which was very common, the mud houses risked bowing down to hug the land and put us under the sky. Literally under the sky! It also happened that several days heavy rain brought a flood from the mountains of the Koh-e-Sulaiman Range to make a circle around our weak mud houses where we all had to keep watch for nights on end to try to protect our houses from the flood, a flood that was coming from the mountains rather than the Indus River that is also near us (about 13 km away). Destruction of agricultural production was common and worse still there are no agricultural insurance plans in the area (not even insurance for humans) so six months of work can be completely wiped out by such rain. When after several days all the rainwater finally reaches the Indus River, this can cause another problem – the Indus overflowing its banks and causing more damage to families, agriculture, and houses, with accidents, loss of animals, shortage of food and widespread disease across the region. The 2010 Indus River flood was quite serious, and we received much support from around the world for our area. Thanks to everyone! Whenever we have mountain flood, it often makes it harder to meet our basic needs from local markets. If someone fell ill or was in urgent need of something, it was a long battle with heavy deep water for several kilometers to fetch medicine and bring food for the family. Prayers were the only hope to stop the rain and flood to bring us back to normality. If, after days and sometimes weeks, life returned to normal, this also enabled me to go back to school.

My weak memory allows me to remember my work of unloading bricks and stones from trucks and helping sellers to sell clothes and vegetables in the local market (mandi) in return for small amounts of money when I was 8-9 years old! Usually, the money from that child labor was too little to even buy local sweets that we would eat sitting under the trees at noon. Till 2007, in each summer, I was severely ill (in 2008, I moved to another city named Lahore for my master's degree) with little hope of survival. The reasons for my illness remain unknown, but now I think that limited resources, including but not limited to lack of a proper diet, lack of better-quality water, lack of electricity to counter hot weather were to blame.

Lack of water supply was a real issue to be solved. I used to fetch water in a clay pitcher carried on my bicycle from a far-away canal, and sometimes the pitcher fell from my bicycle to break into pieces and water shattered on the road due to the heavy load than my small boney

body could not support. This clay pitcher was also very important in the summer to keep water cold; in other words, it was our fridge. I often went with my relatives to bring water, but when my mother had time from her domestic work, she would also go with me to bring a second pitcher to have water for several days. This soft water was considered especially suitable for cooking food, such as beans and potatoes. However, now I realize that it was not as good as was thought as it contained lots of sand particles that my mother tried to remove by passing the water through a clean cloth to capture the sand particles. Our village still does not have a proper water supply and relies on its own resources, so clean water remains a luxury. To counter the scarcity of water, initially the families of the village relied either on rain to store water in one reservoir to use for several months or on bringing water from a canal in pitchers. But during my early childhood, we also had a manual water pump (Nalka in the local language) in the home that brings water from deep underground with manual power to fulfill household needs – though this was hard water, salty and unsafe to drink, particularly for those with a weak digestive system on whom it may work like poison. Anyhow, water scarcity developed my habit of drinking very little water daily until my doctor warned me in December 2020 that my blood is getting thicker and thicker and that, if I do not take proper care this, it can lead to serious consequences in the very near future. The first advice was to drink more water. Water scarcity was an issue we learned to cope with in village life, and so was a lack of food in that we often had to rely on potatoes and beans for weeks, along with plain wheat bread (roti).

Our favorite morning breakfast was always wheat bread prepared in oil (called poratha) with milk tea and sometimes without milk, only red tea with sugar (Kahewa) if we had little milk. I never forget my luxury school lunch prepared by my mother containing wheat bread with sugar and oil poured on it. It was nicely covered in a plastic bag to put in my school bag. Many of my classmates did not even have that! Honestly, it was a little hard in the hot summers to walk 2.5-3 km to primary school since our village had no primary school (it still doesn't). Usually, I packed a book, a writing wooden palette called Takthi that is around A4 size, an inkpot, a wooden pencil etc. along with lunch. The school bag was hand-made by my mother with her sewing machine. It was a kind of folded stitched cloth till 3rd grade and finally, one day, I insisted that my father take me to the nearest city to buy a school bag, and a very stylish one it was. Guess! I was very excited to show it to my classmates the very next day.

Indeed, I have unforgettable memories of my primary school. Well, it is true that it was very hard to attend class in the hot summer without electricity in the class. We students all used to bring our own mattress to sit on the classroom floor or outside under the tree, depending on the season, since there was no proper seating, no benches, or chairs. So, we students in different classes all sat on the floor on our own mattresses, and sometimes we shared with each other if someone forgot to bring his mattress. The mattresses were made from empty fertilizer bags that we got from our parents when they discarded those bags after using fertilizer on the land. We just washed the empty fertilizer bag and used it as our mattress.

There used to be a wooden chair for the teacher in each class. We call our teacher Ustad Ji or Ustad Sahib. Normally, all subjects were taught by a single Ustad Ji from morning to the end of the class. So, one teacher for one large class with boys from different villages; the girls' school was separated from us. I must recall that none of us had a watch to check the time for break or

end of the class, however, Ustad Ji had a watch and we often tried to check from him. Knowing the time was heartening because during break time we would have lunch and relax from the boring class. Our monitor was the kind of guy who often asked Ustad Ji how much time was left until Lunch Break or until the end of the school day. We would sometimes check the time by going near to Ustad Ji to ask permission to go to the toilet, and when he responded, we secretly checked his watch. We would be happy if we had just half an hour of school time left. It gave us real pleasure to hear the bell for afternoon break. Since there was no toilet in the school, we used to go far away in the trees and for this, and we needed to get permission from Ustad Ji. If his mood was good and we got permission successfully, we would relax outside in the trees and skip the boring lessons. Initially till around 3rd grade I was not among the better students, and I was often punished with a bamboo stick on my back and on my hands, making the hands red and painful, and teacher's kicks often sent me falling to the floor, although without so much pain.

Honestly, I never told my parents about Ustad Ji's punishments as he was a very respected person for us. However, when once he had beaten me bitterly on my legs and I was unable to walk properly, my father realized that there was something wrong. He asked me with anger, and I told him the whole story. I don't know until today whether my father met Ustad Ji and asked him not to beat me so hard or not; however, the teacher's behavior improved and, I became less interested in class and school and finally, Ustad Ji made an announcement that I had failed the 3rd grade exams (three years of schooling), which meant that I didn't qualify for admission to 4th grade. The exams were taken and marked by the class teacher till 4th grade. I was given two options: either leave the school with a pass certification and join a new school at 4th grade or repeat the 3rd grade in same school. Because the other school was far away – a distance that I would have needed to cover by walking or cycling and that would have included a train crossing that I was afraid of – I decided to repeat the class to work as hard as possible.

Finally, I passed the exams with better scores to reach 5th grade. The 5th grade was a very pleasant experience as our classroom had two electric fans and we did not need to bring our mattress, as mattresses were provided for the most senior students at primary school. It was the real reason for many to struggle hard through to 5th grade, so that they could then sit under luxury fans and on good mattresses. In winter, we all sat under the sky in the school grounds. I got a distinction in 5th year to qualify for secondary school and it was the first exam that was administered by the government, with the exam papers neither prepared nor checked by our school teachers but by the government board in charge of such exams. Such exams are often called the Board Examination. This board examination gave me confidence to study further.

My father was my childhood friend and I remembered that I was called the "Stapni" of my father as I often went with him when he went on his bicycle to meet his friends. "Stapni" is the local name of the extra tyre that is attached to a car or truck for immediate replacement when a functioning tyre gets punctured. Being the Stapni of my father was a unique experience of my life as I made very senior friends who often shared their life experiences and stories to motivate me for a better future. It was the reason, during my initial days of school, that all kids of my age looked to me like very young children and immature, and I felt myself to be a very mature person. However, I had to adjust myself to other kids when my father told me that now I had to have my own friends and must play with them. My old friends often helped me by asking me to sit beside

them on their bicycles if they saw me walking to school, sometimes even when they were going in the opposite direction: when they saw me, they turned back to drop me to school first and then went back on their way. After all, I was their friend, and we had our memories of having tea together.

If I recall correctly, our village had no electricity till my 8th year of schooling, so I used to study with a small lamp fueled with Kerosene oil in a small mud room where disturbance by mosquitoes and insects was natural in the long dark nights. The lamp was not bought from any market but rather something we invented by using a discarded small medicine bottle, making a hole in upper side of the bottle's top to insert a piece of string, then pouring in kerosene oil to fill the bottle and finally lighting the beautiful lamp with a match. Thanks to my late grandmother for her invention that helped me in my studies!

It was a little harder to complete the reading and writing assignments in the dark room when the cruel summer was extremely hot without any fan (well, sometimes, my mother used to have a hand-made fan moving with her hands for long hours, which was an extra luxury) and in the winter when the weather turned cold, we had no heating and other ways of keeping warm were not enough. If I stayed outside the room to study at night in the summer, insects and mosquitos encircled the light and the lamp could not maintain the light due to external air pressure. So, the small mud room with the small dark light remained my world for several years.

In the summer, we used to spend days under the trees praying to God for a breeze. It was a memorable experience to recite school lessons under the tree during the hot summer when average temperatures in our area were between 35° and 45°C. Winter was boring as we had to keep a fire in the room to have better temperature, and if there was a sunny day then we could sit near the wall of our houses covering ourselves with warm shawls. Our village was filled with lots of wild trees; however, we had to cut down those trees and dry the wood so we could use it for cooking fuel and firewood in the nights to warm ourselves. I used to have a small axe that I would bring when my parents and I collected wood together. Sometimes I also went by myself to cut wood, carrying the wood home with my meagre strength or dragging the wood as I rode my bicycle. Now our village and area are without trees as we hardly planted new trees and kept cutting them down until they were all gone. The same thing happened in the nearby villages and therefore there are now more heat waves, and it is even hotter in the summers.

As a farmer village we used to grow mainly wheat and cotton, occasionally along with rice and sugar cane. My father, our relatives and we children used to work in summer and winter cutting and harvesting wheat and picking cotton, with women contributing significantly. To make harvesting the wheat and picking the cotton efficient and smooth, we used to have a "Wengar", the local term for a joint volunteer group of people working together. So today if we are picking cotton on our land, all our relatives will join us to help complete the task efficiently. This is a "Wengar". We don't need to pay them for their work. Instead, we reward them in future by helping them in return. In this way, we all efficiently handle our village tasks. However, if there was no Wengar, then people are hired to work and cash payment is based on output, on how many kilograms of cotton is picked by individuals till evening. I remember once asking my mother whether I could buy badminton rackets and a ball. I was told not to inform my father as this would burden him. The cotton season was almost over and after the collection from all the plants (often

after three or four rounds when there next to no cotton left on the plants), these plants are made available to everyone to use them for home cooking needs. Even at this stage one can sometimes pick very small amounts of remaining cotton (known as "OJARA" in the local language) for free. So, we went to our land and for several days collected as much of the remaining cotton as we could. I took this cotton on my head for sale in the nearby city to buy my favorite rackets. Imagine my joy when I returned home with my two rackets! Hurrah for my rackets!

A real wave of joy came when we saw electric bulbs in our mud houses and electricity was provided to our village. Hurrah, hurrah, electric bulbs in a variety of colors. Ah! what about the television!! OMG, it was something very beautiful when we bought a black & white television with a TV aerial (antenna) several years later that opened a new world to us. There used to be only one accessible TV channel named PTV where our favorite cartoons and programs were on weekly basis. We often face signal issues, and someone need to rotate the antenna to clear signals where our communication was with loud voice to inform each other if now TV screen is better or getting worse.

EIDS, our two annual Muslims religious festivals, were the main source of happiness, as on EIDS new dresses and shoes and pocket money (Eidi) were granted from elders, and we spent the pocket money on hand-made ice cream. EIDS were also the best source of meat for all in the village, especially on Eid al Adha, when many slaughter animals such as cows and goats to sacrifice according to the will of God and distribute among relatives and to people who cannot slaughter animals. All of us young kids went to places where people were slaughtering animals and gathered our shares in the form of lots of meat. This meat was not eaten in a few days but rather often stretched over more than a month. However, storing the meat was by a novel method that I will never forget. Even after we got electricity many of us were unable to buy a fridge, which was obviously a luxury item that my family also bought very late. So, my mother put meat in one big container and put it on the fire to let its water evaporate. I remember she mixed in salt. Later all the meat was put on the roof in the sunshine to dry it further. Well, crows often took their share from the roof, but the rest was ours, enough for many days. So, in this way, EID is a blessing for many poor people, enabling them to have meat for several days. Otherwise, honestly, it's not affordable for the poor.

Let me briefly mention some of our relatively richer relatives who kept their distance from us, considering us very poor. Perhaps they were afraid that we might ask them for money. Even though my parents faced a great struggle to raise us with dignity, we rarely asked for a helping hand during those difficult times. However, some relatives rarely visited us and some even fled when they saw me or my younger brother walking near the road. Some went so far as to break relations with us permanently. They stopped speaking with us because, given how poor we were, any association with us might make them look poor also. Once I asked my parents whether we had some terrible disease, and whether this was the reason our relatives did not visit us. What is the problem with us? My father silenced me angrily, saying I was a young child who knew nothing. But now I realize that we did have a disease, which is called poverty.

Based on the above limited glimpse of my life and situation, it is natural to wonder, given such extreme poverty, what enabled us three siblings to earn PhD degrees while also helping others improve their lives. Allow me a few more lines to explain my understanding about poverty

and opportunities for improvement. The first thing is hard work, the second is external support, with both interconnected. Normally, poor people have the first quality as they are hard working with the wish to improve their lives. But limited understanding and knowledge often hinder them. Here external support is needed where they lack the understanding and have little resources, so they need a positive push from more affluent people and countries to fill the gap. I am not here assuming that the poor can improve their lives with mere financial support such as aid and donations. Rather, moral support and encouragement along with guidance do play important roles. To my understanding, the poor often need a positive forward push to improve their lives through better education and knowledge. If I am asked how to eradicate poverty, I will confidently respond – yes, *education* is the key. By education, I do not mean a PhD degree for all. What I mean is a better understanding of how to improve one's situation, and education can bring such a better understanding.

Naturally, some will go for higher education according to their thirst for knowledge, and some will end at an intermediate stage. But all will have improved lives in ways that would not have been possible without education. It was also true in my case that after my master's degree (2010), I kept trying for four years for the opportunity to continue my PhD when it was hard to finance my further education without external support. Luckily, I was awarded a full scholarship from the Chinese Government Scholarship Council (CSC) to fulfill my dreams. Otherwise, it would have been hard to gather resources for a PhD. A plane ticket was bought by borrowing 600 USD to fly to China. Honestly, it was a very lovely experience in August 2014 to see a plane for the first time so close, where previously my experience of planes had been the sight of a small dot moving in the sky. I was neither sure that I would be granted a visa during the visa process nor was I sure whether plane officials would allow me to enter the plane. Perhaps I was too nervous and excited, what I can say! After reaching the Chinese University, there was only one choice: to work hard to prove my abilities. This is important for everyone, but particularly for those who have seen hardships of life. So, I tried my best to prove myself, with the hope of having a better future for myself and my family.

In 2016, my younger sister also won the same scholarship to join me and completed her PhD in 2020 at the young age of 26, placing her among the youngest Pakistani PhD degree holders. How much she struggled as a village girl or how much social pressure we faced to educate her is another long story to share. However, we remained committed to encouraging her to continue her study, even with limited resources and in a restricted environment.

Recently, my younger brother also got the opportunity to complete his PhD on a scholarship. It is true that my parents diverted all their small resources to education till our master's degrees, and I feel proud that we have better results after years of struggle even though some of our houses are still made out of mud and girls' education in my area is still a challenge. It is also true that without the scholarship support it would have been very hard for us to continue further study. I am hopeful and committed with my small resources to encourage youth to put them on an educational track, encourage them with small projects that I am sure will help them in one way or another to come out of poverty. Certainly, it is hard without the support of sincere academic friends like all of you, who always try to encourage and help me by not only creating opportunities for me and for my family but also for my village and area. This brief review of my life

may help clarify the role of education in poverty alleviation and may also reveal that educated children can find their way towards better lives irrespective of their background. But it also reveals that it was hard without external support to continue the battle for improvement. This is the reason why, whenever I am given the opportunity to speak at a national and international forum, I request and appeal to the more affluent people and countries to help poor people and countries to educate their children to have great future generations without poverty. It is only possible if the world makes joint global efforts in poverty eradication. I hope that future generations will find poverty only in museums, and I am very hopeful that this will happen. We academics and more affluent people and countries must play our role in poverty alleviation.

Three years ago, I met Professor Thomas in the city of The Hague, Netherlands, and we had a discussion on poverty and future projects. He told me about the Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP) global network in 22 countries and I proposed the idea that we should have an international journal to help academics be the voice of the poor, where researchers' evidence and experiences will explain poverty to people in the more affluent parts of the world. He agreed and proposed to name it "Journal Academics Stand Against Poverty". So, you may call Thomas and me the founding editors of Journal ASAP. However, it does not belong to us. Rather, it belongs to all academics and friends who are committed to contributing to poverty alleviation. I think that we academics, wherever we are around the globe, have a moral responsibility to play our role in poverty alleviation in one way or other. One way can be to bring scientific evidence, real-world examples, and policy suggestions to the attention of international agencies and NGOs, so they can feel how the poor are living, what their core problems are and how we can help them to work themselves out of poverty. It is hoped that all this practice will lead to more resources being devoted to poverty alleviation. We must not forget the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to severely hurt economies around the globe, with people losing jobs at very high rates. It is highly likely that pandemic poor will emerge, that is people who have fallen into poverty due to the pandemic. We must join hands to stand against poverty and act as fast as possible. I invite and appeal to academia to join the movement in standing against poverty to free our and future generations from this scourge.