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Troublemaker

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To see children working at a brick kiln, "It's not a human situation. It's people living in caves. Children do not know what love is, they do not know what paternal affection is. It's inexplicable. Children are naked, barefooted, foul mouthed. I do not know what more to tell. And in the carpet industry—my God. You are put to sit on this weaving loom at an age when your bones are not fully grown. You become physically incapacitated. Your legs do not develop normally. All that they want are those tender, nimble fingers."

Zafaryab Ahmed in his first address at Colby, January 11.

TROUBLEMAKER

PAKISTANI JOURNALIST ZAFARYAB AHMED,
WHO ESCAPED THE NOOSE IN HIS NATIVE
COUNTRY TO COME TO COLBY, REMINDS
STUDENTS THAT THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS IS FAR FROM WON.

BY STEPHEN COLLINS '74



Zafaryab Ahmed arrived at Colby on December 15, exhausted from 50 hours of travel, nursing a head cold and minus his luggage. Since he had neither a winter coat nor boots, his first stop in Maine was at a K-Mart.

The next day he explored the campus to meet people he knew only through e-mail. When he visited Eustis, he told a joke about a couple of communists and a talking parrot who gets stuffed in the deep freeze to keep him from insulting Leonid Brezhnev. When the parrot comes out of the freezer meekly mouthing the party line, Brezhnev says, "Now you see why we send troublemakers to Siberia."

The joke not only established that a serious man with a passionate commitment to human rights has a sparkling sense of humor, it also revealed that a self-acknowledged troublemaker arriving in the frozen north had serious questions about why his government wanted him to be there. Jailed in 1995 on sedition charges for his human-rights work, he was detained for more than four months this year before personal intervention by the prime minister permitted him to travel to Maine. When he arrived he acknowledged that his release was a face-saving compromise for the Pakistani establishment he had offended. By giving him a limited 90-day travel permit, they didn't have to execute him, they didn't have to exonerate him, and he might not come back to plague them.

Ahmed, a dissident Pakistani journalist and human rights gadfly, came to Colby for the first fellowship granted



by the Oak Institute for the Study of International Human Rights. He arrived during exams, and the departure of students and closing of dining halls for the holidays may have reinforced the Siberian motif. When students returned and he finally addressed the College on January 11, he described two traditions in Pakistan that help put his own situation in context. First, the heroic role of the dissident in Islamic Pakistani culture: "Those who choose to tread this path should be prepared to suffer, prepare to be branded as enemy agents and ridiculed as worthless" to bring attention to their cause. Second, "We have a tradition that comes from the Sufi saints of walking to the gallows with honor. And if it comes to that, I will walk to the gallows with honor."

The cause that Ahmed is willing to die for is rooted in an economic web that connects Americans' lust for inexpensive consumer goods—hand-knotted carpets and soccer balls among them—and the *peshgee* system, where employers make advance payments to workers who then

ZAFARYAB AHMED WAS IMPRISONED FOR HIS STANCE AGAINST CHILD LABOR. ABOVE, PARTICIPANTS IN LAST YEAR'S "GLOBAL MARCH AGAINST CHILD LABOR" TOOK THEIR PROTEST TO PAKISTAN. THE MARCH WAS ORGANIZED TO FOCUS ATTENTION ON THE WORLD'S ESTIMATED 250 MILLION CHILD LABORERS.



become bonded laborers. As he describes it, peasants go to work and end up borrowing money from their employer, or they send their children to work to try to pay off their debts. Members of the working class usually cannot read the debt records that employers keep and they end up owing more the longer they stay employed, Ahmed says. They may not leave their employer until their debt is paid, so they sink from bonded labor into virtual slavery. He described conditions in Pakistan's brick kilns, carpet factories and other industries as sub-human, exploiting

children who toil without families, without schools and without aspirations or hope for a better life.

"Children are a commodity; they are not treated as human beings," he said. "The way people have tried to understand it is according to the rules they use to understand their own societies, which are not applicable." In addresses to various groups in Maine he stressed the complicity of Western consumers and the responsibility that Americans share for the chronic human-rights abuses in developing countries. "It is not the producers in countries like Pakistan that are solely responsible; it is the entrepreneurs and buyers here in the West who also benefit from illegal labor practices," he said. "We have to decide who pays for what."

The government outlawed the *peshgee* system in 1992. Ahmed said at the time that it was naïve to expect many thousands of impoverished and illiterate children and adults to be freed from bonded indebtedness as a result. Two years later the government's ban had produced virtually no progress, and Ahmed was hired as a consultant to the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF), an organization dedicated to releasing and rehabilitating children from the brickyards and carpet factories. It was there that he met Iqbal Masih.

HELPING STUDENTS SEE MORE CLEARLY

Zafaryab Ahmed received the first annual fellowship of the Oak Institute for the Study of International Human Rights—a one-semester fellowship established to allow a front-line human-rights worker to take a sabbatical for research, writing, lecturing and teaching as a scholar-in-residence at Colby. For the inaugural fellowship, Ahmed was selected from 68 nominees, in part because he fit the preferred criteria of being involved in on-the-ground human rights work at some level of personal risk.

Though teaching is only one direction the fellowship can head, Ahmed is conducting a course, International Studies 298: Human Rights—Child Labor. Response on campus is enthusiastic; when 54 students registered he had to split the group and teach two sections. One section includes all of the Pakistani students at Colby, and discussions have been lively and, at times, contentious.

"Child labor is a very volatile topic—a topic where everyone has a strong opinion," said Aida Khan '01, who is from Karachi. Initially she felt compelled to challenge some of Ahmed's generalizations about Pakistan, "to balance out the view that everyone else in the class gets of Pakistan." She realized that this was a patriotic reflex, and she realized that her early attempts to give perspective to Pakistan's problems may have made it sound as if she favored child labor. "Maybe the first class you go in there with a closed mind because you're defensive," she said. But as freewheeling discussions have looked at various human-rights issues through the lenses of economics and history and politics, she has relaxed and opened up. "There's so much to learn," she said.

Asked if Ahmed's teachings at Colby would get him in trouble with the Pakistani government, Khan said, "I don't know if he *can* get into any more trouble." Ahmed's criticism, however, is not reserved for his own country's actions by any means; he is equally critical of U.S. policies on human-rights abuses around the world.

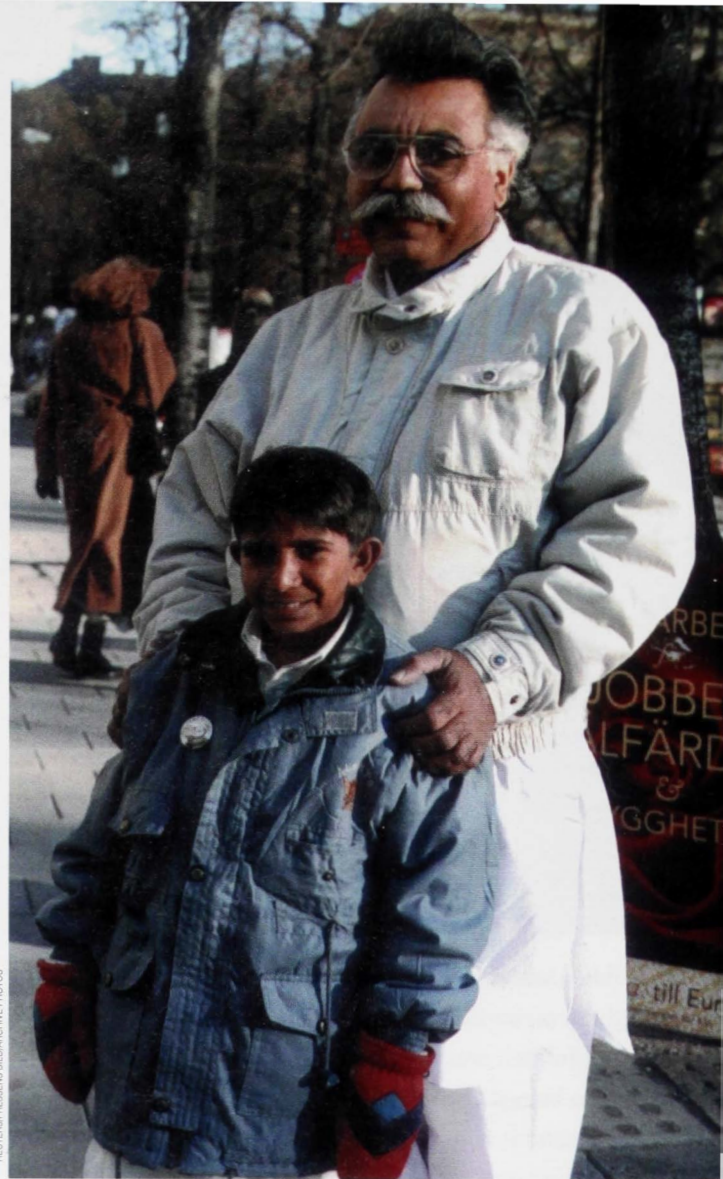
Besides teaching, Ahmed is busy with speaking engagements around Maine—at other colleges, in public schools and for various conferences. He was planning a Children's Rights Day program later in the semester.

The Oak Institute was established with a major endowment from the Oak Foundation. The deadline for nominations for next year's Oak fellow passed January 1, and a selection committee was reviewing dossiers to choose the second Oak Human Rights Fellow, who will be announced this spring. In addition to the fellowship, the institute supports human-rights programs on campus and scholarships for international students at Colby.

Iqbal was sold or “bonded” by his mother to a carpet manufacturer at the age of 4, when his tiny hands were his most valuable asset. At age 10, Iqbal escaped with the help of the BLLF and began a new career speaking at rallies, encouraging thousands of other children to follow his footsteps to freedom. He became an international celebrity and in 1994 won the Reebok Human Rights Youth in Action Award. He appeared on *60 Minutes* and in other Western media, and he dreamed of becoming a lawyer. Then, on Easter Sunday 1994 he was shot dead while riding a bicycle in his home village. Another youth confessed to the shooting but later recanted, and the BLLF contended that the carpet-industry “mafia” was responsible, angered by a drop in carpet exports that it attributed to Iqbal’s campaign.

Ahmed, who calls Iqbal “a valiant soldier for human rights,” pressed for an independent investigation of the boy’s death in his columns that appeared in Pakistan’s national news media. For his efforts he was branded “the Indian agent” and his cause was labeled the “Western, Jewish and Indian media campaign against Pakistan.” During the spring of 1995 he agreed in a phone call to travel to Rome to meet an Indian filmmaker who wanted to make a film based on Iqbal’s life. When Pakistani federal agents arrested him at his home on June 5, 1995, Ahmed knew that the BLLF phones had been tapped.

Zafayab Ahmed is no go-along-to-get-along middle-class intellectual. Pakistan is a society with monumental problems, and Ahmed is a self-proclaimed crusader and career troublemaker. He was born in 1953, six years after Pakistan gained independence from India. He is from Lahore, the capital of Pakistan’s Punjab province and the nation’s second-largest city, with more than five million residents. His country declared martial law when he was in the first grade and went to war with India when he was in junior high school. He got involved in politics, working with an aunt on behalf of Fatimah Jinnah, a local candidate who mounted a strong challenge against the military dictator-



REUTERS/PRESSSENS BILDARCHIVE PHOTOS

ship. By the time he was 15 and in college (equivalent to high school in the U.S. education system) he was active in the student movement that would grow into a major opposition movement in Pakistan. It was then, he says, that he began working for civil and human rights, and it was also when he was first beaten at a demonstration. “The next day the newspaper headline was, ‘Local student leader injured,’” he said. Asked if he was emboldened as a result, he replied, “No, scared. And my parents were furious.”

But they could not keep him home. And just as French and American students threatened revolution during the late 1960s, Pakistani students protested too. Ahmed marched with workers, fellow students, teachers and peasants protesting the authoritarian bureaucracy and civil rights violations. He grew accustomed to getting arrested with dozens of his comrades only to be released the same evening. Later, as an undergraduate student at Punjab University majoring in political theory and European

history, he decided that all political power structures corrupt people, and he gave up on the hierarchical student protest movement to become, in his own words, "an independent free-agent troublemaker." At about the same time, he says, many of his peers were graduating and sitting for the civil service examinations.

In the mid-1970s he earned his first master's degree, still at Punjab University, studying international relations and politics and Eastern and Western political thought. His thesis was on the mass protests in which he had participated during 1968-69. Though never a Maoist himself, he says Mao Zedong was popular in Pakistan because China supported Pakistan in the 1965 war against India and because Mao's "power to the people" slogans were seductive to a populace trying to shake free of an authoritarian regime. But his master's work ultimately led him to conclude that China's brand of socialism could not be replicated in another society; neither was Pakistan ripe for democracy. "We didn't understand our society historically and structurally," he said, "and any social change movement cannot succeed without an understanding of the social and political structure of the society." Slogans and convictions were not enough to bring meaningful reforms to his troubled country. Ahmed continued his studies at the University of Manchester in England, where he earned a second master's degree, in sociology.

He returned to his country to teach and had appointments at Aitchison College and the University of Agriculture at Faisalabad. But he got into disagreements over the content of his courses or his principles and moved on. In Karachi he helped establish a non-governmental organization for working class children and then moved into journalism, working for the English-language *Dawn*. He moved back to the Punjab province and eventually landed

at *Viewpoint*, where he took up the cause against children and families in bonded labor in the brick kiln industry. His work there was reprinted in international journals, but *Viewpoint* closed in the early 1990s for lack of funds.

When his public calls for an independent investigation of Iqbal Masih's murder and his intention to work on a film about the martyr landed him in the Lahore jail, he was adopted as a "Prisoner of Conscience" by Amnesty International. Amnesty and The Body Shop later named him one of 12 Defenders of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He spent two months in prison before local and international pressure prompted a sympathetic judge to order his release for medical reasons. Amnesty International still maintains a campaign to have the sedition charge dropped. "They don't have any evidence," Ahmed told his Colby audience. "But I'm the most dangerous kind of criminal," he said, the sense of humor in clear view. "I don't know what they will do. They can do anything. They can call me an American agent now."

Despite spending two months in the Lahore prison in Pakistan, despite possibly facing death by hanging on charges of treason and conspiracy, despite having been without gainful employment for all but eight months since his release from prison, Ahmed loves his home country and lives to improve it. "Somebody has to shout. Somebody has to be the bad boy," he said. "I am willing to go back. I will go back. I can't leave my country to them." Though he ignored the 90-day limit on travel that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arranged, Ahmed says he will return to Pakistan either when his trial begins or when it is clear that he will be more effective there in his crusade to help free South Asian children from the virtual slavery of the bonded labor system.

IQBAL MASIH, A TWELVE YEAR OLD WHO HAD ESCAPED THE HORRORS OF CHILD LABOR, IS PICTURED WITH ES HAN ULLAH KHAN, FOUNDER OF THE BONDED LABOUR LIBERATION FRONT. AHMED WORKED WITH BOTH AGAINST CHILD LABOR.