

# **DARKNESS ILLUMINED**

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I came back to Pakistan after doing my A' Levels from England where I had grown up. Visually impaired, there was no place where I could find audio books here, no centre, or foundation. My friends and family would read books out to me and I would record them. Thus I managed to graduate from college.

Intelligent, ambitious and hard working I wanted to take the CSS exam and join the Foreign Service. There was very little room for a visually impaired person in the Civil Service of Pakistan. There were no recorded books to prepare for the exam. There was also a rule barring people like myself from taking this exam. I wasn't looking for special privileges or quota, I wanted to apply on open merit. The amount of support I have received over the years from my friends, family and teachers, does not permit me to avail any special advantages. All I needed was a chance to prove myself.

I was determined.

I found out that the Masters in International Relations offered at the Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU) covered 400 marks worth of the CSS exam. If I did this degree, I would be at least partially prepared for the exam. And so I enrolled at the QAU, thinking this would be a short cut to my dream.

Dr Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema was the Head of the Department at the QAU. Supportive and practical, he told me I would have to read newspapers and journals to sit for the CSS exam. 'Who will read to you?' he asked. But he was convinced that the task was not beyond my ability. Sure enough, I topped among the 1000 students who sat for the exam.

Dr Cheema bent the rules and allowed me to sit for the CSS exam despite my disability, or perhaps because of it. But the system was bigger than his support or my talent.

The system was not on my side.

I now had a Masters degree in International Relations and I had no idea what to do with it. That is when I joined the Pakistan Foundation Fighting Blindness (PFFB). My vision has always been to integrate blind people into mainstream society by, for example, recording audio books; I want to help them accept their disability and then build on it.

I was happy doing my recordings at the PFFB. We did most of the recordings in Urdu since most blind children were somehow from deprived communities, for whom Urdu was more accessible than English would have been.

A boy from Dir changed that one fine day. Gul Zameen had lost his eyesight when he was in matric. He was adamant to study further in English and not in Urdu. Trusting my instinct that told me that the boy would go places, I gave the go-ahead for making recordings in English. Gul Zameen went on to do his Masters in English Literature. He is now a lecturer at the National University of Modern Languages.

Just as Dr Cheema tried to make a crack in the system to make a passage for me, I too changed the existing status quo by starting recordings in English.

I find immense satisfaction in doing the work that I do. I draw comfort from the memories of students who have benefited from PFFB audio recordings and are today going ahead with their lives; like Gul Zameen, like Aqil Sajjad who is doing his PhD in Particle Physics at Harvard University. When you lose the gift of sight, there is very little you can do, very few activities you can participate in. I wake up every morning with the hope that I can support the blind to lead as good a life as they did when they had their sight. In all of

God's creation there is some miracle and very few of us live up to that potential. I try to be a catalyst for that potential to be realized. The miracle is within each Gul Zameen and each Aqil Sajjad, waiting to be born...

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