**Individuals and society**

Kamila Hyat January 23, 2020

We hear every day about the misdeeds of people in society. We hear endlessly about corruption, notably by politicians. We hear about murders, honour killing, dacoits, rapes, street crime and much more.

Sometimes, in our minds, we tell ourselves that Pakistan is a country made up of people who have no values, no good within them and no compassion. We share these sentiments in discussions with others, describing our country as a place of chaos and mayhem and crime and evil.

Of course this is to a degree not untrue. But then it is also true of almost every other country around the world. Think of the school shootings in the US, the terrible massacre at Utoya island in Norway, the abduction and rape of small children around the world and so much more.

What we need to remember is that essentially we all suffer due to a lack of system and extremely poor governance. Despite the 2018 election campaign of change, we have not seen this appear. But despite the hardships they face, individuals act with enormous courage, enormous initiative and enormous good will directed towards others despite the lack of benefit to themselves again and again.

The story of Suleman Khan, the young man who in Quetta used his Land Rover to rescue over a hundred people trapped in snow on the highway and saved them from bitter cold, a lack of food and in the worst cases possible death with no signs of official help on the horizon, has been heard. He was helped only by his younger brother and he organized this effort superbly, removing first small children, the sick, the elderly and the unwell before going back for the others in his multiple visits to the highway with its line of stranded vehicles.

Suleman does not stand alone. There are others who have acted as he did. In Karachi, an elderly couple has begun to offer food daily to workers on their street who they see going without lunch in this time of high inflation. Recently, they cited their grief at not being able to feed all who stood in the growing line of the desperate and the hungry. They themselves say they have cut back on their own meals to feed others who have nothing.

There are the nurses who try desperately to pull a newborn baby out of the incubator that went up in flames at the National Institute of Child Health in Karachi after a malfunction in the machine. They did not succeed, but their efforts despite the risk to themselves can only be admired. There are other tales of immense heroism from all parts of the nation.

Early this month, we saw the sixth anniversary of the death of Aitzaz Hasan, the 16-year-old who in Hangu district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa threw himself on two suicide bombers as they tried to enter his school, resulting in their vests detonating and Aitzaz himself dying alongside the terrorists. His act saved the lives of some 700 children who were at that time attending school assembly. Subsequent reports say the bombers had intended to target them. Had they succeeded, the toll a few weeks earlier at the Army Public School in Peshawar would have been minuscule compared to the probable one in Hangu. Aitzaz Hasan featured on the cover of magazines at the time, but is remembered only rarely since then.

There are other individuals like these people. There are the rickshaw drivers who following a bomb blast have asked their passengers to disembark and rushed to rescue injured persons and convey them to hospital at their own cost and without reward. There are others who have dug for hours in the rubble of collapsed buildings to try and save those buried beneath them. There are the families who have taken homeless individuals into their houses to offer them shelter.

It is obvious there is plenty of compassion and also extreme courage in our country. The problem is that it does not appear to exist amongst our political leadership, and the reasons for this may be that almost all of them belong to a class group which cannot really associate with the ordinary people who live in our cities, towns and villages.

Those who can have spoken for their rights. Malala Yousafzai is one such person who from an underprivileged girl in one of the less developed parts of the country has become a world figure. But it does not need the recognition of the world to be a hero. It takes only commitment and a genuine feeling for others.

There are also other kinds of heroes, like those attempting to design equipment that can help the disabled, build filters which can provide safe water to families and launch other initiatives which they hope will benefit others. There are of course countless people who volunteer at schools, at hospitals, at other places, often quietly and without attempts to claim recognition for themselves.

The question for us is how we can expand the astonishing humanity of ordinary people and use it to build a nation that can offer more to all its citizens. To do so, we need also to deal with all that is truly wrong with our society. In some cases, this requires stronger policing and better implementation of laws. The scores of people who rush past the weak, the elderly and women on their own standing in queues designated for them at airport counters need to be stopped and fined.

The knowledge that such penalties exist and the discipline that years of such control brings is the reason why people do not do the same in other parts of the world. The same applies to traffic, to behaviour in public spaces and to many other walks of life.

Alongside this goes the question of education. Education should not mean simply scoring top grades in exams or making a way to institutes of higher learning. Yes, this is important. But is it more important than building a sense of caring and kindness towards others? Is it more important than developing the ethics we have lost over the years?

At schools and colleges across the country, even very young children do not hesitate to find ways to cheat the system in order to gain those few extra marks. For college admissions, giant institutions have sprung up which help the more privileged do precisely the same.

This lack of ethics is a major problem. So is the lack of kindness at schools. The corporal punishment witnessed even at elite places of learning despite the ban on this simply brutalizes people. Persons like Suleman Khan escape this brutalization through the will of their personality and quite possibly the upbringing imparted to them.

More even than admiration, they need to be emulated and this task can best be begun within households even with very small children and then extend to higher levels at schools, at workplaces and at other centres of influence.

The writer is a freelancecolumnist and formernewspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com