

The tormenting memory of Nawabpur

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ON October 8, several hundred activists and concerned citizens, including parliamentarians, gathered in front of Parliament House in Islamabad, to protest against the government's inaction with regard to the so-called honour killings and increasing violence against women in the country. This rally follows several previous ones on similar issues and staged in the hope that our elected representatives realize the gravity of the situation and take action to outlaw honour killings.

In the name of honour, to defend a family, clan or tribe's honour, many injustices and cruelties have been perpetrated against thousands of women in Pakistan's history. Just two years ago, we saw a panchayat in the small village of Meerwala in southern Punjab order an innocent woman to be raped by several men as punishment for an alleged affair that one of her brother committed with a woman from another tribe. Once the story got out, it made international headlines. All hell broke loose, at least initially, with the Supreme Court calling it the "most heinous crime of 21st century Pakistan" and ordering an anti-terrorism court to hear the case.

Six men were eventually sentenced to death while eight were acquitted. However, their defence lawyers moved the high court and their appeal is currently pending. For its part, the government gave

law Mohammad Akbar to a pulp, stripped them naked by tearing their clothes ... and then herded them towards the main street, waving their arms, pistols, iron-mounted lathis and other weapons victoriously... When the women tried to hide their bodies with their hands, they (the men) prodded them with sticks or just hit them. When they tried to hide their faces, they pulled their hair so that they raised their faces."

Beaten beyond recognition, Akbar died six days later from his injuries. Talking to the writer of the article, the chief of the Sheikhana clan at that time and chairman of the union council of Nawabpur, Malik Mohammad Baksh, said that the action of the men (he called them "boys") from his clan was understandable given Akbar's shenanigans because of which they were "terribly angry". He also said that though they were "terribly angry," reports of their "misdeed

impact, or to put it more precisely, the male-dominated politics of Pakistan hasn't allowed them to do anything of significance. One or two members of parliament who do speak quite vociferously on women's issues, such as Kashmala Tariq of the PML or Sherry Rehman of the PPP (Parliamentarians) are either shouted down (as the National Assembly speaker did recently with Ms Tariq), subjected to a thoroughly unwarranted attack on their personal character or are thought to be too westernized and elitist to be of any consequence (as is the case with Ms Rehman).

In fact, a privilege motion was moved recently against Kashmala Tariq by a member of her own party, the PML, after she said, in response to a reporter's question that she wasn't made a minister because she did not have the right surname or connections. On one occasion

she also received comments on her looks from some male members of the National Assembly during parliamentary proceedings, giving the impression that perhaps some of our MNAs had never seen a female face before.

Pretty much the same thing happens at the provincial level. In the case of Punjab, some of the PML women MPAs have said that they often find themselves sidelined during the proceedings or aren't given enough time or opportunity to speak in a debate. As for the role of women in the Balochistan or NWFP assemblies, the less said the better, especially in the latter where they prefer to be silent much of the time and let their erstwhile male colleagues in the MMA take control of parliamentary proceedings.

Twenty years after the horrific events of Nawabpur, where women were stripped of their modesty and forced to walk through the streets, we have achieved little in the way of social reform. Our intellectuals have taken a backseat, while our politicians continue with the traditions of a gender-biased and patriarchal society, doing little to contain violence against women that shows no signs of abating.

part, the government gave the woman, Mukhtar Mai Rs 500,000 and it is believed that aid offers came in from overseas and from private sources as well. She decided that with the money she would build a school in her village. According to a report a few months ago, her school is yet to be completed.

The Supreme Court was right in calling it the most heinous crime seen by Pakistanis in this century. This century yes, but what was the most heinous crime the country witnessed during the previous century, specifically when General Ziaul Haq was in power, a time when the country was exposed to a veritable ocean of arms and drugs and when infamous laws like the Hudood and the Qisas and Diyat ordinances were enacted, perhaps a crime against Pakistan itself.

But if one were to single out an incident and call it the equivalent of the Meerwala tragedy, it would have to be the horrific events that took place in Nawabpur, not far from Meerwala, 20 years ago.

Two women and a nine-year-old girl, were paraded naked on March 31, 1984, through the small *galis* of Nawabpur, a small, sleepy town some 10 kilometres from Multan.

The women's brother-in-law, Akbar, was a local carpenter, who had earned a name for himself by becoming skilled at his craft. The man, according to one account which appeared three weeks after the incident in this newspaper's weekly magazine, was that he had been having affairs with women from the town's leading feudal Sheikhana clan. As such things are "settled" in a feudal/tribal context, several dozen men of the clan made their way to Akbar's house, severely beat him up and then did the same to his two sisters-in-law and nine-year-old sister.

Apparently, not content with their bestiality, they then proceeded to drag the two women and girl to the streets, naked. According to the report, "Talking to two dead women" (April 20, 1984) by Zafar Samdani: "A group of about 40-50 revenge-drunk men had entered their (the women's house), beat up their brother-in-

law had been grossly exaggerated". One can only be astonished by the audacity of this man who probably saw it fit to deny or justify the parading of women naked at gunpoint, because one of their relatives allegedly had an affair or affairs with female relatives of the men who came to take revenge.

A military court heard the case and after the incident an amendment (through the Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance 1984 — Section 354 A) was inserted in the Pakistan Penal Code. It increased the maximum sentence from two years in jail to capital punishment for anyone who forced a woman to strip naked in public. Despite that, the men tried in the Nawabpur case were not given capital punishment or even life sentence.

In fact, two months later they were all released on bail. Akbar's shattered and broken family left the village fearing that the released men might return and persecute them. Quite ironically, a fortnight after the Nawabpur incident, a military court in a separate case sentenced a man and a woman to 20 lashes each after finding them guilty of committing adultery.

It is 20 years on and one wonders whether anything has really changed as far as the misogynist trends in Pakistani society are concerned. Meerwala, which happened just two years ago, would perhaps tell us that not much has changed. In fact, the same year, one witnessed several cases of young teenage girls being "gifted" to men to settle tribal disputes. Earlier this year, a young girl in interior Sindh was shot dead by male relatives after she dared to dance during a family wedding ceremony. Perhaps one difference is that when the Nawabpur incident took place the kind of press and television coverage that Meerwala received did not exist.

Other than that, the military man in charge today at least professes to holding views that are more enlightened than those of General Zia. And yes, the National Assembly and the Senate have several dozen female legislators now. But they haven't really made much of an

If they try and protest against this bias, they are deemed by the men as being too troublesome or noisy. So, while we have lots of women legislators, the male-dominated system doesn't let them do anything at all. In fact, its inherent anti-women attitude is geared towards denying them an effective voice/role in parliament just as it happens throughout the rest of society.

Besides, the role of our so-called intellectuals, who should be more vocal in their demands for social reform, especially in areas such as these that involve the equality of the sexes and human dignity, has yet to materialize.

This is probably why, even 20 years after Nawabpur and two years after Meerwala, various governments continue to procrastinate over legislation against crimes committed in the name of honour. The fact that the print and electronic media report such things with greater alacrity and regularity than before is a positive sign and is aimed at raising public awareness. But then, who doesn't know that ordering a woman to be raped for a crime committed by her brother, or parading women naked in public is reprehensible and can be done only by beasts masquerading as humans? Clearly, increased media reporting of such happenings and greater awareness levels have not persuaded any government — not even one led by a self-professed enlightened moderate — to enact legislation to tilt the balance back, however slightly, in favour of women.

In the past year alone, senior government functionaries, up to the ministerial level, have said at least a dozen times that a law will be "enacted soon". The other day it was reported that the National Assembly's standing committee on law and human rights had finally approved a draft of a proposed law on this issue. If the bill is approved by both houses, and a law is enacted, perhaps a significant change will be witnessed since the abominable events of Nawabpur shook this country 20 years ago.

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