

'The price of honour'

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Human Rights

MARCH 31 marked the chehlum of the martyrs of Karbala and was, as such, a holy and solemn day of prayer and contemplation for us all. But three young men of Ratodero city (Larkana district) chose to mark this holy day by luring an innocent, clueless 14-year-old girl, who had come to the Syed's Imambargah to participate in religious rituals, to an empty house where they gang-raped her and mercilessly beat her.

Ratodero is not just part of my constituency but I regard it as my hometown. As soon as I heard of this awful incident, I contacted local police officers and demanded that they arrest the culprits forthwith and charge them for their crime.

It became apparent from the beginning that the police were reluctant to take action against the culprits because they belonged to an influential family. The culprits happen to be nephews of a retired judge who, before being appointed a judge by Benazir Bhutto when she was prime minister, was twice elected MPA on a PPP ticket in 1988 and 1990, from Ratodero.

Almost a week went by and not only had the culprits not been arrested, but the police had yet to present the girl before a judge to record her statement, knowing that once she implicated those involved in this crime in her statement, the case would have to be challaned under the Hudood Ordinance and then there would be no way for the boys to escape the maximum penalty prescribed by law.

A strange situation arose whereby the victim was being held prisoner while the culprits roamed free. The culprits finally surrendered to the police voluntarily almost a week later once intermediaries had made arrangements for the settlement of the issue in a jirga.

Since the culprits belong to a family closely associated with the PPP, the whole party machinery immediately went into frantic motion to somehow save them from their much deserved punishment. Instead of letting the law take its course, they brought the girl's parents, who are weak and poor people, under enormous pressure to agree to settle this matter in a jirga rather than in a court of law. They filled their ears with horror stories about possible bodily harm to them and their already beleaguered daughter and enticed them with offers of generous financial compensation if they agreed to a jirga and consented to let the culprits off the hook in court.

the PPP, organized a town meeting under the guise of a local social welfare organization. The meeting was headed by the same nationalist leader who had come to plead on the culprits' behalf and many town elders of Ratodero participated.

This town meeting took the form of a jirga as they arrived at the joint decision that the boys' family should pay Rs 600,000 to the girl's parents as a fine for their crime, in return for which the complainant would forsake all recourse to any legal remedy and would withdraw the case. The representative of our party was the sole voice of dissent, placing on record his opposition not only to the verdict but the jirga as well.

I feel ashamed to be part of a community whose elders saw it fit to pronounce such a dishonourable verdict. There is neither honour nor valour in protecting rapists and child molesters. In my view these elders are as guilty as the perpetrators of the crime for letting the criminals off the hook.

What is Rs 600,000? What is six million? Is there a price for rape or child molestation? Everyone has children in their homes. Would these so-called wise men

Is there a price for rape or child molestation? Everyone has children in their homes. Would these so-called wise men who sat in a jirga care to tell us what price they would put on the honour of their own children? Or is it only the poor and harassed victims who have a price for their honour? Have we sunk to such depths of moral depravity that we are willing to auction off the innocence and honour of a poor child for a fistful of rupees?

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Nawab Akbar Bugti, even though they had labelled him a 'warlord'. Though the Sui rape case remains unresolved, I salute the Baloch for taking an honourable and principled stand on the issue.

I am not preaching bloodshed in Sindh, but when one finds oneself amongst people who value political expediency and financial gain more than the pitiful plight of a 14-year-old victim of gang rape, then the stench of opportunism, greed and a criminal disregard for the well being of the less privileged and less fortunate must sicken any reasonable person to the very core of his being.

I have, in the past, written and spoken out in favour of jirgas in some instances only when lives are at stake and violence threatens to erupt if the dispute is not resolved with haste and in an effective manner to the satisfaction of both parties. But jirgas work only when both parties are willing to have their dispute thus settled. You cannot drag a party into a jirga against their will by coercing and intimidating them to abandon all recourse to a judicial remedy if legal justice is what the victim wants. There can be no case for a jirga or town meeting in the Ratodero rape case. The law must be allowed to take its course.

We, the people of Sindh, are the scions of an ancient civilization that is enriched with a refined and sophisticated culture and heritage. Our history spans back over more than five millennia to the pre-Moenjodaro days. When people in Europe were living in caves and wearing crude animal skins, Moenjodaro boasted intricate and sophisticated public drainage systems, paved streets, elaborate and grand public bath houses and an advanced economy based on agriculture and trade. But that was 5,000 years ago; 5,000 years is a long time. It takes no more than five minutes for a man to fall. The tragic rape case is symptomatic of our fall as a society.

Our response to all perceived injustices perpetrated against us by outsiders is lightning quick. We hold outsiders responsible for stealing our water, robbing us of our earned national income and depriving us of the sovereignty and autonomy promised to us in the Pakistan Resolution. But we choose to turn a blind eye to all injustices we perpetrate on each other. In our convoluted view, rape, murder, plunder, theft and everything the civilized world regards to be punishable crimes are no more than an unfortunate inconvenience that can be fixed by plastering over it with money.

If money is the solution to all our problems, then instead of protesting against

A number of PPP MNAs and MPAs did their best to influence and intimidate the girl's parents in order to save the criminals by steering the matter towards a jirga rather than letting the law take its course.

Not being satisfied with putting direct pressure on the girl's family, the culprits enlisted the help of a Sindhi nationalist leader from Ratodero, whom they sent to plead with me to stop pushing the authorities to punish the criminals under the law and resolve the matter quietly in a jirga instead. What amazed me is that while these intermediaries came to plead for leniency for the disgraced boys, not a soul came to plead the case of the poor 14-year-old girl.

Since one would have nothing to do with a disgraceful jirga in this matter, the intermediaries, with the full backing of the influential family concerned and

price they would put on the honour of their own children? Or is it only poor and harassed victims who have a price for their honour? This incident should be an eye opener for us as a nation. Have we sunk to such depths of moral depravity that we are willing and eager to auction off the innocence and honour of a poor child for a fistful of rupees and gag her with threats merely to save the skins of rapists and child molesters? What has happened to our sense of right and wrong? What has happened to our sense of honour and dignity? What use could the victimized girl possibly have for money now when her life has been ruined?

Not so long ago a similar incident in Sui set the whole of Balochistan ablaze and resulted in bloodshed in Dera Bugti. Eventually the federal government was compelled to enter into a dialogue with

lems, then instead of protesting against Punjab and demanding our rights from the centre, why don't we ask for financial compensation? If honour can be sold then why not water? Take away our water but give us money. Take away our rights but slip a few rupees in our pockets and we will be happy. If money can restore honour then may be it also has the magical qualities of quenching thirst and pacifying or diluting the desire to live as equal citizens with some dignity.

If this is our creed, then it is hardly surprising that we have been reduced to doormats whom no one takes seriously. We ourselves have initiated the process of our own moral and social collapse that is bound to lead to our doom and we have no right to blame anyone else for it. I can say it no better than Shakespeare: "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars but in ourselves that we are underlings." ■