

State of human rights in Pakistan

The struggle of an enlightened people alone can provide them freedom, social equality and economic betterment, writes AZIZ-UD-DIN AHMAD

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Little did Milovan Djilas know when he entitled his autobiography *Land Without Justice* that the appellation coined by him for Yugoslavia in 1958 could aptly fit a number of other countries as well. The high sounding claims we in Pakistan are fond of making regarding our being the proud inheritors of a glorious culture that promoted the dignity of man and gave special rights to women are negated by what we encounter around us every day. The high level of intolerance in contemporary Pakistani society, the dishonesty rampant among public representatives, the indifference of the ruling elite to the plight of the common man, the efforts by succeeding governments to devise ways to keep the press under the thumb, the treatment meted out to women, children and minorities by society at large, and also resulting from discriminatory laws enacted to gain cheap popularity, the widespread illiteracy, squalor and underdevelopment, all point to great backwardness, not only in the social and economic spheres but also in the moral realm.

The recently published report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) for the year 1997 substantiates this perception already shared by a number of people in the country. The facts gathered by the authors of the report only make the picture more vivid. The hollowness of the assurances advanced by the government regarding gradual improvement in the law and order situation is amply exposed by the fact that in Karachi alone intolerance and cruelty took a toll of 856 people, including 104 women and 21 children in 1997. 441 deaths occurred from sniper firing, which has become the normal way of settling scores among the two rival groups of the MQM in the city. Killings by police numbered 63 in encounters and 22 in custody. Vendetta, that hallmark of primitive and tribal societies, is now a common thing in the industrialized and, compared to the rest of the country, highly educated Karachi. But is the situation any different in Punjab? Sectarian violence, that

one thought characterized only medieval societies, continues unabated here despite the anti-terrorism laws that were brought in despite opposition from the higher judiciary as the right panacea for the malady. Sectarian violence was responsible for the death of 200 persons. Overall, 350 persons died in the country in police encounters, including 120 policemen. More than 200 persons died in police custody, majority of them presumably from torture.

The administration of justice in Pakistan continues to have a primitive colouring as is shown by the state of the jails and the condition of their inmates. Not taking into account the private detention centers established by some feudals in the rural areas and occasionally by police officers in cities, the 75 authorised prison houses of the country keep 82,000 inmates while these have a capacity for only 34,000. The conditions here cannot be conducive to reforming the prisoners. Of the denizens of the jails, 80% are still under trial, for the reason that the judicial system moves extremely slowly. In Punjab, there are 3,110 child prisoners, the majority of them still under trial. Many of the offenders who show up from hardened criminals but as this is not always the case, they transform themselves into patent offenders. In 27 Punjab gaols, 885 women prisoners also, a large number of them under Hadood laws.

The treatment meted out to women in Pakistan is illustrated graphically in the rape claims eight victims every 24 hours. Of the reported murders of women, 57 per cent at the hands of relatives, which is a sign of honour, which

areas with lower literacy rates. Death by stove-burst remained a common ruse in the cities, the Lahore press alone reporting an average of four stove deaths a week. The primitive custom of *karo kari* in Sindh claimed, according to police figures, which are apparently conservative, the lives of more than 150 persons, a majority of them women. At least two women were publicly done to death during the year, one by shooting in the tribal area of Khyber, another by stoning in a village in Punjab.

The way the press has to bear the brunt of intolerance can be gauged from the following facts. At least two journalists were killed, and eight shot at and wounded for their professional work. In addition, three were picked out for beating and torture, while an uncounted number of others were indiscriminately manhandled during raids on their offices. Seven regional newspapers remained a special target of nationalist groups, intolerant of critical opinion, while a national English daily was attacked by the vigilantes of the ruling party.

The collective performance of all our Messiahs, both civil and military, in the field of education over the last half century is illustrated by the following figures. 59 million people of over 10 years of age were still illiterate in 1997, that meant half the male and close to three quarters of the total female population of the country. In Punjab, which is regarded as a relatively more prosperous unit of the Federation, 32 per cent of the primary schools had no building, 39 per cent had only one room facility, 79 per cent lacked one or more of the basic needs like water, toilet facilities, etc. Higher education continues to suffer on account of the lack of qualified teachers who go abroad or join

more lucrative pursuits inside the country, as well as on account of paucity of funds at the disposal of the universities.

Health, sanitation and housing for the common man have not been among the priorities of successive governments. In the year under review, there was one doctor for 2,500 people; one dentist for 50,000; one nurse for 6-thousand; and one hospital bed for 15,000 population. 645 of the population (90 million people) lived without elementary sanitation; 70 per cent of rural and 50 per cent of the urban population had no access to safe drinking water. A child dies every two minutes and a childbearing mother every 25 minutes. Hepatitis-B carried away 57 patients daily, or 20,000 during the year. That the scourge of T.B. is re-emerging as a major health hazard in the country can be gathered from the fact that 25,000 persons died of it in 1997. HIV-positive cases were estimated between 50,000 and 80,000. 45 million people were living in slums or squatter settlements called *kachi abadis*. Just one of the numerous factors that adds to health hazards is the way waste is disposed of in the country. While 55,000 tonnes of waste is produced daily, 40 per cent of it was deposited either in open fields or dumped in drains, the rivers and *nullahs* and, in the case of Karachi, partly in the Arabian Sea.

There is a tendency in certain quarters in Pakistan to deny that there is child labour in the country or that women or minorities are maltreated. Things do not disappear because certain people decide to deny their existence, and in an age characterized by a revolution in information technology, nothing happening in society on a large scale can be kept hidden from people for long. Those responsible for denying rights, to people

would feel encouraged if they find that there are apologists around. What is required, therefore, is to recognise the facts as they are and try to remove the causes responsible for them.

Unpopular rulers have often made use of the cultural backwardness in society to prolong their rule. They have often presented themselves as the protectors of the faith in order to justify their continuing in power. Both Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Ziaul Haq resorted to the stratagem. They made laws that were detrimental to minorities in order to cater to the ignorant and the prejudiced in society. The unpopular rulers desirous of survival have thus created some of the human rights problems that society faces today. The greed, the dishonesty, and the desire to enjoy absolute power have led them to squander national resources that could have been diverted to education, health or other sectors of social development, and to trample upon basic freedoms to silence their critics.

The political elite has not been interested in spreading enlightenment. It thinks it stands to benefit from social divisions on an ethnic or communal basis. Instead of helping to create awareness in people, it has tried to add to the residue of backwardness that exists in society through the state media under its control and by patronising regressive forces. Only a widespread awareness among people about their rights, which it is the duty of the institutions of civil society to help create, can unite the masses and force the rulers to grant them those rights. While jointly struggling for their rights, they are bound to shed disagreements and prejudices, and form a cohesive nation, that transcends differences of faith and ethnicity, as was envisaged by the Founding Father of the country. A joint struggle based on consciousness of rights is bound to create in them love and respect for one another. The struggle of an enlightened people alone can provide them freedom, social equality and economic betterment.