

A catalyst for change?

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Human Rights

WHY did civil society in Pakistan vociferously protest the flogging of a 17-year old girl in a public square in Swat and not when many other atrocities were committed against women in recent times?

The demonstrations and protests began when this barbaric incident that was filmed on a cellphone came to light last week. It seemed to have touched a raw nerve and received wide publicity in the electronic and print media and on the Internet making an impact that went beyond expectations.

Now there are counter allegations that the video was fake and meant to undermine the February peace deal. The police produced before the Supreme Court a statement from Chand Bibi, the girl who was said to have been flogged in Kabbal district of Swat, denying that the incident ever took place. What has become more significant today is the fact that the incident triggered off protests and they still continue.

Worse brutalities have been visited upon women in our society in the past without stirring the conscience of the nation. Less than a year ago, there were reports that three teenaged girls, along with two chaperones, were buried alive in the Jafarabad district of Balochistan for the 'crime' of attempting to marry men of their choice. Subsequently a senator from that province had the temerity to justify the incident as something that fell within the bounds of 'tribal customs'. He was later rewarded with a specially created ministerial portfolio in the cabinet much to the anger of women. But there was no outcry of the kind witnessed against the Swat flogging incident.

Earlier, in September 2007, two women were beheaded in Bannu in the NWFP by religious extremists posing as the custodians of public morals. The men had arbitrarily pronounced the women guilty of running a brothel and 'executed' them for their 'sins'.

politics was left as a secular matter to the whims of the political/military leadership.

Religious parties did not receive the public backing they now lay claim to. The moderate psyche of the people contributed to the failure of the Jamaat-Islami, the JUI and their like to garner collectively more than five per cent of the votes in any polls. In the absence of general elections at regular intervals until 1970, the myth of the invincibility of religious parties was successfully perpetuated.

Ziaul Haq adopted the strategy of exploiting religion — resorting to coercion where necessary — for his political empowerment. This transformed the socio-cultural scene in Pakistan and encouraged the growth of religiosity. Yet there is no way of knowing what people expect in terms of the nitty-gritty when leaders speak of Sharia being introduced as the law of the land. Didn't the people of Swat vote overwhelmingly for the ANP, an avowedly secular party in the last elections?

As a result political leaders have played to the piper's tune when vying for public support. They have sought to establish their Islamic credentials. It didn't seem to matter how deep in corruption they were steeped or how 'un-Islamic' their lifestyle so long as they observed religious rituals with attendant publicity. The voters never really cared.

When problems did arise, as they inevitably did in a religion with numerous *fiqhs*, solutions were found by making compromises on a case-by-case basis. Shias were granted exemption from zakat when they protested by blocking the capital in 1979. Women's lobbies were pacified by introducing amendments to the Hudood Ordinances through the Protection of Women Act. Where the contender — like the Ahmadi community — lacked clout, a policy of suppression was adopted.

The Swat flogging video has brought people face to face with the reality of the emergence of extremism in the name of Islam. It has brought to the surface the paradoxes that had until now

Swat itself has been the scene of so much violence — victims have also included women — for the last 18 months. Nearly 131 girls' schools have been torched or bombed. Even today my contact in Mingora tells me that female attendance in schools is poor and fear pervades the air. Women have been forced to confine themselves to their homes and thousands have been forced to flee. Monday's killing in Mansehra of three women working for an NGO promoting education sends a chilling message to parents. Beware!

Then why this display of pent-up public rage this time? The fact is that the controversial video graphically presented to a national viewership scenes depicting the brutal violation of human dignity with the claim of the perpetrators that it was decreed by Islam. Could this prove to be the much needed catalyst to galvanise the silent majority in Pakistan to make its voice heard against terrorism and Talibanisation?

In the absence of reliable opinion surveys and the reluctance of people to express their views candidly on issues related to Islam it may be difficult to assess public opinion about the role of religion in matters of the state. The prevailing impression in the pre-Zia years was that the common man was happy to keep his religious beliefs within the confines of his personal life while

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been swept under the carpet for expediency's sake. The video has forced difficult choices on the people compelling them to at least think about issues that affect them very personally.

If the chains of fear that had silenced the people have been broken we can assume that the matter will not be forgotten soon. People have articulated their shock and are asking questions forcing the Taliban to prevaricate with regard to the incident. Apart from the militants and the extremist religious lobby, which makes its routine appearance on the electronic media, no one wants to justify flogging in the name of Islam.

History is replete with examples of the 'one incident' that proved to be the turning point. In Pakistan itself the first sentencing under the Hudood Ordinances of a couple led to the creation of the Women's Action Forum in 1981. Since then, there has been no turning back of the tide that pushed the issue of women's rights onto the national agenda.

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