

# Wisecracks and dances

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Big things are happening all over the world. The world marked International Women's Day, and mae us all think about the perennial enslavement of half of humanity. The Middle East has seen more bloodshed in the last week than even that area has seen for a long time. A SAARC ministerial meeting in Islamabad focused attention on the problems of this troubled region. The Taliban have re-emerged in force, indicating that peace is not going to come to Afghanistan soon. IRSA failed once again to solve the knotty issue of water distribution in a time of drought.

And what was Lahore's contribution to these earthshaking events? The Lahore Police made a major contribution to fighting crime by raiding all the theatres and arresting wisecracking actors and dancing actresses. Houses were being robbed, cars snatched, pockets picked, people murdered, but the Lahore Police was busy with more important things: ensuring the morals of the people were not spoilt.

And it is not Lahore alone that is to be affected. Up there with the rest of them on the list of important subjects for the deliberations of the Federal Cabinet last week, along with approval of two major press laws and important economic decisions, was the personal attention of the Paki-in-Chief to obscene fashion shows.

It's funny. I thought, after the January 12 speech in which true moderate Islam was expounded with such impressive eloquence, that semi-nude fashion shows, obscene wisecracks and vulgar dances were now to be the most significant manifestations of true

Islam. But it seems I'm wrong.

It seems that moderate, tolerant and modern Islam, and extremist, jihadi and medieval Islam have the same thing in common. The ordinary guy is not supposed to enjoy himself. But moderate Islam supports Basant, doesn't it? Ah, but that's because the elite also enjoys Basant night. If you had seen the Pajeros and BMWs outside some prime Basant sites, disgorging men in suits and women dressed for a wedding, you would realise that Basant is tolerated because the upper crust also enjoys it.

But the elite doesn't go to theatres. It just watches mujras arranged by some fellow member of the elite. Well, at least the cafeterias at the theatres only serve soft drinks. At these big parties, they have full-fledged bars. But those parties are not going to be raided, are they?

But perhaps what we have here is a case of overkill. Somehow, I can't help being reminded of the story told by a very senior bureaucrat, who served a stint as DC in a rural Sindh district, and was later Federal Secretary of the Sports, Tourism and Culture Ministry. He received a letter from a foreign sports body, which was organizing a world conference on traditional wrestling. He hazily remembered a legendary local wrestler from his days as a DC, who was a leading exponent of Sindhi-style kushti (apparently, it

is similar to, but not the same, as our own Punjabi kushti), and thought it would be a good idea to honour that gentleman by sending him to represent the country, not as a sportsman, because he would now be quite old, but as a spokesman and theoretician.

So he asked his staff to ask the Sindh government to find out if the wrestler was alive, and living in the same place, and then forgot about it. A couple of mornings later, he was awoken by a servant, who told him that a police

party from Sindh was waiting outside, with the message that they had got his m u j r i m . Amazed, and a little worried, because he couldn't for the life of him think of what mujrim he had asked for, he hurried outside.

And there in the verandah, still disheveled from travel, was a police party consisting of a sub-inspector and some armed constables. As soon as they saw him, the SI shoved a bedraggled, handcuffed, old fellow, face bruised and cut, clothes torn and bloodspotted, with the proud announcement, "Here's your mujrim, saab."

It was the wrestler. Sure he later went on to the conference, but the experience of being dragged from his home, beaten up, handcuffed and taken to Islamabad by a police party, couldn't have been pleasant, and must have cast a shadow over the pride of representing his country. But the Sec-

retary's order to his staff, conveyed to the concerned Sindh government department, passed on to the DC, to the SDM, to the SHO, probably got garbled in transmission.

Perhaps someone took the Governor's orders a little too seriously on the theatre business. Maybe all he asked was, to find out if there was any truth in the report he had had of obscene wisecracks and vulgar dances. And it got garbled in the chain of transmission down the line. And yet we still hear talk of successes in establishing good governance.

I think it important (for my own mental peace) to give She Whose Word Is Law, the last word this week. She wasn't happy to see the Paki-in-Chief's brilliant diplomatic initiative, which had Vajpayee rolling over in agony and L.K. Advani (Secretary General, Pervez Musharraf Fan Club) tearing his remaining hairs out, offering a relaxation if only the Indians pulled back from the border. She Whose Word Is Law said it didn't seem right, to be begging so fawningly for peace, from a government whose hands were fresh with the blood of so many Muslims in Gujarat.

But what does she know? It might have been International Women's Day, but everyone knows that women don't understand matters of high state affairs, and the niceties of diplomacy and the rest of the mumbojumbo that we men have evolved, to fool others partially, but ourselves entirely, that what we do matters. And of course she hasn't yet understood the golden principle of Pakistan-First (and the rest may go you-know-where).

