**The Jaranwala tragedy**

Raashid Wali Janjua

Thursday, Aug 24, 2023

What happened in Jaranwala on August 16 is an example of all that is wrong with our extremist attitude towards the weak and vulnerable. The incident becomes even more tragic when one realizes how the area was once home to heroes like Ahmad Khan Kharal and Bhagat Singh. Singh also wrote about the glory of interfaith harmony in a paper called ‘Kirti’.

The August 16 events are indescribable; the helpless Christian community looked on in disbelief as an enraged mob set churches and their homes on fire. It was however good to see Justice Qazi Faez Isa visit the Christian colony on August 18 and console the grief-stricken community.

During his visit, when he asked a police officer about the details of the incident and the exact time when the tragedy occurred, the officer struggled to reply. This indicates the helplessness of the state machinery when it comes to dealing with extremism.

Many people were quick to compare the events with religious intolerance in India. There is one positive distinction between the Jaranwala attack on the Christian minority and the Manipur violence and the Gujarat pogrom in India; and that is the state’s attitude. In India, the state was an active abettor of the violence whereas in Pakistan it was a helpless spectator. We need to question why, despite the best intentions of the state regarding minority communities, such attacks keep happening.

We have to confront this dark reality and analyze why our police and district administration fail to prevent such acts. The police’s action is always inadequate when they are handling violent mobs that target members of minority communities.

The 2021 lynching of a Sri Lankan manager, Priyantha Kumara, is still fresh in people’s memory. The gory incident happened in broad daylight while the police remained a silent spectator. Our extremism issue has its roots in the misuse of the blasphemy law and the use of religion for political benefits. Low prosecution rates of cases involving religious violence are a consequence of the lackadaisical attitude of the police and the state.

We need to pause and ask ourselves why minorities are being attacked in a country which follows a religion that teaches its followers to respect the customs, places of worship and culture of other faiths. The religion clearly tells people to protect the places of worship of minorities and help those who fight for the rights of the minorities.

Christianity is accepted as one of the true Abrahamic religions by Islam. Our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) chose Abyssinia as the sanctuary after migration from Makkah where a Christian king gave refuge to Muslims and refused to hand them over to the infidels of Makkah.

The Holy Prophet’s (pbuh) Prophethood was predicted by a Christian monk Buhaira whereas the first revelation on the Prophet (pbuh0 was validated by a Christian holy man Warqa bin Nofil. All true Muslims remember the covenant of the Prophet (pbuh) with the Christians preserved to this day at the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The covenant stated that Christians’ places of worship would never be attacked and that Christian judges, monks and worshippers would not be subjected to taxes of any kind and that the covenant with Christians was till the day of judgement.

On the political front, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s speech at the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 echoes the same pluralistic ethos. The Quaid said, “you are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed-that has nothing to do with the business of the state.”

The Christian community has contributed significantly towards the national cause in all spheres. Be it the heroics of Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry and Squadron Leader Mervyn Middlecoat on the battlefield or the glorious tenure of one of the best jurists of the country Justice AR Cornelius, the Christian community has given its best to the country.

The pluralistic heritage of the Indus Valley civilization was taken over by sectarianism in the 70s and 80s when the state made a steady retreat in the face of clerical pressure to enact laws that could be used by extremists against minorities.

It is the state’s responsibility to protect minority communities from extremism, and religious scholars are responsible for educating people about what the religion says about minorities. If both groups fail to fulfil their responsibilities, society will be left at the mercy of the seething rage of people who can be swayed away by any charlatan masquerading as a learned scholar.

The Objectives Resolution that forms part of Pakistan’s constitution provides for the protection of religious freedoms for all minorities. Article 295A criminalizes the “deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan”.

It is time the state did something about the extremism monster. Mere ‘thoughts and prayers’ will not provide any relief to minorities. The nation should show solidarity with the Jaranwala Christians and pledge to protect the minorities from future depredations by the crazed extremists.

Clerics have to play a crucial part in this endeavour along with the media and academia. One thing that can play a big role in dealing with this wave of extremism is ensuring that perpetrators of such violence are given strict punishments.

The writer is director at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute. He can be reached at: rwjanj@hotmail.com