[**Lessons from slavery**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690429/lessons-from-slavery)

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LESS than 200 years or so prior, the institution of slavery was completely legal all across the earth — if you were a free person, you could go to an open market, and much like common chattel, buy or sell other human beings, acquire proprietary ownership over their entire being, their mind and body and flesh, their liberty and livelihood, their progeny, their very sense of self and whatever else not.

Everyone considered it to be morally acceptable. It was the ‘natural order’ of things, and thus, virtually every organised religion or belief system treated it, not as something forbidden or sinful, but as a fact of life, a harsh but fatalistic reality of predestination. Consequently, none ventured so far as to abolish the institution, or even explicitly condemn it for that matter. Instead, they contented themselves with its regulation, and so, granted its subjects spiritual equality, encouraged their kind treatment, provided them with limited rights and turned their manumission into the pinnacles of piety.

These days, in the starkest of contrasts, slavery is considered deeply and egregiously immoral, and therefore, a rather obvious criminal act, like an ignoble by-product of antiquity, long banished from existence. Every international human rights instrument declares it to be prohibited without exception, as I imagine do most constitutions or criminal codes around the world. Article 11 of our very own Constitution plainly declares that it is both “non-existent” and “forbidden” and that “no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form”.

Perspectives remain divided over the exact reasons for this monumental shift in the ethical compass of humankind. Most stress upon the sheer persuasive force behind the moral logic of the abolitionist movements that swept through Europe and the Americas by the end of the 18th and most of the 19th century. Others say that the very imagining of such an ‘abolition’ became possible only due to certain technological and industrial advancements, which rendered the slave trade unprofitable, and eventually, economically obsolete. Others still point out that the hefty yoke of servitude may have been impossible to discard without the fiery slave revolts that wracked the Atlantic’s peculiarly grotesque plantations — like the Haitian Revolution, for instance.

What lessons should we, as humankind, extract from our uncomfortable relationship with slavery?

Whatever complex interaction of events became the precise cause of this radical transformation, it nonetheless raises profound juristic questions, especially for a theocratic legal order. While a secular state can easily dismiss slavery as a moral lapse of judgement on part of its forebearers, any state committed to governance via theologically inspired laws cannot do the same, for in doing so, it may run the risk of passing judgement against its own creed. Law and morality are forever interlinked, and while everything immoral might not necessarily be illegal, everything illegal must necessarily be immoral. Nothing else justifies its prohibition. This being the case, how could an institution once deemed to have the legal sanction of divine authority come to be subverted in its totality?

History testifies that the material needed for this metamorphosis lay in the very sacred canons that had long held slavery aloft as morally innocuous. Where literalism failed to sufficiently satisfy their quest for justice, people turned to exegetical exercises aimed at excavating the inner, hidden meanings behind their texts. No wonder then that many of the fiercest champions of abolition were in fact deeply religious. Just as Christian activists took some of the most radical steps to oppose the slave trade in the Western hemisphere, in Muslim-majority areas, a similar battle was waged by a diverse set of reformers — Syed Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali, Muhammad Abduh, Syed Chirag Ali, to name but a few.

Ultimately, the abolitionist school of thought triumphed, and although back then it may have been aided by colonial forces, post-independence, slavery did not see a resurrection (despite the vocal insistence of some conservative figures). Today, no one comes to the defence of this institution, and those who do, are invariably ostracised, shunned and branded as extremists. Its universal prohibition is seen as desirable, in the collective human interest, and thus, wholly legitimate.

This stunning changeover creates a related and rather obvious query. If an institution once believed to be endorsed as legal by divine decree can transmogrify in this manner, what other practices or customs deemed to enjoy similar sanction may be treated as such? Religious codes (or, rather, to be more accurate, certain interpretations of these codes) are said to have endorsed many things, which, today, come into sharp conflict with contemporary articulations of human rights — the assumptions of patriarchy, discrimination on the basis of characteristics now considered worthy of protection, child marriage, blood money, laws against blasphemy and apostasy, inhumane or degrading modes of punishment and so on. Understanding the global reversal in attitudes to slavery may hold the key to countering the rigidity of moral stances rooted in traditionalism.

Now then, on a larger canvas, what lessons should we, as humankind, extract from our uncomfortable relationship with slavery? Perhaps there is really only one takeaway — that wherever we may be and whenever we may be, our morality will remain dictated by social norms, some so deeply entrenched that we may never give them a second thought. As time churns and realities shift, old inequities will often be revealed. As soon as their inherent injustice becomes apparent, it becomes morally incumbent upon us to fight for their eradication.

If this is indeed true, then morality is always in a constant state of flux, ever-shifting and ever-changing. The fulcrum upon which our ethical universe tilts must rest not on moral stasis but moral evolution. Far from arrogance, what this should engender in anyone is deep humility. As we walk from the past into the future, the present must be introspective. It must take, first and foremost, an inward glance. Who knows what baggage we too may one day be held guilty of carrying along?

In the hinterlands of absolute rights and absolute wrongs, humanity may yet find its bridge. Come, let us hope to gather there one day.

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