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**The PM on rape: the licence no one has**

This government’s rape law mirrors the government’s concern to battle the heinous crime of rape. However, the prime minister’s recent statement linking the increase in rape to the rise of obscenity, vulgarity and indecency implies a complete lack of understanding of what encourages rape in a society. Hence his statement, like similar statements made in the past by others in authority, has been widely condemned and an apology has been demanded.

Was this reaction unjustified? In response to this question several inter-related observations, related to social dynamics, to authority and responsibility, to religion, to justice, to our own realities and history etc come to mind. The following may be noteworthy:

One, that words are really the drawing board and blueprint of what our subsequent outlook and actions are in our personal and our collective existence. Hence, the more powerful and consequential position one is in, the more one needs to be mindful of the words we utter. In fact even before what we say, the foundational aspect of our existence is what we think. People's thoughts are borne of several elements – ranging from family, friends, teachers, and now perhaps the biggest: social media and the internet. From thoughts we graduate to an outlook.

Our outlook in life is a combination of two elements – a weave that pulls our experiences together and the framework that interprets our experiences and designs the weave. The framework is defined by overlapping factors: believers get it from religion, others from ideologies and some just develop it on the basis of experiential wisdom; the bohemian’s framework is just her/his own feelings and sentiments. So, there's a whole lot of diversity in how we look at life, how we think, how we speak and how we act.

If you are in a position of authority, the spoken word is of huge consequence. It begins from you influencing those who look up to you or support you, who report to you, those over whom you exercise authority. Your outlook influences policy choices and, above all, is a message to society and to policymakers. So there is no getting away from how critical the spoken word is and how much thought must go into it. Our Beloved Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) life, his words, his acute sensitivity to those, his family, his Companions, his enemies and all those around him, testify to the significance of the spoken word.

It is no surprise therefore that for the believers, if you turn to the Quran it is constantly reiterating Allah’s Command to think and to speak with great care lest we damage and hurt those who are affected by our words. The Holy Quran and the Prophet’s (pbuh) teachings give no licence to people in authority to speak at will, or even out of deep concern, without clearly factoring in the complex realities of their context and without being mindful of the consequences of the spoken word for individuals and for collective society. A mind appreciative of the complexity of the human soul, and of society and its management, can appreciate the power of the spoken word. The Holy Quran, alongside the study of the Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) life, is the first Grand Induction of the human soul and mind into fully appreciating this reality.

Three, following from this Grand Induction, especially those with authority who aspire like our prime minister to work for a state that is like the Riyasat-e-Madina, the discipline of weighing spoken words for integrity, logic and impact is a must. Words reach out to the core of human existence, the human soul, which directs human mind and action. Passion and good intentions cannot justify loosely spoken words.

The prime minister’s comment about increasing vulgarity leading to an increase in rape perhaps points to a general fact that human behaviour is influenced by multiple factors. However, whatever the multiple factors may be, the key question in this case that ought to be raised by the PM is about the identity and the responsibility of the perpetrator of such a beastly crime. In the context of those speaking from the position of authority – policymakers, politicians and those responsible for creating the collective deterrent against rape – it is important to not confuse or dilute the issue by identifying a broad spectrum of factors that contribute to rape. Instead, the culprit has to be identified, and assigned complete agency and responsibility for the crime.

This leads us to the absolute need for Prime Minister Imran Khan to clearly state that the criminal in this case is the man who committed the crime of rape and not articulate any statement that would deflect from the criminal’s total responsibility. It is important to note that it is this government that has come up with a tough law which clearly puts the onus of rape on the rapist. This again takes us to the more fundamental question of the spoken word and the need for those in authority to speak with great care so as not to send mixed signals.

On the question of the responsibility of the rapist and what impacts the behaviour of the rapist, it is instructive to turn to what Islam has emphasised, through the text of the Holy Quran and the teaching and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). On numerous occasions, including in the Prophet Muhammad ‘s Last Sermon, it was repeatedly emphasised that men must also be of a model character to ensure justice and equality in society.

Of course, character for both men and women – all individuals – in society has been emphasised in the Quran but in the case of men it’s centrality was critical given the vile anti-women customs – including female infanticide – pre-Islam Arabia was saddled with.

The reality of rape, as the PM himself recalled not too long ago, takes place also within the four walls of the home, sadly by family members and others who have access to women and children. There is enough documentation to establish that the crime of rape is also a function largely of the male view of his own power and of the view he has of women. It is that which needs to be addressed, to be tackled – a fact that our Beloved Prophet (pbuh) repeatedly appreciated through his words and actions. In all mention of rape in public space by people in position of authority this factor must be emphasized and must be integral.

The prime minister’s words must be more carefully and sensitively crafted, mirroring, as he wishes, the ideals of Riyasat-e-Madina while also factoring in the realities of Pakistan's context.

Indeed we must all use words very carefully. At best, they mirror the best that the human race is blessed with – in terms of sensitivity, comprehension and commitment to human goodness. At worst, misspoken words are the beasts that devour the inherent goodness of the human soul.

The prime minister must explain, and apologise for, his spoken words on rape.

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