**A society under stress**

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While we know about the level of political dichotomy in the country and the hatred that has crept up between political parties and their supporters with the use of the most abusive language at times on social media and even on television, we need to think about the other strains which are tearing our society apart.

Pakistan was once a society which was strongly united – during the 40s and 50s – and for the longest time, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and other groups celebrated events together and maintained good relations. This somewhat ended under the General Ziaul Haq era when hatred seeped into schools, offices and other places, with discriminatory laws coming in against specific minority groups, and a general feeling of difference was created.

We see the impact of this hatred today. Children from minority groups attending missionary schools say that they do not have Muslim friends. This is a loss to them and the Muslim children who see less diversity in their society and little understanding of the groups they live with. At one charitable school run for children from all communities, we have parents complaining that Muslim children should not be exposed to the slightly different Christian culture which they believe will have a negative effect on their children’s morality.

Again, in the 1980s, such feelings were non-existent. All school-going children, regardless of their religion, would play together, and there was little sense of difference with birthday parties attended by both groups – Christians and Muslims – and there was no consciousness of cultural differences which did exist but were widely accepted. Today this has changed.

Even adult Christians say that they have few Muslim friends and generally socialize only within their community. Even though Pakistan’s minority groups make up over two per cent of the population, such differences are even more unfortunate especially when we consider the fact that Christians and Muslims in Punjab live in close proximity to each other. In Sindh, Hindus and Muslims have enjoyed excellent relations in Tharparkar and other places where they lived together for the longest time. However, this has started to change as many Hindu families are trying to flee the country which, in the words of its founder, was created for all religious groups and intended as a place where all of them were free to follow their religions and live in harmony. While we criticize India frequently for the terrible events that are taking place there and the genocide against Indian Muslims, we should also look within although we are fortunate that we have not yet reached the same hatred levels as are seen in India, with the government promoting anti-Muslim sentiments under the BJP.

But we still witness murder and lynching cases of various kinds, with Christians burnt to death on allegations of blasphemy without any trial, young Hindu girls forcibly converted and married off to far older Muslim men, and Sikhs made to feel uncomfortable and during Ramazan and Muharam asked not to lay out the feasts they traditionally offered to their Muslim brethren, and in case of violence in some areas, they are forced to pay ‘jazia’ and impelled to move out of the area or even leave the country. This of course is Pakistan’s loss and the loss of future generations. The more diversity we have the richer our country will be.

We must also recognize that the same kind of division exists on the basis of ethnicity with divisions between the Baloch and Punjabi communities and other groups. A ban placed on Balochi and Sindhi nationalist websites during the Musharraf era, which has continued into the present age, does not help matters. Even if we do not agree with their views, we should allow these people to express what they feel and how they think. If this is not allowed, the differences will keep growing as will hatred and the feeling of divide and difference.

India is a glaring example of what hatred can do. We have also seen the horrors of a hate-filled society in our country. We must act against the growing division and build a more united society. A few children attending some Christian schools where Muslims are also admitted say that they are encouraged to be friends with everyone, and anyone pointing out any kind of differences with another group is called up for disciplinary action. This is commendable. These students say that they are generally able to make friends with Muslims as well as Christians, regardless of their religion. This is also true of other schools, but divisions and differences do exist. In some colleges, Hindu girls are isolated completely because of their religion with only a few conscious teachers and students attempting to help them out of their isolation.

These barriers need to be brought down. This includes the barriers based on ethnicity and those based on religion. Both are dangerous and can have an extremely adverse impact on the country. We are already seeing this impact as groups such as the TLP spread more hatred.

We welcome the efforts made to do so at some schools, including missionary schools set up in Youhanabad and other areas. But more effort and action is required. No act of violence against any person on the basis of his or her religion or ethnicity should be tolerated. Yet we hear of such actions even at elite education institutions of higher learning both in Punjab and other places. It is time to think about our country, to bring it together and to fight against the political hatred which has swept over us and the hatred which divides other groups and keeps them apart from each other.

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