

The death of two little girls

Society & Social Problems
Dawn 17.3.04

By Zubeida Mustafa

ABOUT four weeks ago, two little girls — Hajra (8) and Sassi (5) — went missing in Murad Memon Goth on the outskirts of Karachi. They had gone to gather firewood for their homes. Two days later their mutilated bodies were recovered from the premises of a veterinary hospital in the possession of the Gadap police station.

This heinous crime, which sent a shiver down most people's spine, was not the first one of its kind in this megacity which has become so unsafe and insecure not just for our children but for all of us as well.

What is shocking is that the incident failed to overly shock the people of Karachi, so desensitized have they become to violence. The kidnapping and killing seemed such a routine affair that no paper reported it until the bodies were found two days later and the people of Memon Goth attacked the police station in anger. The attack on the thana, rather than the killings, made news.

There was not much of a public reaction. True, some voices of protest were raised by a few party leaders, including those in the government, such as the Muttahida that holds the portfolio of the Sindh home department. The statements that were issued were muted and more of a formality than a heart-felt expression of anguish. They made no impact in Islamabad's corridors of power.

No quick investigations by an independent body and prompt justice were ordered. The chief minister of Sindh sent a letter to the registrar of the Sindh High Court urging him to order a judicial enquiry. But nothing came of it and it was left to the police, who were believed to be involved in the crime, to probe into the incident.

After a week of reporting the reaction of the NGOs and opposition leaders who had, to their satisfaction,

for human life and liberty depends on the social status and political standing of the person whose life and liberty are at stake. If he is a 'nobody' and has no social or political influence, he will find himself isolated with no one to stand up for him. He would depart unwept and unsung.

The so-called restoration of democracy in Pakistan has paradoxically only brought greater evils in its wake because this is not the kind of democracy the people had struggled for. The system as it has emerged has not empowered the voters. Instead, it has polarized them sharply. As a result they find that the political institutions which exist do not allow their voice to be heard. The structures of power remain intact and the leaders who manage to get voted into office have their own priorities which do not necessarily coincide with the interests of their electorate. If this state of affairs has led to public despair and cynicism, can you really blame the people?

Seemingly, there is more freedom today. You have a lively press, independent television channels and the Internet which allow a free exchange of views and information. With the disengagement of the government from many sectors of governance and public life, civil society has created more space for itself. Decentralization has also allowed private institutions to play a bigger role in the affairs of the country.

Then why should this impression be created that the public's voice is not heard by those who wield power? How is it possible for the murderers of Hajra and Sassi to get away unaccounted for? The fact is that the decentralization and deregulation of state power has actually enhanced the authority of the government and made it even less accountable to the people.

The institutions which traditionally strengthen government control over society and enhance its authority — the armed forces and the police are two important ones — have become

Killing 'unwanted' babies

A REPORT published in this newspaper on the pathetic state of newborns recovered from garbage dumps all over Karachi by the Edhi Foundation is yet another indication of the utterly callous attitude and spirit that have come to characterize a large part of our society. For no fault of their own, infants are left to die a grisly death in garbage dumps where most either succumb to hunger or fall prey to stray animals and reptiles, while some are strangled at birth and their bodies dumped in open sewers. Last year, the foundation collected some 153 decomposed bodies around Karachi — the nationwide figures being 281 — about 98 per cent of which were female newborns. According to Edhi sources, in what appears to be the start of another dreadful trend, four bodies from among at least 33 recovered so far this year bore the marks of killing by hanging, burning and injuries to the head.

What is equally tragic is that there seems to be utter

Dawn 26.3.04
Society & Social Problems
apathy in political, social and intellectual circles over this horrendous practice of abandoning and killing unwanted babies. Just how many times has the matter been debated in parliament or at public forums? Have any steps been taken to actively dissuade indigent parents or couples in an illicit relationship from resorting to this brutal step? While many 'unwanted' babies are left in cradles installed outside Edhi centres around the country, surely this is not the real solution to a problem that could become deep-rooted as time goes by. Efforts have to be made to sensitize society to the heinous nature of this crime even if it means revising societal mores and offending conservative elements, who are opposed to protection and upbringing of children born out of wedlock. Unless we take up the issue in real earnest and evolve a set of humane principles to deal with it, we will forever be guilty of robbing the most innocent in our midst of the gift of life.

213

ers who had, to their satisfaction, found a new stick to beat the government with, the press lost interest and turned to other issues of a sensational nature which keep propping up in abundance. Sure enough, the murder of a People's Party MPA a week later became the focus of attention of the political parties and provided plenty of fuel to the opposition in its attack against the government, which the murder of two little girls with no political clout could ever have done.

This incident reminded many columnists of the murder of another eight-year-old girl 26 years ago in Karachi. When writing about Hajra and Sassi, many of them recalled the case of Tarannum Aziz (8), for that was the name of the other girl who was kidnapped on February 5, 1978 and then raped and murdered. And how did the public react then? With shock and shame.

The day Tarannum's body was found, there was an outburst of public anger. The next day the city closed down on a call for a strike. The day after that General Ziaul Haq flew into the city in the quiet of the night for "an on-the-spot briefing on the law and order situation in Karachi, particularly the investigation into the kidnapping and murder of an eight-year-old child". Small wonder the police got activated and within a week five suspects were rounded up and a case lodged against them.

All this seems unbelievable. How could the public protest — quite peaceful by and large — have produced such a powerful impact? Wasn't the country under martial law in 1978? Wasn't political activity banned? Wasn't the press tightly shackled? Weren't the student unions banned? Besides there was no MQM to mobilize Karachi's population and enforce a strike by driving terror in the hearts of people. There was no Women's Action Forum either to make people aware of the hateful trend of violence against women. There was no HRCF to demand the fundamental rights of life, liberty and security for the people, including children like Tarannum Aziz.

Then how would one explain this phenomenon? The fact is that our society is regressing as deep fragmentation sets in. Even the basic values of decency and respect for human life, which at one time held people of all beliefs and orientations together, are no more shared by all. Today respect

What is shocking is that the incident failed to shock the people of Karachi. It seemed such a routine affair that no paper reported it until the bodies were found two days later and the people of the area attacked the police station in anger. The attack on the thana, rather than the killings, made news.

stronger. Furthermore, their responsibilities in many spheres have been reduced while their financial resources and powers have been increased, thus giving them greater freedom of action. Since the police were apparently involved in the murder of the two little girls, the fact that they have not been adequately taken to task underscores their privilege and power.

This is the new system which is taking shape. The politicians who are a part of this system do not question it. Their struggle is aimed at gaining a share in the power arrangement. They already enjoy many privileges which they use to their personal advantage while these are denied to the common man. But can this go on indefinitely? Very soon the deprived ones will feel resentful enough to react strongly. The exposure they get to other societies through the media and the information they gather creates awareness in them to help them realize the excesses committed against them.

The people can also see for themselves that the democracy we have doesn't protect them from these heinous crimes, nor provide them the means to articulate their grievances. As a result, protest will emerge as the only political tool. This is not something that augurs well for our society for it will encourage violence, chaos and anarchy.