

These 'codes of honour'

Society & Social Problems

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HAVING explored notions of honour in general terms last Sunday, we now begin with the finding that there is no single, identifiable Pakistani code of honour, conceived as a set of values and attitudes distinct from the nation's professed moral code.

What about the provinces? No amount of recall enables me to say that, beyond conduct related to male and female sexuality, Punjabis have a code of honour. I would not be surprised if it transpired that the same held for the Sindhis and Balochs. Let me hasten to add that this is not a lack for which the people concerned have to be regretful or apologetic.

It so happens, however, that the Pakhtuns in the tribal belt of the NWFP do have such a code, known as Pakhtunwali. At the level of profession, Pakhtun morality is essentially the same as it is elsewhere in the country. In actual practice, several acts that the preacher may consider wicked and sinful are taken in stride. There is, for instance, nothing wrong with killing the violator of one's person, name, shame, or property.

T.L. Pennell, a Christian missionary physician, who once worked in Bannu, found that the Pakhtun regarded robbery as "more or less praiseworthy, according to the skill and daring shown in its perpetration, and to the success in the subsequent evasion of pursuit."

circumstances and the guest's station. A poor Pakhtun may offer only bread and tea. A prosperous man will kill a chicken or, if the guest is a dignitary, a sheep and provide a lavish feast. In any case, the host, even if a malik or a khan, will sit with the guest and dish out the meat to him with his own hands.

As a corollary of "melmastia," the Pakhtun admit to the obligation of granting refuge and protection to those who seek it, often those on the run to evade law-enforcement agencies. Protecting the man, who has been given sanctuary, from his pursuers is a matter of high honour, which may be the reason why our government forces are having such difficulty in getting hold of the Al Qaeda and Taliban guys hiding in South Waziristan.

The obligation to protect and preserve the honour of one's women is an essential part of the Pakhtun code. Many of the murders com-

society nobody forgives a sister or daughter who marries without the consent of her parents or near relatives."

In April 2000, General Musharraf unequivocally denounced honour killings, saying that they had "no place in our religion or law." Yet, he has done nothing to stop them. Parliament, on its part, has passed no bill that would treat honour killing as plain murder. Even a resolution that did no more than condemn the practice failed in the Senate. A few months ago, a minister in the Sindh government defended it as part of a venerable tribal tradition. In a weird, possibly sarcastic, statement Mumtaz Bhutto has argued that if, in a country where truth, honesty, faithfulness, and hard work are lacking, a man must die because he acts to preserve his honour and self-respect, nothing is "left for him to live for."

Before going further, we should pause to note that honour killing is not practiced uniformly in all sections of society. It happens more often in rural than in urban areas. Second, it is less common in educated and modernized, affluent urban classes than in the lower middle class. Young men and women in cities go to college and university together, meet outside the classroom, have tea, and talk. Their parents don't breathe down their necks. Some of these young people become romantically involved with one another, and "love marriages" are on the increase.

That honour killings are an abomination goes without saying. We must ask why the practice exists. To begin with, the idea of honour was rooted in a man's ability to maintain his possessions against an outsider's trespasses or violations. Somewhere during the evolution of cultures, woman began to be seen and treated as man's possession.

and to the success in the subsequent evasion of pursuit." He was also given to bluffing which made him appear more formidable than he might actually be. A bit of cheating in business transactions, false accusations of crime against an adversary, false testimony in court or before the jirga were, and probably still are, acceptable in Pakhtun culture (as they are in others).

Let us now consider Pakhtunwali. It seems to consist of four elements, the foremost of them being "badal" or revenge. The obligation to take revenge falls not only upon the man who has been wronged but also on his family or tribe. The resulting feud may go on for generations. The wrong to be avenged may be real or fancied. Perceived wrongs relate more often to transgressions against one's person, standing, money, land and women.

The idea of revenge is taken by Pakhtun women as seriously as by men. Consider the following account provided by Mr Pennell: A man was once murdered in Bannu. Witnesses to the crime, fearing the wealth and power of the killer's family, would not testify against him, and the judge had to acquit him. The victim's sister, present in the court, wailed: "Am I to have no justice from the Sarkar?" "Bring me witnesses and I will convict," said the judge. "Very well, I must find my own way," answered the sister and left. A few days later she confronted her brother's killer in the local bazaar and shot him dead.

Closely related to "badal" is "nanawati". When a man wishes to end a feud because he sees only his utter ruin in its continuance, he may go to his adversary's home, with his woman unveiled and carrying the Quran on their heads, bearing gifts (usually two sheep or goat), throw himself at the latter's mercy and ask for peace. In this circumstance the stronger party is expected to call off the feud. Note that "nanawati" is ultimate humiliation and resort to it is not made often.

The next commandment in Pakhtunwali is "melmastia," meaning the obligation to extend hospitality (food and shelter) to those who have come to one's door and request it (including possibly even an enemy). The scale of hospitality will depend upon the host's cir-

mitted in the NWFP, as in the other provinces, are instigated by allegations of unchaste conduct on the part of women.

Pakhtunwali may represent the Pakhtun's distinguishing commitments, but there is nothing here that outsiders will rush to embrace. Killing as a way of avenging an insult or an injury is a medieval custom. Modern men sue the aggressor in a court of law. Imposition of extreme humiliation upon a defeated and exhausted adversary before agreeing to let go of him is not a particularly praiseworthy practice. Hospitality within one's means is a fine idea, but it should be noted that both hospitality and grant of sanctuary are intended to maintain the host's prestige; they are not simply acts of kindness.

In cases of sexual waywardness, the Pakhtun code of honour entitles a man to kill both parties to the illicit affair. This is "honour killing." An agency at the United Nations has received reports of such killings from some 20 countries, but the larger number of them comes from Brazil, Jordan, Pakistan, and Yemen. In Pakistan, several hundred women are killed each year for honour-related reasons. The penalty is not limited to adulteresses; it may befall women who seek divorce, and those who have merely chatted with a stranger.

The law disapproves of honour killings in most of the countries where they are common. But in some of them the same law makes allowances for "grave provocation" as an extenuating circumstance that allows acquittal or a reduced sentence. The police and judges are inclined to take a lenient view of the offence. In a recent case the Supreme Court of Brazil dismissed the plea of extenuating circumstance as being irrelevant. But the lower courts in that country have continued to acquit men accused of killing women for alleged loss of honour.

In 1998, a sessions court in Punjab sentenced two men to life imprisonment because they had killed their sister for having married a man of her choice. On appeal the Lahore High Court reduced their sentence to 18 months (already served), saying that "in our

are on the increase.

Note also that relatives of the man involved in an illicit relationship, if he has escaped the wrath of the woman's family, will not normally cast him away. "Boys will be boys," they are likely to say, and they will do what they can to defend and protect him.

That honour killings are an abomination goes without saying. We must ask why the practice exists. To begin with, the idea of honour was rooted in a man's ability to maintain his possessions against an outsider's trespasses or violations. Somewhere during the evolution of cultures, woman began to be seen and treated as man's possession. His property right resided in her body. She could hire herself out as a nurse to another man's children without prejudice to her "owner's" property right. But she would damage herself as an object, lose her value, and thus inflict a loss upon her keeper (father or husband) if she developed illicit relations with this other man. If she had lost her value, she was not worth keeping any more, and she might as well lose her life.

The way to stop honour killing does not go through courts of law. Shaheen Sardar Ali, chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women, stated in January 2001 that the practice would not go away until men stopped thinking of women as their property. As Pakistani women become more educated and economically self-sufficient, they will repudiate the notion of any man's property right in their persons. Their drive has some considerable distance to go. The persistence of honour killing is a part of the ongoing contest between mediaevalism and modernity in Pakistan.

The authors of our concepts of honour could have included commitment to patriotism, duty, probity, sanctity of covenants, and defence of the downtrodden in their concerns. What a pity that they got so consumed by the subject of woman's chastity that they could go no further.

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