

# Poverty and ostentation

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IT is understandable if the price of an essential item rises because it happens to be in short supply or that its demand has suddenly or excessively gone up. But what is not understandable is that when a commodity is in abundance and its export demands forbiddingly large subsidies, its price should abruptly fall instead of rising. But that is what has happened in case of sugar.

Owing to its abundance the sugar mills have postponed the start of crushing season to November 21, a month later. And yet the price of sugar went up by Rs. 2 per kilo to Rs. 24 in the open market in Karachi due to price manipulation or the success of sugar cartels in pushing up prices. That was the Ramazan syndrome as well for the traders. Rightly or wrongly, the prices should be pushed up; if there is no shortage one should be created.

The Economic Coordination Committee of the Cabinet reacted promptly and ordered the Trading Corporation of Pakistan to release 50,000 tonnes from stocks, including 20,000 tonnes for Karachi. Now the utility stores talk of selling sugar at Rs. 20 per kilo. They may have enough sugar, but there are not enough utility stores in the city or the country.

Of course, as usual the sugar mill owners are blaming the wholesalers, stockists and the

old federal ordinance of 2000 has been reactivated. Still one question arises. Can a family set up several shamianas in their large compound and entertain any number of guests, arguing they are members of the larger family? If that is practised that will be a violation of the spirit of the new judgment emphasizing austerity and banishing ostentation. The rules which the government may make to implement the new judgment must take care of that.

The fact is that some wedding ceremonies have become so extravagant that invites receive not an invitation card but a whole invitation booklet of eight to ten pages. And yet the marriages break down in weeks, if not within days.

The judgment described several of the additional ceremonies accompanying the wedding as non-Islamic and acquired from

murders. The supporters of women who are appalled by such crimes are far from satisfied with the new law with two many loopholes which can negate the law. The problem in Pakistan, as in many other developing countries, is each family has too many children. And the parents get them married early, particularly in the rural areas. Dowry and expensive wedding ceremonies in each case places heavy burden on the family.

They have to borrow heavily for that purpose at high interest rates. In the rural areas that could mean 100 per cent interest, and the family ending up as bonded labour. Because of the dowry system many of the fathers in rural areas sell their daughter even at an early age. Female children within families are often neglected and ill-cared. As a result if we have a male population of 77.38 million, female population is 71.65 million — a gap of 5.73 million.

India's Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen some years ago startled India by talking of the missing 30 million Indians — its women. They have been lost through the same process of neglect which the girls in poor families in Pakistan suffer and vanish from our census figures. Now instead of letting them die due to undernourishment, some fathers sell off their daughters early to old men.

The Supreme Court says the rich should give up their spendthrift ways in marriages

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The Supreme Court wants the government and society to popularise holding of wedding ceremonies in mosques. If couples in the west can take pride in solemnizing their weddings in churches, and even princes and princesses go there for this purpose, Muslims can also perform these ceremonies in mosques so that the poor and the middle class families spend far less on the marriages. It is also essential to forbid lavish illuminations at weddings.

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wholesalers, stockists and the retailers while retailers are blaming the sugar mill owners and stockists. It is a truly exploitative system that we have, and Ramazan is the best season for over-pricing eatables. In fact, judging by the glossy advertisement the austere month of abstinence has become a "Ramazan festival" where the affluent should have their Iftari and Sehri at swanky restaurants with foreign brand names.

On the government's part, in an effort to increase the supply of food items the ECC has not only banned export of Urea but also decided to import it at a heavy subsidy. The imported urea will be sold at Rs. 450 for 40 kg which could mean a subsidy of Rs. 700. The TCP now says that as a result of such subsidy it has incurred a staggering deficit of Rs. 10 billion which the government has to make up quick before it could bear more such burdens in these difficult economic times.

In such an environment it is proper that the Supreme Court has banned serving of meals at wedding ceremonies and several other related functions. The richer the family the larger the number of such functions, and the more lavish and wasteful the menu. Meals can be served only for the family members and within the home premises. These cannot be served at wedding functions at hotels, clubs and other plush premises. The middle class families cannot block the roads by setting up large Shamianas and disrupting the traffic.

In fact, the wedding functions have become more and more lavish as foreign bands and dancing groups from abroad are hired at a high cost. A new tribe of event managers has also sprung up to organize such functions.

Gone is the Punjab government's decision of serving one dish for 300 guests. Now the

Hindu culture. It says that display of dowries which is copied by the low-income families as well is crushing the poor. In parts of Punjab the groom has to produce 20 tolas of gold before he can claim his bride. In these days of high gold prices, it is a nerve-shattering demand.

The Supreme Court wants the government and society to popularise wedding ceremonies in mosques. If the western couples can take pride in solemnizing their weddings in churches, and even princes and princesses go there for this purpose, Muslims can also perform these ceremonies in mosques so that the poor and the middle class families spend far less on the marriages. It is essential to forbid lavish illuminations at weddings, and for several days together, in a country where shortage of power and power breakdowns are too common.

Similarly, after a number of persons have died and far more have been injured in the course of shootings at wedding parties, the ban on shootings at weddings should be enforced rigidly. One couple's joy should not be the cause of tragedy for others. And yet the ban continues to be violated even on occasions when policemen get married.

In a country in which unemployment suicides, terrorism and large scale crimes are common, the rich should not be allowed to revel in display of their wealth at weddings and hold up the traffic of their areas. On one side we have such weddings and on the other side girls and boys who fall in love and get married without the approval of one or more parents are murdered in cold blood. Even when the marriages are within their own families such couples could be murdered in the name of karo kari. And it remains to be seen how effective is the new federal law banning such cold blooded

spendthrift ways in marriages as the poor try to imitate the rich and come to grief. And thereafter some of the members of the poor families vengefully turn to dacoity and try to rectify the balance partially. The policemen, too, profit in the process as they get their cut.

The VVIPs in this country are partially responsible for popularizing lavish weddings. When they attend such functions these become even more lavish and are widely publicised. Photographs appear in newspapers and magazines showing them attending such functions regardless of how dubious is the source of the host's income.

The chicken industry will be hit by the Supreme Court verdict. The earlier chief justice wanted to give a decision in favour of the industry; but did not sign the verdict before his retirement. So the earlier federal ordinance stays restored. But weddings without meals have been there for long until the Punjab law. Wedding halls will also be affected and they are in large numbers.

This is a country in which domestic savings are very low compared to other countries in the region. It went up from 13.3 per cent in the fiscal year 2001 to 14.8 per cent and ten to 16.9 per cent in FY 2003 and dropped to 13 per cent last year. This is the period of consumer credit from banks for the rich and many tend to live on tomorrow's earnings.

This is a country marked for its high rural indebtedness with its crippling interest rate. Everything possible has to be done to reduce that, particularly if the debt is incurred in a wasteful manner. We have to move more and more towards a rational social order until we are clearly out of the poverty trap and free of the increasing unemployment suicides and karo kari murders, and the vanishing over a thousand children a year.

## Edhi's concern for animals

Society & Social P...  
By Our Staff Reporter

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KARACHI, Oct 11: Noted social worker Maulana Abdul Sattar Edhi, besides providing various social welfare services for the ailing humanity is also working for shelterless and sick animals.

Over 260 animals and birds were brought to the Edhi

Foundation's Animal Hospital and shelter home since 2003. According to the break up, 88 dogs, 154 cats, 16 donkeys, one horse, and two falcons were admitted by the foundation.

Responding to Dawn queries, Rizwan Edhi said that 136 animals — 60 cats, 62 dogs, and 13

donkeys — either died at the animal hospital or their carcasses were brought in from various places of the city and buried in the hospital compound.

He said that many points in the city where animals could drink water, over the years had been encroached upon.