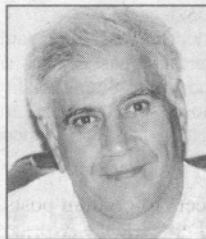


RECENTLY, THE PAPERS HAVE BEEN FULL OF reports and outraged comment on two high-profile rape cases. Combine that with the lamentable fudging exercise by our legislators on the 'honour-killing' issue, and you will understand why this new 'soft image' business is unlikely to have much impact.

Now my personal stance on such matters is not in doubt: laws, customary practices, and social attitudes based on gender discrimination are, as far as I am concerned, abhorrent. But my guess is that even most of those Pakistani males who accept this principle (are they a majority or a minority?), do no more than pay lip service to it in practice. Deviations, particularly in one's own case, are easily rationalised and justified on all manner of nebulous grounds (a particular favourite, being the one beloved by our religious dogmatists, is what I call, "God made the two sexes equal but different, and therefore..." theory). It is equally obvious to me that any struggle against such injustice will remain an uphill one for a long time to come. Why should this be so? Are my fellow Pakistanis who insist on the primacy of ancient customs, trying to protect some vested interest? Are they — horror of horrors — evil men? Or are they just ignorant? Alternatively, is it not the case that it is I who am out of step, my views a by-product of Western education and indelible conditioning through living in Europe? Are my views 'better' than theirs, in some absolute sense, or moral values too are 'relative' *a la* the post-modernist?

These are obvious enough thoughts. And most of us instinctively — but uneasily — understand, in a broad and general way, that this huge difference in mental outlook between 'them' and 'us' is probably best explained in terms of differing social realities. For

VIEW



MUNIR ATTAULLAH

Ours is the last generation for which precedent and custom will retain their traditional importance. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the new reality of human social existence is that change begets even more change, and what is more, it does so at an increasingly rapid rate. For advanced societies, change is now the new fundamental constant

the moment let me not discuss the full implications of this view for those who, taking their cue from religion, hold that moral values are somehow immutable. But, as you read on, you will find that this obvious thought,

Moral problems

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as I idly tossed it around in the mind, proved a surprisingly fertile one in many other ways.

Until fairly recent times, the fundamental reality of human existence — the 'bottom line' so to speak — was the inescapable need for toil and labour (and no write-in jokes please, from those who know me, on how my life is a living refutation of this statement). Historically, some 80-90 percent of any population was engaged in food production. That reality has not changed a great deal even today, for predominantly poor and agricultural countries like Pakistan. But contrast that with the situation of advanced industrial societies, such as the United States, where now less than 3 percent of the population produces not only enough food for itself but also has huge surpluses available for export. This release from the bondage of human agrarian social existence — a compulsion that had hitherto remained largely frozen across space and through time — was to have profound and unexpected consequences.

Traditional societies, much like bureaucrats and lawyers, place a high value on precedent, with good reason. For, to borrow a phrase from Hobsbawm, "we all grow up as Christopher Columbuses". In that voyage of discovery that is life, and which each one of us has to undertake willy-nilly, what fathers and forefathers did has automatic value for sons and grandsons, as long as the pattern of life remains unchanging across generations. Custom and precedent provide the assurance and comfort of the well-mapped channels on the navigational chart of life.

But it could well be — and I say this even as I hear in my mind the equivalent of the Greek chorus off-stage, saying, "You foolish, man!" — that ours is the last generation for which precedent and custom will retain their traditional importance. Certainly it is

time to give that French cliché, "*Plus ces't change plus ces't la meme chose*" a decent burial. For, ever since the Industrial Revolution, the new reality of human social existence is that change begets even more change, and what is more, it does so at an increasingly rapid rate. For advanced societies, change is now the new and fundamental constant.

Moreover, many of the changes are so rapid and continuous (e.g. mass air travel, the computer and the communication revolutions etc), or are so radical (MNCs and globalisation, urbanisation, mastery of nuclear forces, space exploration etc), that previous experience is of little relevance in the new situation we have to deal with. No adequate precedent exists, by definition, to guide us. Novel circumstances often lead to re-thinking matters afresh, and the Industrial Revolution brought in its wake the rise of the social sciences. In due course, Marx's dictum that "the function of the social sciences is to change the world and not simply to understand and interpret it", became the driving force underpinning the new social compulsions of human existence in the West.

But it is not only horses that you can drive to the water but not be able to force them to drink. Humans can be even more difficult. The Columbus living in each one of us must still navigate the treacherous sea of life on his own. Only, now he is more aware than ever before of the vast ocean of the unknown upon which he is adrift. Who can blame him for wanting to sail close to a reassuring recognisable shoreline keeping familiar landmarks always in sight? It is but natural to resist change — especially rapid change — because the survival instinct is dominated by a sense of fear, and it pays to be wary of the unknown.

By the same token, once survival requires that we

re-adapt to the inevitability and primacy of change, an accumulation of incremental changes over even a few generations are sufficient to condition us to the new social realities. Today, how rapidly and wholeheartedly a society embraces change, defines in a large measure how 'advanced' it is considered.

We know now the dramatic impact rapid economic growth can have on a society. And change of one sort or another — technological, social, even demographic — is the sharpest spur available to prod the sides of economic inertia. In the age of obsolescence and change for the sake of change, experimentation is welcome. The emphasis on 'fashion', the primacy of 'design', the large potential reward and the smaller downside of risk-taking, when combined with the liberating effects of economic freedom for the individual, now make conventional wisdom and precedent increasingly irrelevant. The Columbus of old is now increasingly like that post-modernist of an early era, Tariq bin Ziyad.

I realise that this confused ramble has done nothing to answer the question I posed at the beginning. But then how can I, when philosophers still cannot agree whether all moral values are relative, or do some at least have an objective invariant core? Is 'shikar' immoral? Homosexuality? What about the death penalty? How about slavery or polygamy? Yes, I have my views on most such matters, and if called upon to climb down from the fence, will unhesitatingly do so. But I also understand what compulsions may drive others to make a different choice. Persuasion — in all its varied forms — is the only practical escape route left from this existential dilemma.

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