

No shame in a simple 'sorry'

News

24-3-05

Society & Social Problems

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Countless column inches have been written about the Doctor Rape Case, and the Mukhtaran Mai atrocity, both here in Pakistan and around the world, and it may be that there is little else left to say beyond a heartfelt 'Sorry' to both women. But nobody seems to have done that. Said 'Sorry'. Not in Pakistan, anyway.

The people who brutalised Mukhtaran Mai are most certainly not going to be saying 'Sorry' to her now or at any time in the future; mainly because they don't think they have got anything to be sorry about. That's just the way things are, and if Mukhtaran Mai had had a smidgen of sense she would have shut up and got on with the rest of her besmirched and probably short, life. Nor can she expect much in the way of an apology for anybody within the legal system, which is seemingly determined to violate her even further.

And who was going to say 'Sorry' to the lady doctor who was assaulted by a person or persons unknown? Certainly not those of her relatives — her relatives — who think she ought to be murdered for bringing dishonour upon them and their precious family. And the President is not going to be saying 'Sorry' either for his mis-speak regarding who may or may not have committed unspeakable acts and in doing so perhaps impeded or clouded whatever justice may be

available to the wronged doctor.

So nobody, it would seem, is much inclined to express a simple 'Sorry' to either of these innocent women. It is hard to say 'Sorry', at least in the context of an apology rather than in the

sel of reproduction — preferably of sons. In a country where mobile phones are the fashion-object of choice and Bollywood the opium of the masses and consumerism beginning to gather a terrible momentum,

just that, mere paint, and that the grand words and policy statements and pious platitudes uttered by lawmakers and parliamentarians are but a patina of camouflage on the ugliness beneath.

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context of an expression of sorrow — because it means an acceptance of a mistake or wrongdoing on the part of the person or persons expressing the apology, and if there is one thing that nobody is ever going to do willingly in Pakistan it is accept responsibility for anything, no matter how great or small.

This is a culture that condones and encourages the regular abuse and murder of women and girls. It is a culture where women and girls are often mere chattels, disposable objects of little worth or value. Where for all the trumpeting of the wonders of womanhood and the place of a woman in society, the uncomfortable fact is that women are cheap and plentiful. Their lives, little more than that of the ves-

more than fifty percent of the population appears to be more worthless than the objects of desire that fill homes, provide entertainment and facilitate the national pastime of telephonic gupshupping.

But there is something astir, something that both cases coming so close together and catching the attention of a wider world has perhaps sparked in the vast sleeping corpus of the Pakistani masses. A sense that perhaps, just maybe, a line is going to be drawn in the sand, a sense that enough is enough and that it is high time they stopped turning the blind eye and faced up to a few uncomfortable realities. Recognition that the cosmetic that covers the face of barbarism is

What may be astir among ordinary people is the feeling that this is *not right*, that as a society we should not be raping or butchering womankind in the name of nebulous 'honour' and that the cultural imperatives of generations past may not be appropriate to life today in the early 21st century. And that there is, just faintly on the edge of collective consciousness, a perception of collective guilt, a vague outline of the shape of the responsibility that all societies should have to their members. A feeling that there is no shame in expressing an apology for a dreadful wrong and that honour is better served by honesty and acceptance than by the application of a layer of makeup.

It is that coalescence of perceptions that will, in the end, change things for the women of Pakistan. At which point they will be able to hold their heads up in pride and with a feeling of worth, rather than the fear and trepidation which so sullies their lives now.

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Note: Farhan Bokhari's weekly column will now appear on Fridays.

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The national morale

Raania Ahmed

A country's national morale is affected by many factors. Mainly the environment around it, the environment within and more importantly, the nation's own self-perception and its understanding of how the world views it.

Pakistan in 2005 is in the midst of a dilemma. Having surfaced from years of support to the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is now trying damage control. The extremism brought about within society is a direct result of years of deprivation that 'Islamists' have felt, caused by dualistic Western policies where they felt themselves used but not rewarded. The reward that they await is the resolution of the potent territorial disputes around the Muslim world, whether it is Palestine or Kashmir or other relatively smaller areas.

Pakistan's dilemma is to shift from the sense of deprivation that leads to violence, into the realm of hope through a belief in national values that have a cascading nature. One could start at the macro level with the actual message of Islam, which is one of peace. Unfortunately that this message is distorted by those who don't understand Islam and propagate it incorrectly, either on purpose to suit their own goals or due to ignorance. The message is for all humanity, not just Muslims. This is Pakistan's first value, which is supreme for its national morale.

The environment around Pakistan is dominated by the 'War on Terror', where terror is mistakenly taken to represent Islamic forces. The dilemma is to participate in this war keeping Pakistan's objectives of resolving core Islamic disputes as first priority. When the masses are shown scenes of these core struggles getting further bulldozed by Western agendas, they react and national morale suffers. It is not just lip service, then, that has led Pakistan to be aggressively focused on the resolution of the Kashmir and Palestine problems. Pakistan realises that sacrificing these values would lead to an erosion of national morale.

In terms of environment, the other important factor is the treatment meted out to Islamic states by the US, in partic-

ular. The harsh reality of a unipolar world is that there is a ruthless attempt at deriving some form of conformity to Western ideals and policies that the US is pursuing in the greater Middle East. This affects the environment in which Pakistan finds itself. The state has to wade clear of the minefields laid in this environment, that can become divisive factors within the Muslim Ummah, since that has a severe impact on Pakistan's own national morale.

The environment within Pakistan has an equally large role to play in shaping national morale. The president has said at numerous occasions: "We don't face an external threat, but internal challenges in the form of terrorism, extremism and sectarianism." These challenges are in fact the result of the environment around the country. Extremism is not just a result of poverty, as many would have us believe, but a result of unresolved disputes in the Muslim world. When Pakistanis find themselves in the middle of a society that is torn between what is natural and good for it and what a noisy minority is propagating, divisions emerge. The silent majority knows that ridding the country of such extremist elements will improve the health of society at large, translating into a better national morale.

Most crucial in the entire national morale debate, is Pakistan's perception about itself and the perception it feels others have about it. These are critical swing factors which can create unnatural buoyancy or dips in national morale. Firstly, let's address the issue of Pakistan's self-perception.

Unfortunately, as a nation we are becoming seepics, pessimists and undeniably more staunch in our resolute belief about our faults and follies. This is an unhealthy trend, fuelled by those anti-state elements that for their own limited political agendas turn positives into negatives. We often blame our media for projecting Pakistan's failures more than its successes. But to be fair, this trend does not just exist in a vacuum. The media are part and parcel of society at large. Their role is to reflect society's temperature check.

This negative spiral of outdoing competition by pointing out the most 'nega-

tives' on the national media, thus gaining fame, needs to be examined. The role of the media undoubtedly includes pointing out what is wrong, but surely it also has a responsibility to improve national morale. In an effort to improve self-perception, there has been a steady increase in sports and cultural events. This might be termed as the 'soft image' of Pakistan, but I would rather go a step further and call it the actual, moderate and true face of Pakistan.

We have a lot to be proud of in terms of national heritage. The idea is to derive maximum gain for national morale within Pakistan using such a strategy, whilst at the same time more positively projecting Pakistan's image outside. This will eventually lead to more foreign investment and interest in Pakistan as a member of the comity of nations, which, in turn, will lead to a better self-image of how the rest of the world views Pakistan.

We tend to be hard on ourselves on many fronts, including the apparent failure of the poverty alleviation strategy. The realities are somewhat different. Our negative view is based on the concept that inflation is making the poor poorer whilst the rich are getting richer. Actual statistics show that wheat flour in Islamabad costs Rs12.32/kg, in Dhaka it is 15.26, in Delhi it is between 15 and 26, in Colombo, 28. Similarly, the price of diesel in Calcutta is Rs39.32/ltr, in Chennai it is Rs40.16, in Mumbai it is Rs45, in Delhi it is Rs36.02 and in Pakistan it is 28.28.

I rest my case! India's poor population, as described by international standards, is double that of our entire population, but her national morale is not beaten up by pessimists. In fact, Indians project themselves as being far better than they really are. Pakistanis, on the other hand, indulge in so much self-criticism that their perceptions about themselves fall far beyond actual levels. As a result, their perceptions in the comity of nations fall as well. Only we ourselves can raise national morale by emerging from self-inflicted despondency. It is time to enjoy events like the March 23 parade, rather than frown at the expenditures and inconveniences it resulted in. It is time to start believing in ourselves. Only then can we project ourselves externally.