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**Terrible suffering**

Terrible acts of violence and suffering take place in houses across our country because of the inability of the government to pay heed to the laws it has itself put on the books. Most recently in Karachi, a 13-year-old girl Arzoo was kidnapped from inside her house while playing with her brother and sister and, according to the reports we have so far, possibly married to the 44-year-old neighbour who had kidnapped her. She was also forced to convert to Islam. The matter was then taken to the court which decided to send her back with the husband. Her mother was not allowed to see the teenager in the courtroom despite making many pleas for a meeting of a few minutes.

This is not an unusual story. It has occurred even though the Child Marriage Restraint Act which abolishes the marriage of a person aged below 18 in the province of Sindh is on the statute books of the province and other laws against forced conversion are also in place. Yet the question is when the government will make any real effort to enforce these laws. The Sindh government has said it plans to investigate the matter of Arzoo and determine what happened. But time has already been lost. The family has been traumatized and any action coming now will be late but still welcome.

The case of Arzoo is not isolated. In other parts of Sindh, Hindu girls have been forced to convert and marry in a very similar way. Often a local cleric is involved. The matter is one that has been brought to the notice of authorities again and again by minority groups. But nothing changes. No one seems to bother beyond the usual protest by the familiar human rights and other groups which take up these issues nothing really moves.

Indeed, there is evidence that the attitude of people is growing more and more extreme and rigid by the day. The remarks made by some government ministers on the issue of minorities may have had a role to play in this. It is now time for change. Recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan quite correctly spoke out against what happened in France and the use of cartoons derogatory to the Holy Prophet (pbuh) in a classroom. But even as he spoke, we wonder if he was thinking about the multiple cases which occur in his own country.

Certainly, he has not said anything about Arzoo or the other girls who are forcibly converted and married to men usually far older than themselves. The question has been asked of why it is only girls who feel compelled to convert this way and not boys of a similar age. We need the prime minister and the federal government to at least speak out on the matter. Only if this happens will the case receive the kind of attention it deserves. The Sindh government has moved and is doing what it can but we can only hope this will be enough.

Beyond the issue of girls being forcibly converted, there are also many other matters concerning minorities in the manner in which they are treated. We often take up the issue of minorities in other countries and how they are suffering abuse or mistreatment at the hands of persons in those nations. It is good that we speak out. Certainly someone needs to speak out for the Muslims of Kashmir and those of Palestine. Even though Pakistan has been largely silent on Palestine, it has spoken out for Kashmir. It now also needs to speak out for minorities in its own country. There is no reason why that should not happen.

In the original State of Medina that Imran Khan has told us so much about, even Jewish people were called in to give their opinion on various issues and to participate in meetings about these matters. Minorities were not ostracized, they were not punished, they were not penalized only because their religion was different to that of the ruling group.

This is something we need to learn from. We must go back in time: look at history, learn from it and also learn from the examples of other countries. Today we do not want to be converted into anything that looks like the India that exists today. It has become a terribly dangerous place for many people to live in. These people include the large Muslim minority of that country and the Dalit group which is discriminated against on the basis of cast.

The first issue is for the government to ensure that laws in place on the statute books are respected and abided by. The police must be educated about these laws and some steps taken to guide them on how to act when cases occur. The attitudes within the police force are of course no different to those of the general public. Many believe that minorities are in some way inferior to the majority group in this country. This policy has to be corrected. It should begin by trying to re-educate the police force and also the lower judiciary

But beyond this better material has to go into the textbooks that are studied by children in schools and read in other places including madressahs. Madressahs of course present a difficult problem in the sense that their curricula are so different to that of mainstream schools that it will be difficult to change them although the government has promised this will be done. In the meanwhile, at least in the mainstream schools where books published by the provisional text book boards apply, material has to be provided to children which teaches them respect for all religions no matter who follows them or what these people believe.

Humanity must be the first principle of our lives. Humanity belongs to all persons and it is not based around any particular sect, any particular religion or any particular school or belief. Certainly, this has become the norm in many developed countries. It must be brought into our own country bit by bit and piece by piece.

We took many steps back in the 1980s during the days of the Zia dictatorship. There is now evidence that we are still moving further back and that the current government has done nothing to stop this. In some ways it may have encouraged it. This has to change. Steps forward have to be taken so that in the future there are no cases like those of little Arzoo and no sufferings like that seen by a mother outside the Sindh courtroom where her daughter and her so-called husband were taken.

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