

Benchmarks of 'honour'

Around 1870, Julia Ward Howe called for Mother's Day to be celebrated each year to encourage 'pacifism and disarmament' amongst women. Both were noble but non-selling causes. So commerce had to be brought in. Thank you Lifebuoy, McDonalds and Tang for taking time out to make our mothers happy this year.

On 8th March 2016, we celebrated the International Women day with seminars on gender equality and 'violence against women'. The two most disinterested residents of the Constitution Avenue also sent pledges to promote and protect women's rights. Our Senate unanimously adopted a resolution expressing solidarity with women. The Women of the World festival sponsored by the British Council of Pakistan left us totally WOW-ed. However soothing, these activities do little to restrain the rapidly worsening status of women in Pakistan.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported more than 500 cases of honour killings in Pakistan in 2015. On 2nd March 2016, Mohammad Asif, using an illegal weapon, shot and killed his two sisters, Fauzia and Surriya in Sahiwal, because he doubted their character and was against their lifestyle. Four years earlier Asif had killed his mother in a similar episode. He was however set free after his family 'pardoned' the culprit. The murder of the two sisters could have been prevented had there been no 'forgiveness' clause in the law.

In yet another incident of honour killing, on April 27, 2016, Hayat Khan of Orangi Town Karachi, stabbed and slit the throat of his 16-year old sister Sumaira. She was seen talking to a youngster on the doorstep of their home – an offence that Hayat thought was serious enough to deserve slaughter. He dumped Sumaira's body, soaked in blood and writhing in pain on the pavement outside his house. As expected, Inayat Khan, father of the cold-blooded murderer told the local media, "what is done is done and I forgive my son".

On April 29, 2016, Ambreen, a class nine student Abbotabad was tied up in the back seat of a van and burnt alive. A 15- member 'jirga' of goons had pronounced that she be decimated in this unimaginably inhuman and barbaric manner. Ambreen had to be charred alive for helping her friend escape to marry a person of her own choice.

Clearly the benchmark of our 'honour' is rapidly plummeting. Our current actions and strategies, our seminars and speeches and our laws and governance have been inadequate and ineffective. They have failed to create equality, protect the rights or provide security not just to women but to all citizens of Pakistan. Should we not pause for a moment to ponder as to what makes us behave in such a berserk and barbaric manner.

Can honour killings be prevented in a country where every criminal gang apprehended on charges of land grabbing, money laundering, killing or extortion is found to have direct links and patronage of those who are at the helm of affairs. Why will Vani, Swara or Karokari not flourish in a country when many who sit in the Assemblies also preside over 'jirgas' in their spare time. Why will the killing culture not flourish in a land where saying "I forgive" is enough to let a murderer go scot-free.

Why does the state tolerate parallel and private judicial systems such as the JuD's "Darul Qaza Sharia" operating in Lahore and its suburbs. Why does the state go around mincing legal jargon and not say upfront that all murders will be treated as crime against state and would have nothing to do with anyone's generosity or forgiveness. The government promised but did nothing to end the curse of 'Jirgas' after a 'jirga' ordered the gang rape of Mukhtaran Mai. It again failed to move when 5 women were buried alive in Balochistan. On the contrary, this decadent practice was defended as "our tribal custom" by a member of the upper house.

Forty six years ago, Amanullah Khan left this country, to live in a council flat in London driving a bus for the next 25 years. Today his son is the mayor of the same city. If we too had equality of rights and equal opportunities, our Ambreens and Sumairas could also dream of becoming mayors in their own country? But these things do not happen in societies where the law primarily serves to protect the interests of the ruling class, where 'Jirgas' are institutionalised and where families can forgive the murderers.

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