



Violence against Women in Swat Why blame only Taliban?

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"Women will benefit the most from the enforcement of the Shariah...We want to give women their rightful place in Islam...Women are not supposed to work in factories, or even work in fields. That is a man's work and we will not allow them to shrug off their responsibility."

- Muslim Khan, Spokesperson for the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP)

The first week of April 2009 witnessed a furore inside Pakistan, when private channels showed a young girl being beaten by the Taliban in Swat. In the last two years, there have been many anti-women acts by the Taliban, from demolishing girl schools to attacking women for actions, which they consider un-Islamic. What form this furore will take is too early to comment upon at this time, immediately after the video footage was released. Will this make the rulers and the ruled in Pakistan understand the true nature of the Taliban? Will this make them realize what the Taliban will do, if they are permitted to administer justice? Will this initiate a renaissance in Pakistan's society to elevate the status of women?

JIHAD AGAINST WOMEN IN SWAT ISLAM, TALIBAN STYLE

There is a pattern in what Maulana Fazlullah and his cadres are doing against women in the name of Islam. As part of "providing their rightful place in Islam," the Taliban is adopting a multi-pronged strategy against this generation of women and future ones. Fazlullah has openly opposed women's education and started targeting girl schools in Swat. The Taliban has destroyed more than 120 girls schools in the Swat Valley alone,

besides 80 other schools. Attacking the girls schools is part of the Taliban's long term strategy to take the society backwards into the dark ages. What better way to ensure an illiterate society than to ban education for women? The Taliban is well aware that any progress towards modern and liberal social values is not in their interests.

This long term strategy will only work if one creates fear amongst women who are working now, and want to take the society ahead. To ensure this, the Taliban has issued another fatwa against women who have been working in Swat. They were asked to resign and not leave their houses without a male member who is a relative. Women working in schools and other offices – government and private-- had to leave or risk their lives. In cases of medical emergency, they are at greater risk; as a nurse in a local hospital in Swat commented: "Women, however sick, can only be admitted if accompanied by a male relative. Every woman fears she will be killed if she comes out, so even sick and pregnant women have to visit the hospital with their husbands." While the actual attacks in such instances may be few, the fear created is substantial.

Besides their reduced economic contribution to families and their fears in this abnormal situation, what hurts the women in Swat is that the Taliban has totally disrupted their social life. Women running beauty parlours were asked to close their shops, as the Taliban considers them to be the den of vices. Those who have been working in governmental and non-governmental institutions in Swat are now asked to shut themselves up and isolate themselves from other society. A teacher, mother of two, who was teaching in Mingora until forced to leave her work, commented: "Life bores us to tears. There is

no entertainment. We can't even think about cable TV, cinema, film and music. Imagine I can't even go shopping or to the bazaar as women are banned by Taliban." Another woman commented, "There's not a single shop left where I can go and buy cosmetics, all shops selling women's things are either closed or empty. I remember when I used to go to this market with my mother and sisters, but now it seems like a dream."

Is this barbarism in Swat - an aberration, or only the beginning of even worse to come? How did all this come about? Could this have been avoided if early warnings had been heeded? Obviously, Swat was not destroyed in a single day. For the last fifteen years, there have been visible signs of an upheaval. It started with the establishment of the Tanzim Nifaz Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) in Swat by Sufi Mohammad in the early 1990s. However, the objectives and strategies of the TNSM under him were different as compared to the present dispensation under his son-in-law Maluana Fazlullah. Both demand the imposition of Shariah, but their strategies are different. The TNSM led by the Sufi was moderate and did not believe in the Taliban brand of Islam. Sufi Mohammad's movement started much before the Taliban movement was born, which explains why there were no ban on girl's education, music and dance. However, under Fazlullah's leadership, the TNSM metamorphosed into the Taliban of Swat, with different interpretations of Islam ranging from girl's education to men's beards.

The slide began in the early 1990s and continued into the late 1990s during the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, and has become what it is now under the regime of Pervez Musharraf, the 'enlightened moderate'. The expectations that the PPP and ANP civilian governments formed at the national and provincial levels would address the situation in

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Swat were quite misplaced. The civilian governments in Islamabad and Peshawar did address the situation in an ironical manner – by handing over Swat on a platter to Fazlullah, and by agreeing to impose the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation in February 2009, which permitted imposition of the Shariah in Swat.

Undoubtedly, this deal concluded between the government and the Taliban is not in the interests of women. Many human rights activists in Pakistan warned the State, on what this deal could do the women. This is precisely why the first response of the State on the flogging incident in Swat was to defend the Swat deal. Minister for Information in NWFP, Mian Iftikhar Hussain, made a statement and urged that it is a conspiracy against the deal which the government has signed with the Taliban. It is unfortunate, that while the moderates consider this an act of barbarism, the government wants to preserve the deal at any cost. There were other bizarre arguments – that the footage was old, and even that it was recorded before the deal was signed!

When this outrage occurred is immaterial. The issue here is: what is the Taliban capable of against women in the name of Islam. Even if the footage belongs to the pre-deal period, it makes the government's position worse. And how could the government consider agreeing to a deal with people with such primitive attitudes towards Islam, justice and women?.

II VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PAKISTAN WHY BLAME ONLY TALIBAN?

Women in Pakistan has been facing violence, not only by the Taliban's religious 'Islamic' codes in the NWFP, but also by the secular 'feudal' and 'tribal' codes of the Tribal Sardars and Feudal Lords in Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab.

Consider the following cases in the last eight years in Pakistan. In Meerawala, in Punjab province, Mukhtaran Mai was raped in 2002 after a local tribal jirga pronounced a heinous verdict against her. Why? Mukhtaran Mai's brother was accused of having an affair with a girl belonging to an upper caste, thereby 'dishonoring' the upper caste family. The local tribal jirga decided that Mukhtaran Mai be raped by men of the upper

caste.

In 2007, the same incident was repeated in Ubavro in Sindh province. Naseema Chohan, a sixteen year old girl, was gang raped by eleven men and paraded naked. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), her cousin had eloped and married a girl from a local Wadera family.

In Balochistan, in August 2008, five women were shot and buried alive, as three amongst them wanted a court marriage against the wishes of their elders. Six armed men, directed by local Sardars, abducted them, fired on the women and buried them. Alive.

The problem in Pakistan is not just with the Taliban. Its feudal and tribal society needs to be indicted for the continuing atrocities against women.

III QUESTIONS TO THE STATE: WHY DON'T YOU TAKE CHARGE? AND ACT LIKE A STATE?

Should one blame only the Taliban and feudal society for the crime against women? Where does the State figure in all this? Whether it be the Taliban offence or feudal atrocities against women, the State has to take responsibility for failing to protect them. Worse, in some cases, the State has actively or passively protected the accused.

Consider the following cases. When Mukhataran Mai's case became public and the international community started questioning Gen Musharraf's policy towards protecting women rights, the Washington Post quoted him as saying during his visit to the US in 2005 "this (rape in Pakistan) has become a moneymaking concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped." If this is the attitude of an 'enlightened' moderate, imagine what would be the attitude of other officials in the State of Pakistan!

The same callous attitude towards women was reflected in the statement made by Israr Ullah Zehri, a Senator from Balochistan, in Pakistan's Parliament in August 2008, when the case of five

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women being buried alive came to public notice. The Senator thundered: "These are centuries-old traditions, and I will continue to defend them". He was not alone in the Parliament. Jan Muhammad Jamali, acting Chairman of the Senate was quoted saying: "Yasmin Shah (who raised the issue in the Senate) should go to our society and see for herself what the situation is like there and then come back to raise such questions in the house." Jamali then went to criticize the media for laying an "out of proportion" emphasis on this incident, as it "gave the matter such a colour as if heavens have fallen."

If the rulers – whether military or civilian-- have such a carefree attitude towards atrocities on women, the officials cannot be different. The case of Sonia Naz, mother of two, would reveal how the protectors of law are themselves its violators. In 2004, the husband of Sonia Naz was arrested in Faisalabad, along with 12 others on charges of corruption. While others were released subsequently her husband went missing; the police were demanding a bribe for his release. When her efforts to find her husband failed, she went to the National Assembly to meet the MPs and demand the release of her husband. She was arrested on the orders of the Speaker of the House for obstructing the functioning of the House, but later released. After she decided to report the matter to the media she was illegally detained, and raped by the local police, while the Superintendent of Police urinated on her face.

In the current enthusiasm to blame whatever the Taliban does, one can forget that the State also needs to be blamed for this situation. It has completely abdicated its responsibility to protect women against the Taliban brand of justice or what is sanctioned by the feudal lords and Sardars in Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan.

The problem in Swat is a perfect example of State failure to discharge its duties, which has provided space for the Taliban to grow. Many believe that

the system of justice and governance process under the Wali was superior. When Swat was merged into Pakistan in 1969, the existing judicial system, based on customs, convention and Islam under the Wali was replaced with the modern system of secular courts. The former was cheap, effective and swift, while the latter, unfortunately, became corrupt, slow and long drawn out. The same was true of the educational system in Swat. Under the Wali, girls' education was much better, with a large network of schools and colleges. In fact, Fazlullah, who has banned girls education, was a product of the educational system created by the Wali!

Like the judicial process, the modern State in Pakistan also let the Wali's educational system degenerate and crumble away. Under both civilian and military rule, many schools became 'ghost' schools with no teachers. They were drawing their salaries, however, from the district headquarters. In most of rural Swat, the school system lies in shambles – weakened by the state due to callous neglect, and decimated now by the relentless bombing initiated by Fazlullah. The means are different, but the end achieved has been the same.

The Taliban is only doing what it is good at doing: destroying the social edifice and persecuting women, who could preserve and build this structure. The State should act like one, and perform its essential role, instead of abdicating its responsibilities. In Swat, it could start with scrapping the deal it has signed with the Taliban and establish its own writ, while restarting its war against the Taliban, and addressing the issues that have provided the space for radical elements like the Taliban to operate.

More importantly, the State should ask its spokesmen to close their mouths and stop defending atrocities against women – either in terms of defending age old traditions or to obtain a visa to enter the West. In reality, there is not much difference between what Muslim Khan, the spokesman of the Taliban, said after the public beating of the teenage girl, or the Senator who defended the killing of five women in Parliament or, indeed, General Musharraf's statement in Washington DC. They are multiple sides of the same coin.

IV THIS IS ONLY A BEGINNING

While certain tribal and feudal practices in all the provinces resulted in public violence against women, what is new is the use of religion by the Taliban to perpetuate atrocities against violence. This is clearly a new beginning in Pakistan, in which the local Taliban leadership is trying to replicate what Mullah Omar's regime did in Pakistan in the 1990s. These are the new villains of Pakistan.

There is also another new beginning, especially in the last few years. There has been a slow, but a strong resistance from the society. The participants, audience and their voices, may be feeble, but a point is being made. Victims like Mukhtaran Mai, activists like Asma Jehangir and martyrs like Zille Huma have given a voice to this movement. Mukhtaran has become a symbol of hope and courage, for standing up against a discriminatory system. Asma and other activists provide the intellectual and legal support. Leaders like Zille Huma have given their lives and are willing to fight for women. These are the new heroes of Pakistan.

Clearly, there are two beginnings in Pakistan. One using street violence, taking sanctions from unacceptable secular and religious codes, and the other trying to counter it peacefully. Will the latter arrest the former? Much will depend on how much support the latter receives from the State and the Civil Society.

What can the international community do? Can something be done, instead of just highlighting what the Taliban is doing and what it is capable of doing vis-à-vis the civilians, women in particular? Obama in his recent speech has clearly stated that the funding that Pakistan is likely to receive will not be blank check and will be linked with performance in the ground. Will that "performance" include the State in Pakistan expanding its writ and protecting its own people, women in particular?



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