

Two Minutes-Of-Shame That Shook Pakistan

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A two-minute video episode captured on a cell phone shook Pakistan when it penetrated the blogosphere and began making rounds as everybody with a mobile phone passed the footage to all the contacts in his/her phone book. The rough-and-ready footage emerged from Swat. Once a honeymoon destination, this scenic valley has, of late, become a Saudi-style puritan "Emirate of Taliban".

Having earned itself the neologism of "Swat video", this widely watched footage shows a burka-clad girl pinned to ground. Two men holding her hand and feet while the third - with a black turban and beard - canning the girl. Crying for mercy ("stop it please") and begging forgiveness, the girl struggles - instinctively but unsuccessfully - to free herself.

Silent onlookers watch on helplessly, apparently unmoved by the shameful spectacle on display. "Either kill me or stop", screams helpless girl yet again in her mother tongue, Pashto. Her pleas for mercy are instead countered by an off-camera instruction to the man holding her feet: "Hold her legs tightly". The flogging does not stop until the count is 34. When the lashing is over, she is led to a stone building nearby.

The footage was passed on to local journalists. Afraid of puritan wrath, the local journalists kept mum. Their fears were justified. Only weeks ago, a journalist was cold-bloodedly murdered in Swat. Elsewhere, Pakistan is no "safe haven" for journalists either. Almost 40 journalists have been killed in the last eight years, most of them in Taliban-controlled districts. However, self censorship in the face of Taliban terror was not the only reason that mainstream media in Pakistan hushed this video up. Making a "breaking news" out of every trifle, a dozen or so Pakistani channels jealously vie with each other to be the first to report a particular incident. But this footage for days and days did not manage to gatecrash the newsrooms also because a big chunk of media men and women too sympathise with Taliban. A brave woman and documentary maker, Samar Minallah, passed the footage to local media.

"They were not ready to show it", she told this scribe on phone. Finally, she sent the video on to Islamabad-based foreign journalists. It made cautious headlines on April 2 in, for instance, the *Guardian* while BBC Urdu also hosted the news on its website.

Meantime, women rights groups began staging demonstrations in Lahore and Karachi. Thus, the silence was broken. Then the vultures from mainstream media-houses swooped on Swat. On April 3, electronic media swung to action while the morning papers on April 4 had wall-to-wall coverage of the incident with chilling details.

Universal outrage

The media coverage, however, was also triggered by the universal outrage. The anger is so widespread that even right-wing and Islamist parties, for the first time, have condemned the Taliban. Also, a host of columnists and anchorpersons sympathising with Taliban - touted as Media Mujahideen - are, for the first time, finding it hard to defend Taliban. Until now, every brutality Taliban has inflicted on their helpless victims, was justified in the name of resistance to US

occupation of Afghanistan. When, for instance, the five-star Marriot was attacked by a suicide bomber in capital Islamabad, a leading Media Mujahid spun a cock-and-bull theory that hotel was housing US military facilities.

It turned out that a beautifully named 14-year-old girl, Chaand (moon in many South Asian languages) was accused of having an “affair” with Adalat Khan, a youth living in the same street. An electrician by profession, Adalat Khan was one day spotted coming out of Chaand’s home by Taliban. Adalat had been summoned by Chaand’s family to help fix some electric appliances. A Taliban militant had proposed Chaand. Her family turned down the suit. Now was a chance to take revenge. Hence, both Adalat and Chaand were dragged out of their respective homes and flogged. First, Adalat was administered 50 lashes. Later, Chaand was spanked with a leather belt. Muslim Khan, a spokesperson for Taliban in Swat, while replying journalists’ queries not merely defended this disgraceful butchery but claimed that the girl should have been stoned instead! Since the punishment was awarded, according to Muslim Khan, before the implementation of Sharia when Taliban were at war with the government hence a fatwa for stoning could not be obtained from a Sharia court.

Deal delivers Sharia law

Following a “peace deal” struck on February 21, between Taliban and the government, Sharia courts have been established. These courts pass a verdict in three days while local lawyers are not allowed to appear as counsels since they are not qualified in Sharia.

Meantime, as this scribe is busy writing these lines, more information is pouring in and the latest news is: The Taliban also forced Adalat to marry Chaand. As more information reaches people, they are getting more agitated and outraged. This outrage is translating into protest demonstrations across Pakistan. Every demo is proving more fatal for Taliban than any US drone attack.