

A Town Called Shantinagar

Newspaper accounts of the terror which the fanatical mob of Muslims visited, on February 6, upon the hapless Christians of Shantinagar are quite uniform. Thirteen churches were ransacked and hundreds of homes destroyed by the arsonists. But statistics cannot convey the enormity of the crime, collectively committed by a section of the majority community, upon fellow citizens belonging to a religious minority.

Available evidence also suggests that some members of Khanewal district's police force were involved in inciting and organising this atrocity while others were guilty of complicity as they were on-duty spectators. A few are reported to have even helped themselves to the loot. The nightmare ended only after the army arrived to enforce the law. It was the worst incident of sectarian violence in recent memory.

In a morally engaged society, so appalling an event would have caused self-examination and soul-searching in the media and educated sections of society. From the government and political parties we had a right to expect symbolic as well as substantive gestures to restore confidence, affirm values, and reinforce the rule of law. Yet no evidence of concern and introspection is at hand. Not one political office-holder of the federal or provincial governments visited that ironically named town, Shantinagar - habitat of peace. No major leader - elected or unelected - thought it fit to go there and reassure the frightened, aggrieved people whose 700 or more homes were burnt down, belongings were looted and women were molested. Only one party leader - Jamaat-i-Islami's Qazi Husain Ahmed - publicly condemned the atrocity.

The task of affirming our humanity and salvaging this country's conscience was left to journalists, and the over-worked and brave leaders of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). Its team of six eminent human rights advocates visited Shantinagar on February 10 and reported that the "loot and destruction of a whole civilian habitation were unprecedented since the anti-Ahmadi riots of Chak Sikander in 1989. They were reminiscent in part of the days of partition in 1947." In the first two of its five-point recommendations, the HRCP has urged the government to concede the Christian community's "demand for an inquiry by a High Court judge... and then the retribution meted out in a way to become a standing deterrent to all such elements for the future. Secondly, a genuine and large-scale effort should be made for a full rehabilitation of the two communities of Tibba and Shantinagar." One hopes that the newly elected Federal and Punjab governments all implement these recommendations expeditiously.

The HRCP reports that its members returned from the scene of carnage "not just shaken by what they saw and heard. They felt alarmed at the omens it held for the future." Those who hold the reins of power today, and also, those who aspire to it, would do well to reflect on these 'omens'.

First of all, the catastrophe originated with an apparently false accusation of blasphemy. It was claimed that early on February 5, some burnt pages of the Holy Quran were found around a small, roadside mosque two kilometres from Shantinagar, and they bore a Christian name presumably of the desecrator. The mosques in the area began to spread the word from their loudspeakers calling the faithful to arms. "This went on" states the HRCP report "for some hours during which time people gathered from the surrounding areas. The crowd, suitably worked up, sacked several churches in Khanewal.

The rampage was resumed the next morning (February 6) when the mob was first led to Tibba and then to the main Shantinagar." It was apparently an organised affair. People were asked to vacate their homes before these were looted, burned, and the cattle stolen. That same morning Khanewal's main Church, St. Joseph's and the children's

hostel adjoining it, were ransacked. "Pages of children's books, informs HRCP, including of the Islamic scriptures prescribed in the school course, littered the front of the hostel.

The lesson is clear; the blasphemy law not only violates fundamental principles of justice, it distorts law into an instrument of sectarian witch-hunts and also of collective and individual reprisal. Its victims have ranged from an innocent Hafiz who was burned to death by a frenzied mob, to Pakistan's most renowned social engineer Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan who suffered years of harassment, death threats and litigation for unsubstantiated allegations of blasphemy. One can only concur with HRCP's view that the potential of blasphemy laws in promoting fanaticism and helping public mischief has once again been proved - at an enormous cost to thousands of people and to the national image as a whole." The law ought to be repealed, and it is timely to do so now.

Second, a most disturbing aspect of the carnage at Shantinagar is the multiple failure of the state apparatus. There are reasons to suspect the involvement of the Khanewal police force personnel in organising the rioting. Shantinagar's inhabitants recall that on January 17, Aziz-ur-Rahman Dogar of Khanewal Sadar raided the, house of Ayub, a Shantinagar resident, alleging that he ran a gambling den. He found nothing there, and perhaps in frustration kicked a Bible in the house. The family filed a complaint whereby the SHO was suspended but remained at large and vowed to teach Shantinagar a lesson. The manner in which the allegation of blasphemy was spread by a motor-cycle rider, then taken up by the mosques' loud speakers suggests mischievous planning though its truth can be established best by a judicial inquiry.

Khanewal may have been ripe on February 5 for sectarian incitement. Kabirwala, a Khanewal locality, is birthplace of the most militant of Pakistan's 'Islamic' formations, the Anjuman-i-Sipah-i-Sahaba. A Maulana Ziaur Rahman Farooqui ran from the district as a National Assembly candidate for the party. Unfortunately, the Maulana died in the bomb blast at Lahore Sessions Court before he could turn the Muslim League tide. To make matters more bitter, party leader Azam Tariq lost in the election. However, he was later declared elected after the recount. Pious anger was at a high when the occasion arose to hit the Christians.

Khanewal's officials must, or at least should have been aware of these sore happenings and heightened tensions. They made no effort to forestall and none to confront the violence. They yawned while just a few miles away from the DC's and SSP's headquarters, loudspeakers summoned people to violence. At some point during the orgy, police arrived. Some policemen participated in it, others became spectators, and a few fled the scene. The district administration remained paralysed even as St Joseph's church and the children hostel were ransacked yards away from the offices of the DC and SSP. Oddly, the HRCP team-felt "overwhelmed by the [DCs] concern for the tragedy and sympathy for the victims"; it praised his administration for "the relief and reassurance" the district had provided and the "impressive" help that was still underway. HRCP's explanation of sorts for the good DC's paralysis: the SSP was away on Umra, and the DC "emphasised for good measure that his predecessor had been killed by a fanatic in front of the office in broad daylight." Don't the men at the helm of the state know the omens that these facts announce? Then why have they been silent?

The third and most crucial insight to be drawn from this tragedy concerns the risky transition through which this country and society is passing. There was nothing traditional, nor anything truly modern about the horror that was enacted on February 5-6 in Shantinagar. The colony of some 15,000 persons was founded by the Salvation Army in 1912. Nearby Tibba came up a decade or so ago, a product of the 7-marla scheme. Throughout this time, the predominantly Christian colony had co-existed peacefully with its Muslim neighbours. It had no history of communal strife. But in recent decades, market forces have penetrated at a rapid pace, reducing the interdependence of local economies. Economic competition has accelerated in the area. New jealousies

and newer ambitions have been aroused. Old ways are on the decline but viable new ways have not taken hold.

In such an environment of increasing flux, people need the guidance of thoughtful leadership, judicious and firm administration, the certainties of the rule of law, and a sense of participation and empowerment. When these are absent, they can fall prey to the manipulations of sectarian demagogues who ply ideologies of difference, and sell faith as hate and fear. In such times of transition then politics has primacy, enactment of enlightened laws are essential, and good governance is the key to survival and progress.

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