

COMMENT

'Silence is Betrayal'

HISTORY IS SAID TO BE MADE when humanity has tried to break asunder forces of unreason, irrationality, bigotry, intolerance and reaction which keep reappearing in newer forms in its onward journey. But what can one say when it tries to do the exact opposite, or prefer to go back on the path undertaken.

Pakistan, a country of 170 millions, stands at a similar juncture today.

A woman has been sentenced to death, for the first time in Pakistan's sixty-year-old history, for an alleged act of blasphemy against Islam, an act which itself abhors modern sensibilities. All attempts by justice loving persons in Pakistan to stop the impending execution of this agricultural labourer, Aasia Bibi, who is a mother of five children and belongs to Christian minority community, seems to have reached a dead end. Whether she would ever be able to get glimpses of the outside world, free from the shackles which bind her today, remains uncertain. The story of her conviction under the infamous blasphemy law has been told umpteen times. Everybody knows how her troubles started when she had a fight with her fellow workers on some petty issue which culminated in their charging her under this law. She has been languishing in jail for around one and a half years now.

As things stand today, efforts to save Aasia Bibi's life and seek repeal/revisions in the controversial law have received a tremendous setback with the assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab Province, Pakistan, scion of the progressive intellectual/activist Dr M O Taseer and nephew of one of the legendary voices in this part of South Asia, Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

Salman Taseer had felt perturbed over the judicial verdict in Aasia Bibi's case and had even demanded that she be immediately freed. To show his solidarity with the hapless woman, he even personally went to meet her in jail with his wife and daughter and even demanded repeal of the law.

There is no denying the fact with growing belligerence of the fundamentalist forces in Pakistan, with few of the Mullahs even declaring Salman Taseer *Wajib Ul Katl* (worth to be killed) over his stand on the blasphemy law, few from the ruling dispensation gathered courage to support him. Despite his growing isolation within the party he refused to budge from his voice of conscience.

The manner in which his killer Malik Qadri was declared a 'Gazi of Islam' (warrior for Islam) by some fundooos or the jubilation which awaited him when he was presented in the Islamabad court, with someone from the crowd even showering rose petals on him, just goes to show growing hold of extremism in the society.

The only silver lining to the otherwise grim scenario in Pakistan is that voices of sanity, voices of tolerance, voices of reason and protest have not given up their fight; they have held candlelight marches, organised rallies in different parts of Pakistan in memory of Salman Taseer, and declared their solidarity towards the cause celebre for which he faced martyrdom.

The developments in Pakistan have been witnessed with glee by Talibans of a different kind, namely the Hindutva Supremacists in India, which have similarly tried to pursue their very own agenda of majoritarianism.

Perhaps Martin Luther King's exhortation to the ordinary populace in one of his famous speeches is worth quoting here:

'There comes a time when silence is betrayal... History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.' □□ *[contributed]*