

Indian women are paving the way for social reforms

I'll urge those who are intent on perceiving instant triple talaq as an issue concerning only the rights of Muslim women to look back at the history of India. I am sure they'll find the answers for many of their questions there.

Let me begin with an example that predates both Christianity and Islam. When Chandragupta Maurya, born in an ordinary family, assumed power in 321 BC by unseating the Nanda dynasty, which force was at work? It wasn't just the handiwork of Chanakya, who had arrived from remote Taxila. Believing this theory will be poetic sentimentality. There are dozens of examples in India of a change in government through the instrument of people's power.

As far as social change is concerned, without going very far, let us begin by discussing sati (widow burning). A vocal advocate of ending sati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy launched a movement against this regressive practice. His initiative couldn't have been successful had he not got the backing of the Hindu majority. British rulers were aware of the contradictions within our society. They were interested in perpetuating everything that could divide Indians on caste, communal and parochial lines. Despite that they agreed to create a law to abolish the practice of sati since they realised that sooner or later the majority of the Indian population was bound to boycott it.

The question is: Is making a law enough to banish social ills?

No. The prevalence of the dowry system is a living example of this misconception. Despite an anti-dowry law having been in existence for a long time, the heinous practice continues even today. And those fighting a battle with this social ill are not the guardians of our Constitution, but ordinary women. You must have read a number of reports about brides rejecting grooms who were seeking dowry. In the past few months, we have also read reports about girls who have refused to get married after discovering that the groom's residence does not have a toilet. Clearly, Indian women are displaying the capability of paving the way for social reforms on their own.

A large section of women from the Muslim community, who publicly celebrated the verdict on instant triple talaq, is symbolic of this shift in mindset. During this time we also saw a number of men who came out publicly against the practice of instant triple talaq. Hearing the statement of a father on television made me emotional. He is the father of five daughters. Two of them are divorced and the other three are not finding suitors because their elder sisters' marriages have broken down. Shayara Bano, who challenged the practice of instant triple talaq in court, has emerged as a beacon of hope for such tormented women.

Even for those opposing the triple talaq verdict, our Constitution has the provision of a review petition. If even that is rejected, they can still file a curative petition in an appropriate court. I am not sure about the stand the judiciary will take, but it is true that changes such as these are like a deluge—once they take shape it is impossible to control them.

Consider the examples of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Within hours of the verdict being delivered, a case of was filed in Kanpur against some people, including a former woman legislator, on a complaint by a woman who alleged that she was harassed by her husband and his family for dowry; her husband divorced her by uttering the word talaq thrice. Similarly Patna's Atiya Fatima, whose doctor husband allegedly divorced her over the phone through triple talaq, filed a police complaint. How many similar verdicts with such an immediate impact have you seen in the country?

Why don't the few people who are still making uncharitable remarks about the verdict look at

Pakistan and Bangladesh? These are Islamic nations. Pakistan gave divorce to instant triple talaq in 1961 itself. Bangladesh didn't even bother to adopt it since the country's genesis. Clearly, over these years, these social malpractices in India were nurtured by the insecurities created by our politicians. The self-styled custodians of religion supported them for selfish gains but the women of India have given them a reality check by winning the judicial battle. Here it is important to clarify that the first country to say no to instant triple talaq was Egypt. The 22 countries that have placed restrictions on this practice include many Muslim-majority nations such as Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, Algeria and Malaysia. Although the verdict in India was delayed, it was appropriate.

I salute women like Shayara Bano and others trying to bring in social reforms in the country. Their juggernaut will now be unstoppable.

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