Feudal Culture and Violence
[Dawn, 2 February 1998]

An inquiry into the roots of violence in Pakistan may begin with a critical look at the linkages between culture and violence in our society. Feudalism serves as the whipping boy of Pakistan's intelligentsia. Yet, to my knowledge not one serious study exists on the nature and extent of feudal power in Pakistan, and none to my knowledge on the hegemony which feudal culture enjoys in this country.

In economic terms, feudalism is now but only one of many forces in our society, and certainly not the ascendant one. But the culture it bred over the century, remains. Culture almost always persists after the hegemon is weakened and gone. The tenacity with which the colonial culture has, after decolonization, held out and tightened its grip on Pakistan and India is a case in point. Its persistence is defined by the failure of the post-colonial elite to spawn alternative values and styles as foundations of a new culture.

This challenge Pakistan's small and excessively consumption- driven, therefore cautious and West-obsessed, intelligentsia has largely ignored. Hence, the feudal culture continues to enjoy absolute hegemony, that is to say, it sets the norms of behaviour and its values are largely those of society.

Barring a few Pirs, the feudal order is rarely based on ideology or ascription. Nor, unlike capitalism, does it derive its strengths form a process of constant growth in productivity. What defines the feudal order above all is its mastery of violence. Its members practise it, occasionally with some regard for local customs, and always; with scant respect for the law. The law-abiding feudal is an oxymoron. Any experienced district officer will tell you that among the powerful lords of rural Sindh, Punjab, Sarhad, and Balochistan it is the will and integrity of the government that makes the difference between law and lawlessness, civility and violence. Similarly, any hari knows, as the Hari Commission so accurately described some six decades ago, that violence defines the relationship between lords and peasants.

An extra-ordinary example of the persistence of feudal culture is that in the last decade of the twentieth century the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has forced open private jails; entire families have been liberated from bondage - tortured and chained, women used, children misused. And a remarkable detail: these liberations have been affected not by the state but by a private organization. It is failures of this magnitude on the part of the state - and the elite that controls it that help sustain feudal values in our society.

Until such time as the state intervenes to enforce laws, and the intelligentsia actively promotes nonviolent values, the culture of violence shall continue to prevail. Rather, as social change continues at a rapid pace, traditional systems of social control become progressively dysfunctional and the state's administrative machinery continues to erode, violence shall augment in its varied forms.

Violence has traditionally occupied a central and elevated place in our cultures. There are numerous manifestations of it in our social life. I shall mention only three: (i) the value we put on revenge, (ii) the violence against women which persists and has possibly augmented and, (iii) our abuse of children. Revenge is viewed by perhaps an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis as a natural sentiment. It is not merely accepted as normal in many areas of our social, political, and family life; rather, it is linked to the identity and honour of the individual, family, biraderi and tribe. Friends and relatives express solidarity when a man takes revenge while his adversaries proceed, more often than not, to avenge the avenger. To my knowledge, no annual statistics are compiled of revenge killings in Pakistan. Were it available the figure would run into the thousands. Pick a day, and you are likely to find a manifestation.

Wife-beating is viewed by a large section of rural society as though it were a droit de seigneur. It is quite common also among urban dwellers especially in working and lower middle class milieu, and is known to persist in some educated upper class families. "Wife abuse is a fairly common phenomenon in Pakistan", says an extremely balanced and wise "Report of the Commission of Inquiry for Women" of August 1997, "[it] is also indulged in not only by the husband but also by other members of the husband's family. It can take the form of slapping, beating, torture, mutilation and murder."

Rape, especially gang rape, is becoming endemic. In the first nine months of 1997 over 100 women were reported to have been raped in Lahore alone; of these, 28 were victims of gang rape. Typically, the police registered only 35 of the over l00 rape Lahore cases reported to it - a phenomenon that adds to the inhibition against reporting. Actual instances of rape are estimated by human rights groups as being two-&-a-half to three times higher than those reported in the press. Yet, there is no let-up in official neglect of this scourge.

With painstaking and risky effort, women's groups and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) have been documenting the crime against women. HRCP estimates that nationwide a woman is raped in Pakistan every three hours, and "nearly as many minors become victims as adults". In a majority of instances they also suffered violent assault either before or after the crime, and many commit suicide. The ultimate form of violence against women, murder and mutilation, is widely accepted as a mechanism for restoring honour - a practice institutionalized in customs like Karo Kari, in areas of Sindh, Balochistan, the NWFP, and southern Punjab.

To these have been added now a new horror - stove burning - of which spot hospital checks indicate victims in the thousands. Notable, as they co-relate with my argument on feudal culture, are two facts: [i] 80% of the violent crimes against women are committed in rural areas, 20 % in the urban; and [ii] almost all victims of the reported cases of sexual assault were working class women. (Dawn, October 29, 1997) Since from their infancy children witness violence as an integral part of adult behavior, males and females alike grow to accept it as a normal, even preferred, mechanism for achieving one's objective or affecting behavior change. There are scant laws to treat domestic violence as crime, and the police are known to routinely discourage registration of cases in domestic crimes.

Violent treatment of children is even more common than that of women. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child' remains a central tenet of our upbringing of children. It is extravagantly interpreted and excessively practiced in schools no less than in homes. To be sure, physical abuse of children is less prevalent today in educated upper and middle class families; than a few decades ago. It remains, nevertheless, widespread in other strata of society. In the absence of available data it is impossible to identify its comparative prevalence along class or rural/urban lines.

For a host of reasons, including studies on Latin American countries, I surmise that among the urban working class, lower middle class, and lumpenproletariat child abuse is more widely and more excessively practiced than in rural areas. In the religious schools (madaaris), which have proliferated exponentially in the last two decades, pupils are routinely administered physical punishment; the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has exposed instances even of children being kept in chains, for months even years at a time. There exists a considerable body of literature indicating that abused children often become abusive and violent adults.

If they are serious about eliminating the high rate of violence and crime in Pakistan, the least that our governments can do is to legislate against these practices. Laws, after all, are not merely links between crime and punishment. They also set the moral and behavioral standards for citizens of this and coming generations.

Yet, the sensitivities of our ruling establishment are such that during nearly a decade of representative governments not one government has deemed it important to repeal a dictator's laws - the hudood, qisas, diyat, and blasphemy laws are prime examples - which devalue the humanity of women and minorities in our society, promote retrograde attitudes, and invite murder, mutilation, and communal violence.

I have not spoken to one official, in this government or the last, who was willing to defend these laws and practices. To the contrary, all have found them, as any sensible and humane person would, repugnant and harmful to society.

Yet, even this government, which commands a majority large enough to repeal constitutional amendments, has failed so far to act on a single of the many sensible recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry for Women which was headed by an eminent jurist, Mr. Justice Nasir Aslam Zahid of the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

The failure is of course another surrender of responsibility to opportunism, a phenomenon not uncommon in politics anywhere. So the responsibility falls ultimately upon us. The government's inaction underlines, after all, the absence of organized opinion strong enough to counter the loud pressures of right-wing religious groups whose archaic perspectives on' Islam conform neither to the tenets of religion nor to the needs of society.