

OBITUARY

We will miss you Asma Jahangir!

- Shamsul Islam

When common people specially women, minorities, marginalized communities and working class in our sub-continent are being subjected to unparalleled violence inflicted by the state, religious bigots, feudal elites and crony capitalists one of the greatest fighters for the rights of the common people, Asma Jahangir, a dear friend is no more. Pakistan's well-known human rights activist and senior lawyer Asma Jahangir passed away in Lahore on February 11 (2018). Asma died of cardiac arrest when she was only 66.

She was born in 1952 in a political family which had long tradition of opposing military rulers and religion based politics in Pakistan. Her father was a great supporter of the political rights of people of the East Pakistan. She and her sister Hina Jilani became the most prominent faces of resistance to Islamist politics in Pakistan, faced immense repression in Zia's regime but never compromised. Asma Jahangir till her last breath kept on fighting indefatigably for the rights of minorities and women in Pakistan.

She co-founded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in 1987 and became its Secretary General until 1993 when she was elevated as commission's chairperson. Later, she also became president of Supreme Court Bar Association. She also co-chaired South Asians for Human Rights. Due to her unwavering commitment against police state and religious persecution of minorities she was appointed United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Arbitrary or summary executions and later as the United Nations Rapporteur of Freedom of religion or belief.

She with her sister, Hina founded an institution which worked 24×7 to help victims of rape, Hudood Law, religious violence and police repression. She took the issue of 'disappearances' of political activists in Baluchistan by the Pakistan army to UN. She was imprisoned many times and was top on hit list of Islam-o-fascists of Pakistan and army intelligence agencies. She was not only a severe critique of Islamist bigots and state terrorism in Pakistan but she was equally hard hitting against India for human rights excesses, especially in Kashmir. She was never welcome in India, denied visa many times. Even when

she was allowed to visit India in 2009 her room was raided by the Delhi police suspecting for indulging in anti-national activities. Of course, later the then PM of India, Manmohan Singh apologized. Asma in her typical feisty reaction told the media that it did not trouble her much as she “had gotten used to [this kind of treatment] in Pakistan”.

I interviewed her in August 1995 when there was an attempt on her life within the compound of Lahore High Court. The views she expressed 23 years back are relevant even today. If were warnings were heeded both Pakistan and India would not have been at the mercy of criminals who under the garb of religion are dismantling whatever was civilized and humane in the region. An article based on this interview which appeared in an English daily is reproduced here.

“ACT NOW AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM” —ASMA JAHANGIR

February 16, 1995, Asma Jahangir is attacked and her car set on fire within the premises of the Lahore High Court. Her “crime”: she is pleading the case of 14-year-old Salamat Masih, one of the many blasphemy accused she has been defending. The incident and the case make headlines. But Asma is unmoved. “These are the essential risks of the cause I have chosen to uphold,” she once said. A cause she upholds as the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. A cause she furthers by running a 24-hour legal aid cell, exclusively for women and members of the minorities victimized by feudal elements and Shariat laws.

It is not surprising, since she belongs to a family which has a tradition of opposing dictatorial regimes. Her father headed the West Pakistan chapter of Sheikh Mujib’s Awami League and spent many years in Ayub Khan’s jails for supporting the Bengali Muslim struggle. Asma and her sister Hina were students when their participation in anti-Ayub agitations landed them in jail, time and again. The dictators are gone but dictatorial laws continue to hold sway in Pakistan. Laws such as 295-C under which the only punishment is death. All you need to do is go to a police post and lodge a complaint that a person has insulted the Prophet. This would become a case of Gustakhi-e-Rasool (blasphemy). A law that can be used to settle personal scores, including land disputes, get rid of lawful wives and browbeat Muslims and minorities alike, according to Asma. In one case, that she has been defending, a Muslim social worker was implicated in a blasphemy case by someone who wanted his job.

Then there are the Shariat laws on rape, the brainchild of General Zia. The rape victim must produce four witnesses—all Muslim males—to prove the crime. If the witnesses happen to be non-Muslims or women, the required number goes up to eight. The result is that the victims often end up in jail themselves after being convicted of adultery, a crime that carries a sentence of seven years. Today, 70 percent of the women languishing in Pakistan’s jails are victims of such laws, according to Asma. All in the name of Islamization, Asma firmly believes that this is a political issue linked essentially to the sense of insecurity among Pakistan’s rulers, most of whom have been military dictators.

“Shariat laws have been their most favourite game. The more they repress and loot, the more they shout about upholding Islam.” The dictators are gone, but little has changed under the Bhutto government. The party had promised a review of Shariat laws, but has preferred to stay neutral, fearing backlash from the mullahs. “They have been given undue importance by dictators in Pakistan. They have intruded into every aspect of life,” says Asma, who feels that their role in education is questionable. “It is worrying to see that the younger generation is turning to fanaticism under the mullahs’ influence.” But the doughty lawyer is hopeful of the future. “Women in Pakistan are not going to submit to the whims of anybody. They are gearing up for a prolonged battle to save their honour and existence,” says Asma who views the minorities as a “natural ally” in this struggle.

She also alerts the world, including India, to be on guard against religious fundamentalism which threatens to take over the polity. “Act now,” she cautions.

(Courtesy: Countercurrents)
