

Tribute

When Comes such Another?
Asma Jahangir 1952 – 2018

On the 11th of February this year death vanquished Pakistan's Asma Jahangir: Nothing else could.

Her name will endure; yet one cannot go on to say “death thou art dead” for the vacuum in the field where this indomitable and intellectually gifted lawyer fought and won her battles for the forgotten and ignored, the resource-less, and – above all – for the politically and socially persecuted is felt more gravely with each passing day: Asma Jahangir was a convinced human rights activist. There are many such, but she was a uniquely effective and successful one.

Even when she was not on the case in court, her legal acumen and clarity of expression in public utterance guided and enlightened. She personified and advanced the ways of focused reasoning and dispassionate argumentation. The backdrop of a saga was illuminated; the perspective righted when Asma Jahangir spoke. Like or dislike the point she was making, you could not question its presentation. That singular ability rendered her both repugnant and formidable to the well-entrenched powers whose vagaries she highlighted: For Asma Jahangir did more than take on cases – she invariably sought to frustrate, expose and outwit an aberrant system and the mushrooming of doctrinal mindsets in civil society that feed on intolerance and compulsion. The voice of an individual with Asma Jahangir's credentials and outlook was a Godsend in an age of the social media and disinformation. It reassured the weary that, despite the babel, relentless misuses and stream of nonsense, freedom of speech is something to cherish.

But Asma Jahangir was a woman who created platforms and made herself heard when silence or sycophancy were the only alternatives and state-controlled media the only outlets. What energized this remarkable person?

Perhaps first of all a keen social conscience, fostered by family values and example. But to make the impact she did, she had to have a natural inborn critically inquiring independence of mind and the dialectical powers that made the mature woman excel in her chosen field

of the law and the young schoolgirl refuse to carry teacher's books from one class to the next (a signal honour reserved for the best and brightest). Authority was made to be questioned! She grew up into refusing to let it get away with the unjustifiable.

Her father was a civil servant whose pursuit of politics after retirement in the Ayub Khan era led to his arrest. The subsequent case challenging his detention is one of the most cited in Pakistan's legal struggles for protecting freedom of association and expression. That youthful introduction to persecution by the state was the spur to the Gilani sisters, Asma and Hina, studying law and setting up their own practice. From the outset, the political and social aspects of freedom were their legal themes. The Gilani name came to be identified with the defence of the underprivileged and ignorant; civil rights' activists; vulnerable women and children; pressured religious and ethnic minorities; and hapless victims of blasphemy laws and Hadood ordinances. Hina worked silently but Asma roared: She went 'public'. Inevitably, she incurred official wrath and experienced personal intimidation – in the cause of the other person's due rights.

Asma Jahangir identified with a democratic political system in eras of military dictatorship. She herself was jailed by General Zia in the eighties. General Musharraf locked her up in November 2007. Allegedly, in 2012 she divulged having received life threats from the ISI. Whether she sought it or not, her work brought her fame and an international status. To some degree that protected her; but her earliest and hardest battles were fought without any such buffer. She served the UN in the capacity of a special rapporteur for freedom of religion from 2004 -10; and extrajudicial execution from 1998-2004. The UN Secretary General feelingly observed on hearing of her sudden death that the world had lost a Human Rights giant. Among her myriad awards were the Raman Magsaysay Award in 2005, the Martin Ennals Award 2010, Sweden's Rights Livelihood Award in 2014, and the lustrous Legion of Honour from France in 2014. Invited to deliver the Amartya Sen lecture at the London School of Economics in 2017, she called for a counter narrative of liberal politics to challenge religious intolerance. Asma was no cloistered academic, she led by example.

At home her work was unceasing and incrementally effective. She co-founded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in 1987. Eventually government was nudged into displaying a matching concern and the National Commission of Human Rights was duly notified in 2012. Lip service, at least, had been elicited for the concept from the oft delinquent state! When she contested and won the elections to head Pakistan's Supreme Court Bar Association the competitive gender

victory the media seized on was not what stood out for the common Pakistani: It was Asma Jahangir the champion of the oppressed and enemy of injustice who gave meaning to the office. Her own country advanced the rather timorous civil award it had given her in 2010 and posthumously conferred its highest civil award on her in March 2018. Asma's clients – the people — would say we but honour ourselves in laying claim to her.

No matter how much she had done, the tragedy of it there was still so much she was doing. In December 2017, she called for a probe into the manifold aspects of the assembly and dispersal of the Faizabad *dharna*. There is no one on the scene today of equal stature and integrity daring to highlight, unequivocally, the injustices carried out in the guise of purging the state of secessionists and divisive ethnic nationalists. Who now will substantiate with their knowledge and learning the truth in the common citizens' cry when they are wronged by religious fanaticism? The vacuum increases daily; as do the dangers of what could come to fill it in the disputed electioneering days ahead.

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