

Pakistan - Zarteef Khan Afridi: The tribesman who showed the way

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A tribute to the human rights activist Zarteef Khan Afridi who was shot dead recently - my article in *The News on Sunday*. *Latitude News* earlier published a shorter, different version titled *In Pakistan, an unlikely hero dies for his cause*. Also see my earlier article: *Pakistan's 'enlightenment' martyrs* [[1](#)].

There was the letter from an anonymous writer saying he was going to hunt down and kill her. And then there was the letter from an Afridi tribesman offering to come down and protect her.

This was in the mid-1990s. The recipient of the letters was the fiery human rights lawyer Asma Jahangir, under threat for having taken on the case of Salamat Masih, the illiterate Christian boy sentenced to death for 'blasphemy' for having allegedly written sacrilegious words on the walls of a village mosque.

Little would anyone have thought that the writer of the second letter, Zarteef Khan Afridi, would one day himself face death threats for his stand on human rights issues. But he would have no armed guards protecting him when he rode his motorcycle, fully exposed and vulnerable, to the school where he taught for two decades in Jamrud, Khyber Agency. He was the school's headmaster when unidentified militants, also on motorcycles, intercepted and gunned him down on his way to the school on Dec 8, 2011.

The slightly built, clean-shaven Afridi was also Coordinator, Khyber Agency, for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), founded by Jahangir and others in 1986. His association with the HRCP began even before he offered to come down to Lahore from Khyber Agency with an armed 'lashkar' to protect her — an offer all the more commendable for having being made in a situation that was so fraught with risk.

The frenzy had been building up. Masked gunmen had opened fire after a court hearing in April 1994, wounding Salamat and killing Manzoor Masih, one of the co-accused in the blasphemy case. Glossy, full-colour stickers and posters cropped up all over Lahore, calling for "believers" to find and kill Jahangir. In July, a mob outside the Lahore High Court attacked her car. Luckily, she was not in the vehicle but her driver was assaulted and the car smashed. It was a few days later that that the letter vowing to hunt down and kill Jahangir was delivered to her office.

Zarteef's letter arrived after eight armed men broke into Jahangir's family house in October and beat up her brother and his wife when they found her out. The assailants ran away when the house guards opened fire. One of them arrested later admitted that the aim had been to kill Jahangir and her sister Hina Jilani.

In that atmosphere of threats and intimidation, Afridi's letter of support was a message of hope, particularly coming as it did from an area known for its religious conservatism. It showed that even there, conservative opinion is not homogenous and there are people willing to counter retrogressive

trends.

"Born in this tribal milieu, Zarteef Afridi is peculiar for his pacifism and his commitment to the cause of education. Prevented in 1982 by maternal pressure from going to Soviet Russia for a degree in engineering, he turned to teaching instead," to quote 'In the eye of the storm' an essay profiling Afridi's work, published a couple of years ago by South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAPPk).

"When he started out as a teacher (in 1983), the Afghan jihad, funded by the West, was in full flow and young men from all over the province made their way to the battlefield to either be killed or to become utterly criminalised. (But) children under the tutelage of the idealistic Zarteef were learning of the reality of the so-called jihad. Looking back, he can proudly claim that not one of the youngsters who passed through his hands went to the fight (although) many have risen to ...become college professors and medical practitioners. Some have gone abroad while others have remained in their native land and in their own ways have been useful against the tide of obscurantism."

Although he was persuaded not to come down with armed tribesman to protect Jahangir, Zarteef Afridi continued to work for human rights. He participated in the first HRCP workshop in Peshawar conducted by the senior journalists and former newspaper editors I.A. Rehman and Hussain Naqi in 1991. The workshop trained volunteers to become correspondents to HRCP's quarterly newsletter 'Jehd-e-Haq' (Fight for Rights).

Afridi was already "a practising progressive," as Naqi puts it. "The extremists were more annoyed when he succeeded in arranging a jirga (tribal council) to oppose extremism and terrorism. He also succeeded in persuading a tribal industrialist to contribute funds for a children's school for internally displaced refugees in camps."

I met Zarteef Afridi at an HRCP meeting in Peshawar in 1996. All of us drove to Jamrud, where he proudly showed us the small public library he had built under the banner of the Fata Education and Welfare Society.

Since then, he catalysed 15 registered NGOs and CBOs in and around Jamrud. With a USAID endowment of Rs800,000 each, these groups focus on child rights, democracy and good governance. "In an area where women's education did not merit much importance, Zarteef had long been a vocal proponent for it," notes the SAPPk essay. "While he spoke for it in the hujras, he had a somewhat covert operation in progress within the homes as well. His training as an electrician and expertise in this field frequently took him into people's homes. As he worked on their electrical appliances, he shamed the women of the household for their illiteracy. He says that over the years, this surreptitious campaign made for an increase in girls' enrollment in schools, as well as that, it prepared older women for school."

A primary girls' school in Khyber Agency: Zarteef Afridi furthered the cause
Zarteef Afridi's organisation helped establish seven adult literacy centres in villages around Jamrud, for women between 17 and 65 years old. Although meant for about 30 students each, these schools cater to more than three times the number, totaling over 750 women.

In his work, Zarteef faced opposition even from his own family members. I remember him saying, "I want my daughters to marry of their own choice and not wear burqa (veil), but my wife gets angry. She says she will leave me if I encourage such 'dishonorable' behaviour."

But his persistence made a dent. He ensured that no one in his family, starting with himself, received a vulvar, or bride price when marrying off their daughters. This spoke volumes for his commitment, countering the all too common hypocrisy visible in Pakistani politics, where activists

who talk of human rights often stop short at practicing what they preach when it comes to their own daughters.

Zarteef Afridi was up against much bigger forces than his wife when he publicly advocated against these long-entrenched traditions. Besides countering bride price, he campaigned tirelessly for girls' education and secular education, for women's right to vote, and for Pakistani laws to be extended to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata). He met some success in all these areas.

In August this year, President Zardari extended Pakistan's Political Parties Act to the Fata, allowing political parties to operate there as they do elsewhere in the country. Increasing numbers of women and girls are attending school. Women voters are now visible on polling day in Jamrud.

"Zarteef was the one who campaigned for women's right to vote at elections and he took his family females to vote," says Husain Naqi. "Both Nasim Wali and Benazir Bhutto contested and won seats in that area where the political parties had agreed that 'their' women will not vote!"

Even these limited gains are anathema to the extremist and criminal forces aligned with the Taliban. Afridi is the third HRCP coordinators to be murdered during 2011. "He was surely the most consistent and committed," says Hussain Naqi.

Zarteef Afridi may be dead, but his consistency and commitment will live on in his legacy of peace, education and human rights values, shared by his community of activists in Pakistan and around the world. The loss is great and painful, but in the long run, his sacrifice and that of others killed in this path will not be in vain.

Beena Sarwar

P.S.

* Posted on December 19, 2011:

<http://beenasarwar.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/zarteef-khan-afриди-the-tribesman-who-showed-the-way/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://beenasarwar.wordpress.com/2011/06/09/pakistan's-'enlightenment'-martyrs/>