

Sri Lanka: Hounded by mullahs, Muslim woman writer forced to leave home

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Hounded by mullahs: A Muslim woman writer forced to leave home, why is the community silent?

As a poet, Sharmila Seyyid is used to dealing in imagination, but even she couldn't have imagined that an innocuous remark in an innocuous BBC interview would trigger a chain of events that would turn her world upside down—ultimately forcing her to go into hiding in a place far away from her home.

A Muslim woman journalist, writer and activist, Seyyid is being hounded by fundamentalist groups –not in one but two countries—because of her outspoken criticism of certain “Islamic” practices such as the purdah system, and her warnings against creeping “Talibanisation” of the Muslim community.

A Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan and a single mother with a small child, she finds herself stuck in a safe house in Chennai after being forced to flee her home in Batticaloa, eastern Sri Lanka. This followed a systematic and vicious campaign of intimidation, including death threats and threats to kidnap her young sister with whom she ran an English language school. The school was attacked, and an attempt was made to burn it down.

But if Seyyid thought that moving to India would buy her peace, she had not reckoned with the long reach of her tormentors. For, far from dying down, the hate campaign against her has grown in recent weeks with Indian Muslim fanatics taking over where their Sri Lankan comrades left off.

Yet, surprisingly, Seyyid's nightmare has attracted little media attention outside Tamil-speaking circles. Among the national English language newspapers, only *The Hindu* took note of it courtesy an op-ed by Kannan Sundaram, editor of *Kalachuvadu*, a Tamil monthly [1].

Meanwhile, vigilantism has gone online with her critics taking their dirty tricks to social media.

A few weeks ago, they warned her to remove all of her photographs without purdah from Facebook within 24 hours.

When she refused, an audio of a lewd conversation between a high-ranking Tamil Nadu police officer and a female subordinate was posted with a photo of Seyyid tagged to it suggesting that the woman the officer was talking to was her. It was widely shared on the net, and though she was finally able to get it off the web the damage had been done.

Emboldened by their “success”, the bullies attempted another –even more obscene—stunt. This time, they posted what sounded like a real news item of a woman being “raped” and “murdered” attached to a photoshopped picture of Seyyid's body.

It went viral, and such was its impact that her family and friends thought it was true and landed up at her home. Her father Seyyid Ahmed has made a formal complaint to the police alleging a concerted attempt to incite hatred against his daughter. He says his family is living a nightmare; and

fears for their safety.

Now back to the BBC interview which triggered Seyyid's nightmare.

It happened in 2012 when speaking to the BBC's Tamil Service she backed legalising sex work arguing that it would help protect sex-workers. It was not part of any agenda. She was simply answering a specific question about her debut collection of poems *Siragu Mulaitha Penn* (The women who grew wings) in which one poem was about sex workers.

Fundamentalist groups, who already had her in their sights because of her progressive (allegedly "anti-Islamic") views, seized on her remarks to launch an all-out attack accusing her of "endorsing" prostitution, considered haram in Islam.

"The threatening calls began soon after. By the next morning, Ms. Seyyid had received hundreds of missed calls on her mobile phone. There were news reports that condemned her for supporting sex work and the social media joined in," according to The Hindu article.

Threats and intimidation continued even after she apologised for unwittingly hurting anyone's sentiments. But she refused to retract her statement under duress. This provoked the mullahs to step up their attacks—finally forcing her to seek refuge in India, only to discover that you can run away from your country but you can't run away from the growing menace of religious fundamentalism.

Sayyid has been praised for standing up to the bullies.

"Horrid as this entire episode is, I think, Sharmila's courage, strength and tenacity will inspire women everywhere to fight oppression," human rights activist Mari Marcel Thekaekara wrote on her blog.

Seyyid's case comes on the heels of that of Mumbai-based Shirin Dalvi, then editor of an Urdu daily, *Avadhnama*. She was targeted in a similar fashion for "hurting" Muslim sentiments. Her "crime" was that while writing about the murder of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists, she reproduced the magazine's cover carrying a cartoon of Prophet Mohammad. And though she was quick to publish an unconditional front page apology, it did not satisfy Islam's self-appointed custodians who continued their relentless smear campaign.

On their complaint, she was arrested, and multiple cases were registered against her for "outraging religious feelings ... with malicious intent." Things reached a point where she felt so insecure that she took to wearing burqa to escape attention and to move out her family home.

Unfortunately, few liberal Muslims stood up for her. In fact, a senior Urdu newspaper editor admitted that elements of the Urdu Patrakar Sangh, which represents Urdu journalists and of which she was a member, were party to the cases filed against Dalvi.

Understandably, Muslims resent being called upon to condemn every act of Muslim extremism by arguing why the entire community should be held accountable for a few rotten apples. But here was a Muslim woman being harassed by their own lunatic fringe.

In Seyyid's case, though, some liberal Tamil Muslims have joined an online protest but that's not enough. Contrast this with the strong liberal Hindu response in the Perumal Murugan case. They rushed to support the Tamil writer when he was attacked by Hindutva groups objecting to certain portions in one of his best-known books.

Unchallenged, this “lunatic fringe” can also turn against us one day.

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P.S.

* “Hounded by mullahs: A Muslim woman writer forced to leave home, why is the community silent?”. F.India. firstpost.com - April 27, 2015. Apr 27, 2015 09:14 IST4:

<http://www.firstpost.com/world/hounded-mullahs-muslim-woman-writer-forced-leave-home-community-silent-2214208.html>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 34864), [Chronicle of a death online: Hate campaign from Muslim fundamentalist groups from Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and West Asia against a Muslim woman writer](#)

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