

# Remembering Asma Jahangir - South Asia Looses A Voice of Sanity

Wednesday 28 February 2018, by [HUSAIN Irfan](#), [HUSSAIN Maryam](#), [REHMAN I. A.](#) (Date first published: 18 February 2018).

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### The five-foot giant

IN a land with too few heroes, a single death can diminish us all.

With Asma Jahangir's untimely demise, Pakistan lost a fearless warrior for human rights and dignity, while her friends lost a witty and loyal companion who stood by them in good times and bad. A born comic and mimic, Asma often had us in fits of laughter with her brilliant imitations.

I met Asma and her husband Tahir Jahangir — known universally as TJ — in the mid-1970s, shortly before they got married, and we have been friends ever since. In all this time, I had always known Asma to be so full of energy that when she had a bout of cancer surgery a couple of years ago, it came as a huge shock to her family and friends.

Asma never made a big deal about her fame.

But with characteristic courage, she faced her illness and carried on. When she and TJ came with us on an expedition into Sri Lanka's hill country over a year ago, I expected her to slow down. Not a bit of it: after an exhausting drive from Colombo to the somewhat basic resort situated on a steep hillside near Kandy, she was in fine form, chatting away till late. Early next morning, she was off to Colombo again to attend a meeting.

Oddly, the last time I met her was also in Sri Lanka less than three months ago when she had come to attend a meeting of the South Asia Human Rights organisation that she had helped set up. We had invited friends and their family to a restaurant, and asked Asma to join us. There she was, in the midst of three generations of Jayawardenes, regaling them all with stories, and engaging with them individually.

When she was with friends, she never took herself seriously, or made a big deal about her fame. Until I read all the tributes and condolences that have poured in since her death, I had no idea of the many honours foreign governments and international organisations had bestowed on her.

This recognition was probably useful in ensuring her safety in a country where journalists and human rights activists are routinely beaten up and 'disappeared' by shadowy state operatives. Asma's family and friends were obviously concerned about her security, but she refused to retreat

into a bunker mentality.

I recall watching her on one TV chat show when she called generals who staged coups 'political duffers' who had no idea about the ground reality of Pakistani politics. While many of us share this view, few have the courage to state it as bluntly. But this diminutive, gutsy woman kept giving us lessons in speaking truth to power.

The establishment mindset she fought against is captured in a recent email I received from a retired colonel. As this was the copy of a letter sent to the editor of this newspaper, and hence meant for publication, I have no qualms in quoting from it:

"In spite of the (undeservedly) [sic] praise showered upon her by the so called pseudo intellectuals of Pakistan; in spite of the eulogising of her by the Tom Dick and Harries of the paid anti-army media... it would be hypocritical on my part not to say '*Khas kum jehan pak*'." (The less rubbish, the cleaner the land).

I was rather rude in my reply, reminding him that when he died, nobody but his immediate family would mourn his passing. But the retired officer's hatred of Asma symbolises the gulf that has opened up between the security establishment and civil society.

As a counterpoint to this vicious little missive, here's a quote from John Bunyan's famous 1684 hymn (I have taken the liberty of altering the gender of the original):

"Whoso beset her round/With dismal stories/Do but themselves confound/Her strength the more is/No lion can her fright/She'll with a giant fight..."

And Asma certainly took on the giants singlehandedly in battles conducted in courtrooms, TV studios, newspaper articles and the streets of Pakistan. Judges, generals and politicians all felt the lash of her righteous tongue as she fought for the rights of the weak and the vulnerable.

Despite her criticism of Benazir Bhutto's government, the two women remained close friends. In fact, the assassinated prime minister offered Asma a cabinet position on several occasions. She refused because being part of the government would curtail her freedom to criticise it. How many of us would turn down the power and perks of a ministerial portfolio?

No personal tribute to Asma would be complete without a mention of TJ's supportive role. In a country where men avoid relationships with strong, independent women, TJ stood by Asma when she went to jail, or confronted the state's security apparatus.

When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, my late mother's Christian carer wept and said she and her community had been orphaned. I can imagine her shedding tears at Asma's death now.

**Irfan Husain**

\* Published in Dawn, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1389867/the-five-foot-giant>

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## My friend Asma

I cannot recall exactly when and how I first met Asma. Did I see her when I was invited to dinner by her father, Malik Ghulam Jilani, to meet Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was staying with him? Not sure. But in the early 1980s I have several images of her in my mind. In one image she is standing between me and Aitzaz Ahsan, whose protégé she at that time was supposed to be, by the bedside of Mahmud Ali Kasuri. Mian Kasuri sahib was unwell and wanted to discuss with his young friends how to strengthen the Lahore High Court Bar Association's challenge to the Zia tyranny.

However, I was soon attracted by Asma's campaign against the Hudood Ordinances and her defence of its victims, especially the visually impaired Safia Bibi, who had been sentenced to imprisonment and flogging for committing zina. She established herself, in my estimation, as a doughty fighter worthy of our respect. This impression was deepened when she was accused of having provided justification for the addition of the blasphemy provision to the Penal Code. I was among the many defenders of civil liberties who rallied to her defence.

Beginning in the 1990s, Asma won an embarrassingly large number of international awards. She took these awards in her stride. She valued her title of Senior Supreme Court Advocate more.

This was a period of great ferment in Lahore's political circles. The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD, a name coined by top journalist Nisar Osmani) had been founded in 1981. Ziaul Haq had used the hijacking of a PIA plane to fill the jails with PPP leaders and a large number of leftists, and to proclaim the first Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO). He had also embroiled Pakistan in the Afghan conflict. At the same time the world had started looking at Zia's arbitrary curtailment of the legal protection to citizens. All these developments influenced Asma's mind and she decided to broaden her concerns and address human rights.

A distinct image in my mind is that Asma is standing in the door of my small room at Mazhar Ali Khan's brave weekly Viewpoint and I am scribbling something. She says: "Rehman sahib, let us set up a Human Rights Commission". And I say without lifting my head "All right, let us do that". For many years she would repeat this scene to chide me for my casual response to her momentous announcement and to remind me that I had been wasting my time writing in small letters something of little value.

Of course, she had been talking to a lot of people, especially after she had established the Malik Ghulam Jilani Foundation to continue her father's work following his sudden death. The Foundation held a convention in Lahore. It was at this gathering that the decision to set up the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) was taken.

The convention had the stamp of Asma's organisational capacity. Everybody who was doing something for women's rights, for political prisoners' release and welfare, or for the liberation of bonded labour was invited (Asma had already played a key role in the case of Darshan Masih in which the Supreme Court started the train of events that led to the abolition of bonded labour).

A distinguished guest had brought some posters and other display material to expose the excesses committed by the Bhutto regime. Asma put her foot down. She refused to allow the convention to be marred by unnecessary controversies. The honourable guest was free to walk out.

HRCP was founded in October 1986 and it came at the right time. Martial Law had been withdrawn, Muhammad Khan Junejo had become prime minister after a party-less poll. Benazir Bhutto had returned. MRD had conducted a movement three years earlier and another was only a year away. With Justice Dorab Patel as its head and a governing body full of eminent fighters for basic rights, Asma as Secretary General launched HRCP on a full-throttle drive to defend the people's human

rights.

The commission had its office in Asma's law chamber above a shop on Hall Road. For three years it received no donor support and all office-bearers themselves bore their expenses on attending its meetings. The commission started getting financial support in 1990 and it shifted to a flat that Asma had bought for herself in Gulberg.

1998 was a remarkably successful year in Asma's life. This was the year that Asma gave a dazzling display of her lobbying skills. We were in the midst of a regional human rights conference when we received reports that the National Assembly had passed a bill for the enforcement of the religious code, similar to Ziaul Haq's 9<sup>th</sup> amendment that had been passed by the National Assembly but had lapsed due to the Junejo government's failure to table it in the Senate. Within a few hours Asma persuaded the leaders of all opposition parties to block the measure in the Senate. The last one to fall in line was Akbar Bugti. He was asleep and woke up at midnight and immediately nodded concurrence. The bill was never sent to the Senate. It lapsed.

One other example of Asma Jahangir turning her sole voice into the voice of the majority was the demand for increase in women's seats in legislatures. A large convention was organised jointly by HRCP and Sustainable Development Policy Institute to discuss the quantum of women's seats in assemblies. Most organisations present were thinking of 10-12 per cent seats for women. Asma said: "Nothing less than 33 per cent."

A long debate ensued. She was supported by Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan, the then HRCP vice-chair for Punjab, and Aziz Siddiqui, and one or two others. By and by, Asma's supporters grew and by the end of the convention women's demand for seats in legislatures had been fixed at 33 per cent.

Beginning in the 1990s, Asma won an embarrassingly large number of international awards, including the King Baudouin Prize for development, which they wished to give to Asma alone but she put HRCP as a co-awardee and gave all the prize money, a substantial amount, to HRCP. She took these awards in her stride and valued only a few, such as the Right to Living Award, said to be an alternative to the Nobel Prize. Four foreign universities gave her honorary doctorates - two Canadian, one Swiss and one American - though she never used the prefix 'Dr'. She especially valued her title of Senior Supreme Court Advocate. There was an unmistakable glint in her eyes when she told me about this. The little girl who had dared to defend Safia Bibi had arrived among the highest category of the country's lawyers. She had found a place of distinction among her peers.

The most important thing that happened in 1998 was her nomination as the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. She decided to consult Aziz Siddiqui and me about whether she should accept the job. She talked about her practice, her work at AGHS Legal Aid Cell, her duties to HRCP. Apparently she wanted us to endorse her entry into the UN system and perhaps an assurance from us that HRCP's work would not suffer. We duly helped her accept the UN offer.

With her work against extra-legal killings Asma took off into the international orbit. Important world leaders - presidents, prime ministers, academics, artists - sought her company and some advice too. She grew up fast. She acquired a deeper understanding of men and matters. She quickly learned to comprehend the problems related to extra-legal killings in various countries and also mastered the art of writing concise reports. She outpaced most of the people who at one stage or another considered themselves as her mentors.

The first UN mandate was renewed after three years and continued till 2004. This was in accordance with the normal practice. A bit unusual was the fact that without any break she was given a second

mandate – on Freedom of Religion and Belief – that continued till 2010. This mandate enabled Asma to further refine her thought process and her advocacy skills. She also became more circumspect. The way she carried herself in public changed and she began to care for what she wore. Quite a few things did not change, though. Smoking, for instance. Doctors' warnings persuaded her to switch over to lighter brands. For some time bidi was the thing. Then back to thin cigarettes.

Also gossip sessions with friends were not given up. The core group comprised friends since childhood – Seema Iftikhar and Nazish Attaullah, followed by Mona Kasuri and Saleema Hashmi. The common factor among them was that all of them, including Asma herself, had themselves made their lives and each one of them had excelled in the area of their choice. Asma would often relate with pride the hard struggles they had to wage before achieving success. She adored her friends and she also admired them.

Her love of having regular meals did not change either. Lunch was usually out of office and she did not care what she ate. But dinners were always elaborate affairs. She liked to cook for guests and especially for her children in foreign lands. She had a special liking for fish and would buy it from a choice shop in Islamabad and Karachi, to be carried home for the family, the bad smell making fellow travellers uncomfortable sometimes. During drives in the interior, especially in Sindh, she would like to stop at the first tikka shop by the roadside. She ate little but enjoyed a fresh tikka to cleanse her palate.

She was a good mother to her children. A good governess helped while the children were small. She gave them full freedom to become whatever they wanted to be and her husband, Tahir Jahangir, played his role quietly. They gave the children opportunities for studying in the best institutions of Canada and the US. If any one of them had a health problem Asma would take the child to any part of the globe where treatment was possible.

Asma loved crowds. Active crowds, and crowds that kept moving forward – Jaloos. She would issue the call whenever the crowd grew to a sizeable number.

We were having a workshop in Mirpurkhas with an unusually large number of correspondents and field workers from all parts of Sindh, around 650 of them. The Commissioner had imposed section 144 but that didn't deter Asma. She asked me about taking out a procession. My view was that a procession could be carried out if the people who had come to listen to the speeches exceeded 3,000. By afternoon the crowd had swelled to more than 3,000 and Asma's wish could not be denied. With Iqbal Haider jumping up and down in the frontline, the procession marched along the town's roads. The administration struck back by picking up senior activist Akhtar Baloch. But Asma made so much noise that he had to be released after 'first aid' treatment only.

Beginning with 2010 when she became the first woman president of the Supreme Court Bar Association she led a more hectic life than even a far stronger body could bear. The long line of litigants at her office grew longer. Even the General who had wanted to slap her wished her to defend her. Constant travelling between Lahore and Islamabad, with frequent breaks for flying visits to London, Geneva, Toronto and New York City, catching bits of sleep in cars and on planes, making notes, checking e-mails in short journey breaks, she took too much liberty with her body. She was a sound manager of time but there is a limit to which hours and minutes could be stretched.

Several times I called on her to slow down, because I saw a thin screen of pain on her face, which many thought was a sign of annoyance. Her remark always was, "I am OK". She literally worked herself to death.

There were quite a few things she left undone. But any mortal will be proud of what she had done. A

little lawyer from Lahore had become the greatest defender of human rights in the subcontinent and one of the bravest voices in the world against injustice, falsehood, autocracy, patriarchy, intolerance and humbug.

What a life, my friend Asma, and what a life to celebrate for a long, long time.  
Share !

### **I.A. Rehman**

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\* The News on Sunday, February 18, 2018 :  
<http://tns.thenews.com.pk/friend-asma/#.Wpa92rZ7SCQ>

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## **Against Deification**

The progressives are mourning the passing of Asma Jahangir. For many the loss is personal, a friend has gone. It follows the loss of Lala Rukh and Nigar Ahmed last year and brings home once again, the enormity of losing Shehla Zia over a decade ago. Though Asma was more visible, and her fame undeniable, the connections are clear. These were the women who took on Zia, these were the women who carved out a framework for Pakistani feminism as we recognize it today. They parted ways with APWA to become something else, the times required something else. For a small group of us who were teenagers in the 80s they were the 'aunts', irascible, sarcastic, argumentative, horribly unconventional, but solidly there. It was a strange group then, the divorcees with children, the working women with families, the single women, short haired, khaddar wearing, unjewelled, these women were different. So unlike the other mothers lined up outside school at the end of the day; because they were not 'normal', we the children perforce were also not, and this was not a comfortable thing especially when two worlds moving in opposite directions ideologically and performatively collided at the school gates. We were the children who attended the meetings after school, who were taken to the protests; we listened with half an ear to the debates, the arguments, and the stories, still in our sticky end of the day school uniforms. While our friends were learning other things, we learned how to make banners and placards, we learned how to be careful with the words we used, and to understand their importance. We learned that as individuals we were still inescapably part of a greater whole, that we carried public responsibility, and that our actions mattered, everywhere and all the time. We were there when the songs emerged- not many of them could sing, but they did anyway. There is a smirk some of us exchange, now tinged with nostalgia, whenever we hear Ye Tana Bana Badle Ga, there is an instant memory of reedy tuneless singing, the aunts and the new faces, not middle class, and deeply unfamiliar in this country of class divides.

Somewhere in the middle of growing up Zia, we also grew up feminist. Not just feminist, but with an education that the schools did not provide. For many of us, the children, we went away to study, we came back, and saw the changes and the shifts within the same groups. We worked with some as adults, and saw firsthand the cracks and the flaws, and the conflicts of interest alongside the broad strokes of the importance of work being undertaken. We saw the NGOization of activism, the corporatization of the NGOs and also the demise of something essential. We saw the friendships remain and strengthen, but also how these connections translated into an elite capture of a different kind as many ideals fell in essence by the wayside to the greater endurance of interpersonal memory

and connection, and at times to the lure of power and the benefits of being established and establishment within new paradigms of cultural resistance. We saw how rhetoric can be separable from personal purpose and action in real terms. These were in effect, our parents, and as our parents, they became fallible. Our motley crew of rag tag aunts had grown in stature, and with that many had succumbed to the pitfalls of stature.

Yet, despite all this, something critical endures and lights the way; nothing can compare to the enormous privilege of being witness to their strength, and nothing can compare to the protection they provided and continue to provide. Nothing can compare to their relentless energy. One by one, they leave us, and we are no less orphaned for being adults in our own landscapes of impossibility. As things grow darker today, in many ways darker than we could have imagined in the 80s, many of these are still the people who can be relied on to be there at protests against the violation of rights, they are still the people who will take on the cases that no one else will touch, these are still the people who will be there in court, these are still the people that can provide the most solid advice when our friends are disappeared, and when our generation is called to action; they are still the people who have the capacity to instinctively and methodologically be on the side of human rights and citizens rights when the chips are down. These are still the people who think nothing of danger and personal risk. These are still the people who will stare down the mullahs and the army when others weigh the consequences. These are still the people who have experience, direct experience of cause and effect, and deep knowledge of the history that we are all living today. I speak now not only of the aunts but also of the men. People like IA Rehman now 86 years old and heartbroken at the loss of one more of his 'children'. These are still the people who are solid and solidly there, for me and for many others these are still the ones who have answers and clarity born of a lifetime of resistance. These are still the people who have scored pathways across class divides, across gender, across religious and ethnic divides, and allowed us see that it is possible in Pakistan to be human, first and foremost.

Our debt to them as a country is enormous, without them, we would have perhaps only one frame of reference. We would perhaps be completely engulfed by the right and the far right, we would perhaps be possessed in body and mind entirely.

In the midst of eulogies for Asma Jahangir, well deserved and well earned, I am reminded strongly of the teachings of those we now seek to remember and honour, and those who are still here. In our desire to honour a woman who many knew as a person and as a symbol, we should not reduce her, or what indeed she stood for. We are mythmaking, and that is antithetical to what these women and men stand for and have stood for all their lives. What we are doing is dangerous. When we say Asma was arrested in 1983, or that she was lathi charged, or that she was the only voice that dared, when we imply that Asma was her own phenomenon, when we imply that her courage was an anomaly, when we say that she was the sole embodiment of our ideals we misrepresent the truth, we undermine historical fact, and we dismember the collective. When we say 'ab koi nahi raha' (there is no one now), we remove hope from all those who have been disappeared, from all those who are vulnerable, and those who are disenfranchised today; we also remove our own responsibility to act and speak. All of what we say may indeed be true, for a particular value of truth, but in our grief, we should also remember that we are still alive, and that we should not strengthen the hands that would silence us by saying that we are no more; that without Asma we no longer exist. We should not undermine what Asma came to symbolize.

We all understand the danger of reductionism, the danger of the absence of real analysis, we understand the enormous potential of fiction to remove the ground on which we stand. Our historical landscape, the one constructed by the state, is populated in equal measure by heroes and villains, each one two dimensional, our Jinnahs are transparent, cardboard cut outs, representative now of a history that never happened. Our mythological landscape of gods and demons, shadows and

silhouettes has removed our capacity to engage with the real, we as a Nation seek two dimensionality, this is where we are most comfortable. We deify, and then we defend our gods, irrationally, loudly and in essence ineffectively; we police the border of blasphemy and treason even when we define the parameters of what these words mean ourselves. We of the left also have a tendency become the spectacle and the worshipful mass beneath an Olympus of our own creation, we have our own doctrine of signatures.

So I will say this. Each time Asma was arrested, dozens more were also arrested, each time Asma spoke, she was a voice among many others, her voice may have been loudest but she was part of a susurruration, each time Asma was in court as a lawyer, dozens stood with her, we should not forget that Asma was part of a chorus. That thousands have stood, and marched, and spoken over the decades, that many have been dispossessed, tortured and murdered for their refusal. Asma did not happen in a vacuum, she was not sans context, she was not a prophet or an anomaly. She was one of many.

The Womens Action Forum is and was against leaders and icons, in fact there has never been a director, a single representative at any time in this groups history. Each person within it contributes their skills, each one has responsibility in equal measure. This was a decision taken for a reason. Whereas we do at times need a face, a tangible thing around which our collective concerns can coalesce, we need at times an object that anchors our empty signifiers to the real and makes action, any action, possible, there are also pitfalls that come with the assigning of a single face to a cause. Icons also diminish the real, leaders, especially enduring ones reduce debate and growth, they remove the necessity for individual thought and responsibility, leaders become corrupt, leaders die and in doing so make movements instantly ghosts. When we enable our ideals and purpose to be embodied in a single person outside of ourselves, we are instantly protected and instantly devolved of personal responsibility. We become like the proverbial Djinn who keep themselves safe by keeping their life force elsewhere. We become entirely vulnerable when that object is threatened.

Our imaginary needs our heroes and our saviours, we do. We here need our Ches, our Bacha Khans, our Mandelas our Gandhis, our larger than life creatures who can challenge those larger than life constructs on the other side. We need increasingly the possibility of Davids when Goliaths are multiplying. We need our Davids to also now face off against the newly minted Davids of the far right, the Mumtaz Qadris of this world. But we also have to remember that here and now, our personal responses to the loss of Asma are simultaneously also political and public. We must take the present moment into account but also recognize that we are making history when we speak, that we are constructing narratives and truths which will be of great importance to those coming after who will like us be seeking a firm place to stand somewhere down the line in their darkest hours. At the time when our loss is most palpable we have to remember that firm places to stand are born not from myths, from superhumans, or from gods, but from the historical truth of flawed human beings living in less than perfect times.

It is a balancing act, so we must choose our words carefully. We need our Asmas to remain real in memory because we need to learn from their mistakes and failings as well as their successes and strengths. We need to be able to criticize that which we love, and continue love that which we can criticize. With Asma there is enough there to acknowledge her contribution and her worth without resorting to fictions and tropes. We do not need more gods, we do not need more hyperbole, we do not need to make more effigies.

So, today I raise a glass to the streets. To the ideologies- to pluralism, to fundamental rights, to equal citizenship, to freedom from fear and from violence, to freedom of speech and thought, to the idea that some of us should have a little less so that all can have a little more. Today I acknowledge my gratitude to all the Asmas both living and dead, male and female. Today I acknowledge that the



only place I will ever feel at home is on the Mall, under the Peepal trees, in the middle of a failed revolution but armed with the idea that it matters that we try, it matters that we stand, it matters that we speak, and it matters that we speak the truth no matter how unpalatable.

**Maryam Hussain**, 16 février, 13:23

\* <https://www.facebook.com/evie.soup/posts/1495661800531513>

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