

EDITORIAL

Demise of Gujranwala

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A 'religious fanatic' murdered Punjab's welfare minister, Zille Huma Usman, in broad daylight Tuesday as she was about to address an open session of her 'meet-the-people' pre-election routine at the Muslim League House in Gujranwala. The killer was Maulvi Sarwar and the press has tried to play down his heinous crime by calling him an 'Islamist'.

In fact, the man is a stereotypical follower of the religious parties. He has serial-killed women in the past but was prevented from being punished by his powerful religio-political patrons. The fact also is that by Gujranwala standards, he was no fanatic, just a product of Gujranwala where the religious parties are strong and the city has contributed the largest number of youthful 'martyrs' to the earlier state-run jihad in Kashmir.

Maulvi Sarwar is supposed to have disapproved of women in public life. But this was not sticky personal matter. He was simply following the MMA manifesto against the inclusion of women's special seats in the assemblies. (The deceased minister was inducted on one of these seats by the ruling party.)

If the religious alliance is not worried about the consequences of its 'Islamic' teachings, the rest of the nation should certainly be, because it gives the largest number of votes to a woman called Benazir Bhutto.

Minister Zille Huma Usman was only 37 and was dreaming of a life of freedom for the daughters of Gujranwala. She had organised the 'marathon' for them in 2005 in Gujranwala which was attacked by the local seminary aligned to the MMA. Unfortunately, far from challenging the seminary at the time and siding with Ms Huma, the provincial government had kowtowed and called off

all 'mixed marathons' in the province which finally meant that girls stayed indoors.

The minister had received death threats for several months. Most probably they came after it was heard that she was planning another marathon for Gujranwala girls. Who were the people behind these threats? They were the same people who repeatedly saved the serial killer Maulvi Sarwar from being tried and hanged because "he was following his Islamic conscience" and cleansing the city of sin.

Let us take a look at this Maulvi Sarwar. The man had earlier murdered seven women described in the press as 'call girls' in Gujranwala and Lahore. He was arrested once and confessed to killing the 'sinful women'; he was let off after one year because of lack of evidence but, more accurately, because of religious support. His patrons, according to the police, had "paid off" the relatives of the killed and been reprieved under 'Islamic' laws. There is nothing new in this. Anybody who knows the decade of religious mayhem in Karachi knows how criminals are protected from punishment by powerful patrons.

If our universities had not already been 'conquered' by the religious parties they could have done a sociological profile of Gujranwala as a city without a soul and a dangerous tendency towards punishing all kinds of 'entertainers', often with death. No one could imagine a decade ago that Gujranwala would become so violently Islamist in the future. No doubt it was becoming a wayside city that was growing by accretion without an intellectual mooring, more or less like Faisalabad that began well under the British but declined spiritually afterwards.

After General Zia ul Haq's Islamisation, Gujranwala began to produce jihadis and turned inward, scrutinising its citizens for moral backslidings. It first turned on the minorities and produced the famous Salamat Masih Case, accusing an under-age Christian child of insulting the Holy Prophet (PBUH). A religious party attacked him and his co-accused in Lahore when they were coming to attend the High Court, killing one. Salamat Masih had to be sent out of Pakistan to save his life.

The second famous Gujranwala case was about a hafiz of Quran and amateur doctor who accidentally dropped his copy of the Holy Quran in the fire and was reported over the loudspeaker by a local cleric. His neighbours came out and burnt him alive. The rural nature of the population was expressed in the way the citizens mistook the word atai (quack doctor) applied to the victim over the loudspeaker, for asai (Christian). In other words, in Gujranwala one doesn't have to check the facts before killing a non-Muslim!

Meanwhile, because of the atmosphere of extremism created by the clergy, some citizens like Maulvi Sarwar took to killing women they suspected of fahashi. Maulvi Sarwar began killing women in 2002 after listening to the most powerful cleric of the city (who shall remain unnamed) calling down the wrath of God on the entertainers that performed in the seven theatres of Gujranwala. He was not the only one who was inspired. The city's police and the magistracy equally took part in 'acts of piety' by arresting actresses from the city theatres. Only Maulvi Sarwar went further than that.

He turned a serial killer and first murdered two dancing girls of Gujranwala, but went scot-free because witnesses who had earlier deposed against him quickly recanted under threat or inducement. He was now wanted only in one case of injuring a dancing girl after an attempt to murder her. After that, he went around catching dancing girls outside cinema halls and theatres and hotels and shooting them to death. In each case he was let off because many powerful people seemed to actually enjoy or approve of what he was doing. The method was the same: witnesses either recanted or were made to recant.

The politicians did nothing in Lahore. In fact one not-very-reputable politician of Gujranwala whose newly elected son was given the portfolio of culture complained to the chief minister that culture was a morally incorrect portfolio as it was not allowed by Islam!

Today the press has forgotten the dark past of the city that has killed a young minister who thought of bringing progress to it. While jihad was at its height in the 1990s, the state

sacrificed the fourth largest city of Pakistan to 'martyrdom' in Kashmir. Now most cities of the country are becoming like Gujranwala. And the politician and the officer are still slumbering. *

P.S.

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