

A Life of Truth and Struggle

A respectful tribute paid in homage to Tahira Shah, the great leader of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, who recently passed away

By **Mustafa Gurgaze**
(gurgaiz@gmail.com),
Programme Manager
Livelihoods, at the
Pakistan Fisherfolk
Forum (PFF)

I can never forget the first official meeting I attended soon after joining Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) in January 2010. This was held at the PFF Secretariat premises in Ibrahim Hydri, which houses the largest fishing community village in Pakistan. I noticed a simple but gorgeous lady in her mid-forties taking down notes of the discussion, who humbly raised her hand whenever she wanted to be clear on some points. She seemed seriously concerned about the issues of fisherwomen, their role at the unit- (village), district- and central governing-body level of PFF, and of course, about the education and health of fisherwomen. One of the senior colleagues at PFF told me that she was the elected Senior Vice Chairperson of PFF. That was the first time I met Tahira Shah, and observed in her the qualities of a great leader.

Being born in a middle class Syed family, it was hard for Tahira to get an education.

While still in her teens, she decided to get married, against the rules of the society and the wishes of her family, to Muhammad Ali Shah who belonged to an economically lower class in society. Ultimately, Tahira took the bold and rebellious step of getting married in court, outside the traditional rituals.

The couple started working for the fishing community at a local level, under the platform of their first organization 'Anjum-e SamajiBehbood'. Tahira however felt that the issues of women were not being addressed properly, and there was no effective role of women in the decision making structure of the organization. She then founded an organization only for women, named 'SaheriyenSath' (group of womenfolk). She campaigned door to door, organized women, mobilized them and made them understand the roots of their problems and the way to get them resolved. She spoke up against all forms of discrimination, based on gender, caste and religion and made other women also speak up against these. On one occasion, among hundreds of participants, there were a few

MUSTAFA GURGAZE



Tahira Shah leads a cultural rally in Hyderabad, Pakistan to celebrate World Fisheries Day on 21 November 2013. She spoke up against all forms of discrimination, based on gender, caste and religion and made other women also speak up against these

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women who belonged to a Hindu scheduled (socially lower) caste group. Tahira felt that some of the women participants were being disrespectful in their behavior towards the women of the scheduled caste. She at once mingled with the Hindu women as if they were old and close friends, shared meals with them, and did everything to remove their feeling of discrimination. Such was our leader.

Tahira's real fight started when Pakistan Rangers—the paramilitary force—occupied the lakes in the coastal areas of Badin district. She threw away her *burqa* (veil) and came out openly to struggle. She mobilized fisherwomen to come out on the streets, organized demonstrations, observed hunger strikes, organized sit-ins in front of the press club and what not. She bravely led the struggle against the illegal occupation of the lakes by the Rangers. When her husband Muhammad Ali Shah was put in jail, she carried on unflinchingly to strengthen the peaceful struggle. Finally, Tahira and the coastal communities succeeded and the powerful Rangers were forced to end their occupation of the lakes, despite Pakistan being under martial law.

I have heard many friends say that it was Tahira who gave voice to the Press Club of Sanghar district, where the nibs of journalists' pens had rusted due to the extreme feudal influence of the ruling classes. The PFF launched a campaign against the illegal occupation by the feudal lords of the Chotiyarion Reservoir, and Tahira with her magical ways of mobilizing womenfolk, brought them out in thousands on to the streets of Sanghar city. She boldly challenged the force of feudal lords in fiery speeches before the Press Club. The journalists were compelled to cover her speeches and news of the struggle.

Tahira had a multi-dimensional personality. She conducted meetings with women in different villages of the fishing community, mobilized and organized them, encouraged them to become the strong member of the PFF and raise their voices for their rights. At the same time, like other professionals, she took notes of the discussions and prepared reports of the community meetings. She was an enthusiastic member in community theatres, formed to promote understanding of the illiterate fisherwomen on the issues they encountered in their daily lives. She sang cultural songs and also danced in the events of the fisherfolk. She was at the same time a

good listener and always welcomed differences of opinion. She was a bold, brave and upright leader who never left her companions alone and acted like a rock in every situation, even where it was extremely dangerous for women.

Tahira and Muhammad Ali Shah were equal comrades in their political struggle. They walked together in step, in their personal life, as well as in the struggle for the socio-economic, political and cultural empowerment of the fishing community. Tahira was also a good home maker and mother, brought up the children well, and gave Muhammad Ali Shah the space to effectively lead the organization. She was generous in her support to a number of poor families. No needy person returned empty handed from her house. Everybody in the fishing community across Pakistan called her Jeeji (mother). They all had their stories of the love and affection they received from Tahira. She once told me "You are Mustafa and my son is also Mustafa, so you are like my son".

Tahira never wore jewellery and make up. She always remained a picture of simplicity and grace.

During the struggle for the protection of mangroves, when two of her comrades were martyred by the notorious land grabbers, Tahira did not hesitate to openly name the murderers in her speeches at every forum. Everybody knew how risky it could be to even talk about those who were involved. I said to her: "Jeeji, please avoid taking so many risks, it can be dangerous in the current situation". She replied, "I never want to die by inches. I shall be proud to sacrifice my life for truth and in struggle for my community". I recall a number of occasions when she was asked to take some rest, or to see her doctor, her reply would be "I want to die in the fight for the rights of my community, not ill in bed". Even a day before her demise, our senior colleague Dr. Ely Ercelan noticed her blood pressure was high and suggested she avoid continuous travels, but she responded as always, "I shall go in a flash, not by inches". And so she did, the very next day. She was going with her husband to Badin to lead the rally organized to mark the International Rivers Day. They had a deadly accident when their car plunged in deep stagnant waters. She had sacrificed her life in the struggle for the restoration of the Indus. She rightly earned the title of 'The Martyr of the Indus', given to

her by civil society. No doubt she lived as she wanted, and she died as she had wished. Live long Jeeji Tahira, Live long PFF. ❧

Family Fish Farming

A recent study found that family fish farming improves quality of life in the Bolivian Amazon

A recent study titled “Family fish farming improves quality of life in the Bolivian Amazon” by Tiffanie Rainville and colleagues evaluated the changes brought into the lives of around 4000 families of the Yapacani municipality of Bolivia, living in extreme poverty. This study was part of the ‘Stories of Change’ series that shared emerging outcomes from research conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean. These families from Yapacani had been dependent on single crop rice farming. This type of farming was however highly vulnerable to vagaries of weather and market conditions. The families were able to improve their conditions through diversifying into family-based fish farming. They incorporated technological innovations in water management and polyculture which increased their income by five times.

An important aspect of this activity was that women led the fish farming activity. They were in the process empowered within their homes and community. The fish cultivation also gave women access to an affordable source of high quality protein for their family consumption.

To quote Victoria Zelaya, a local fish farmer, “Raising small fish is like a bank. Whenever I need to, I sell my fish and it gives me a little money, both for food for my fish as well as food for us. With the sale of my fish, I was also able to make another fish pond and buy more fish fry to continue producing more fish.”

Family fish farming has begun to be replicated in other regions throughout Bolivia. As the model centres on family based productive business units, it has also been able to bring together families and communities into an inclusive model of economic progress.

For more details, visit: <http://www.idrc.ca/en/Documents/Family-fish-farming-improves-quality-of-life-in-the-Bolivian-Amazon.pdf> ❧