

Martyr for the Indus

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"Let's try and avoid death in small doses, reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the simple fact of breathing..." Pablo Neruda



The **Indus River** is one of the longest rivers in Asia which runs a course through the region of [Jammu and Kashmir](#) (India), towards [Gilgit-Baltistan](#) & the [Hindukush](#) ranges to flow in a southerly direction along the entire length of Pakistan. The Indus ends at the coastal belt of Sindh province of Pakistan.

Since decades, the Indus had been suffering from acute shortage of freshwater flow to the tail-end. This has jeopardized the life and livelihoods of millions of fisher people of the region.

Tahira Ali Shah, the militant women-wing leader and co-founder of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Asia's biggest social movement striving for the rights of fishing communities lost her life during one of the campaigns targeting the restoration and protection of the Indus.

FOREWORD

For many of us, celebrating Tahira Ali Shah is an occasion to happily renew faith in the goodness of humanity. Happily because we were blessed with her company for many years and her presence as a generous host was always good fortune. She was always a deeply affectionate friend. We must celebrate because Tahira Ali Shah is not only an existence in person but also a concept of a consistent endeavor for justice. And most of all, she shared with us her vision of a fair world for men, women, children and the elderly. She challenged as well as invited us to be by her side in fearlessly fighting to make this world happen now. This made her an ardent disciple of the advice given by Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the person you want the world to be." No doubt we lagged behind but were never scolded without reason.

Being a rebellious women is not easy anywhere. In Pakistan it was forced upon Tahira Ali Shah to fight many battles that we will never have to face as men. With patience and a smile, Tahira Shah faced all odds successfully with dignity. But she paid the price in deteriorating health, for whose cure she never had enough time to spare. All of us can only regret forever that we did not do as much as we could and should have done in assistance for the hard work of making a triumphant movement for all of us. We dare not ask our daughter Erum for how often and how badly we may miss her. But then this regret is going to take us nowhere and the only way out of this heavy heart would be keeping her alive through her work that keeps reverberating in memory.

Retracing the journey that was Tahira's life is best left to us. Close comrades in PFF's movement will also have much more to say of her courage, devotion and commitment to realize justice. In recent years Tahira Ali Shah had expanded her work for embracing landless women peasants. While initiating her work for peasant women, she started off with infusing the same spirit in them that she once infused in fisher women that ultimately laid the foundation of what we now call "vocal fisher women of the coast". Tahira had the guts to move the masses no matter how tough the situation turned. She turned even tougher when the going got tough. The loss of a gentle but firm leader is deeply felt, but we should not tarry in personal regret lest it divert us from assuming responsibility to carry on her endeavors. We may well fail to meet her exacting standards of engagement with peasant women, but at least we should strive to avoid taunts by her ever vigilant spirit: "The only choice we don't have is whether to change the world. It turns out that every act we make or do not, changes the world."

We gladly echo what Roshan Bhatti has quoted from Pablo Neruda as a mirror for Tahira Ali Shah: "Let's try and avoid death in small doses, reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the simple fact of breathing." In love with nature, and especially respectful of water, Tahira Shah has now started a new journey. I hope her companions are prepared to be repeatedly questioned, including queries that will make some other Syeds quite uncomfortable with facing the fact of their squandered lives seeking privilege and power. Tahira's death by drowning can be deemed as akin to baptism, where the spirits of water reclaimed her as one of

their own. May the rest of us be as lucky!

To be born one day naturally leads to death on another day. So has been for Tahira Ali. Rather than continue to mourn her death, we return to celebrate our good fortune at sharing in her vision and struggles for social justice. The best way to make her live an eternal life is to celebrate her life or else if mourning the absence of her corporeal being is carried on, there are chances we might lead ourselves astray from the mission, vision and the will that she had. Tahira Shah's mission was the empowerment of the one who was weakened by the crippled corrupt governance system. She envisioned that the marginalized masses must raise their voice in favor of rights fundamental to their existence. Tahira Shah's life can be celebrated each day if the muffled voice that gasps for justice stays strong even after her physical distance from the mortal world.

She earnestly and consistently spent her life to give truth to the fact that "there is no way to human rights, for human rights are the way." In our experience of three score plus ten years, Tahira Ali is among the very few privileged to "be the person you want the world to be." As we all know, this is no easy task and specially filled with obstacles for a woman in South Asia. Without doubt, life would have been free for herself if Tahira Ali had not repeatedly acted in rebellion against her class, beginning with abandoning her middle class comforts to choose a laborer's son as her spouse; knowing well that Muhammad Ali Shah not having a financially rewarding job.

Mourning can become an escape from the responsibility of us living in ways that would genuinely respect the vision of those mourned. We therefore ask friends to join in celebrating Tahira Ali by recalling her vision and actions. For an escape from the responsibility is a life wasted in a meaningless existence. Tahira Shah, even without being fully equipped with formal education felt the burden of responsibility. The good thing is the shell of her responsibility grew outside of her family and reached up to those who did not have a sense of responsibility. Therefore instead of mourning her loss, we must come up with the attitude like, "I know you are in heaven smiling down" for Tahira Shah.

The hope still remains alive when these poor masses especially the women still keep uniting under one platform, trying to follow in the footsteps of Tahira Ali Shah. When they pledge a struggle against the injustice, one can see her reflections in their form. At every step that Tahira

Shah took, she bettered her own record to reach new heights. Her celebration of every victory is evident in the pictures that need no words of explanation. Believing that a picture speaks a thousand words, this book includes several photographs. For the collection, we much appreciate the efforts of her children, both those who she gave birth to from her body and the countless those who have been nurtured by her mind and heart.

We earnestly and sincerely thank Roshan Bhatti and Abubaker Shaikh for their affection and tireless endeavors to bring this dedication to fruition.

Aly Ercelan & Karamat Ali



Brief Profile

**TAHIRA ALI SHAH
A CHAPTER OF
STRUGGLE THAT
ENDED TO BEGIN...**

Roshan Bhatti

"Let's try and avoid death in small doses, reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the simple fact of breathing..." Pablo Neruda

There are people who leave this mortal world far earlier than expected just because their motive is to live an eternal life in the annals of history. The ones who prefer an endless life in history are those who fight their individual struggle so that they could be able to fight for a collective cause. The voice of such souls echoes even if they cease to exist corporeally. Their voice echoes in the corridors of power and is reminder of the rights of the one who faces denial. Their definition of life is "struggle". While writing above lines I feel proud to say that Tahira Ali Shah, martyr for water rights is among such few souls. "I wish that I don't die a natural death. I would love to die struggling for underprivileged people", said Tahira Ali Shah. These words of Tahira Ali Shah came true when she set off for an eternal journey on March, 10, 2015 following a fatal road accident while she led PFF's 14-day long campaign known as Keep Rivers Free Movement.

Tahira Ali Shah was the wife of Muhammed Ali Shah, chairperson of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and co-chairperson of the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP). One of the founding members of PFF, she also remained PFF's senior vice-chairperson. Later, she became the founder of Noori Development Foundation, an organization working for fisher women's rights. Tahira Ali Shah was born on December 18, 1964 in Goth Ibrahim Hydri, a coastal village inhabited by fishing communities and one of the neighborhoods of Bin Qasim Town in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan. Moreover, she hailed

from the Syed family, which is prominently known for strict *parda* (veil) when it comes to females. The place where she grew up is a male-dominant society where women are deemed to be nothing more than housewives.

Women of this family background are stringently confined within the four walls of their homes. This was also one of the major reasons why she could not get higher education after completing her elementary education. Breaking all such societal and family taboos, Tahira Shah accompanied her husband Muhammed Ali Shah through every thick and thin during the struggle. Upon her stepping out of the home for the cause of poor masses, she faced a lot of criticism from her family and relatives. But she remained consistent since she strongly believed that women, especially the ones whose voice is suppressed must be prodded into action. Her struggle for the rights of rural women, especially fisher women, is incomparable and will always be so.

Her love for education

it is amazing how she informally educated and trained herself when she started her struggle for the underprivileged communities of the area. She had that zeal and zest to be trained and capacitated. With this spark within herself, she taught herself to read and write in the middle of her family engagements and even when she had little kids who needed her the most. The day came when after learning by trial and error, Tahira Ali Shah spoke up for the rights and became a right-based campaigner, an activist and a leader as a matter of fact. What inspires is the fact that not only she learned, and completed her education but she taught the suppressed ones to speak freely as well. Her disappointment of not getting higher education could not prevent her from educating herself relating to the complex political, economic and social issues that posed threat to the livelihood of the communities she struggled for. She knew that education is not merely being able to read and write but it is about having a right attitude, right behavior and the feelings for the troubled ones.

Initiating activism

Before Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum came into being on May, 5, 1998 later on to turn into the biggest social movements of South Asia, PFF was initially known as *Anjuman Samaji Behbood*. A female wing known as *Saheriyan*

Sath was also the part and parcel of *Anjuman Samaji Behbood*. Tahira Ali Shah was at the fore front of *Saheriyan Sath* when she started to sensitize and mobilize the suppressed fishing and peasant communities of Sindh province. Part of her own self-development and capacity building, Tahira Ali Shah began to part take in theatre groups that highlighted the issues of fishing communities. At first she participated in the theatres and then started writing script for the groups too. Internalizing the activism day in and day out she began to sing folk songs and danced to the tune of fishing communities throughout the country. With time, she began to participate in workshops and seminars. The day came when she emerged as an eloquent orator. Her speeches had the flame that lit the torch of struggle.

The campaigns she led

She stood shoulder to shoulder with her husband whether rain or shine. Following are the major campaigns that she led along with Muhammed Ali Shah and other senior comrades.

- Struggle against Rangers in Badin.
- People's Caravan under 'Keep Rivers Free' movement.
- Demanding sustainable fishing policy.
- Initiating Noori Development Foundation for women empowerment.
- Illegal occupation of the Chotiyarion Reservoir in district Sanghar.
- Long-standing issue of detained fishermen of Pakistan and India.
- Restoration of Indus Delta.
- Protection of mangrove forests in the coastal belt of Sindh.
- Restoration of Keenjhar and Manchar Lakes.
- Mainstreaming the issue of the rights of peasant communities.
- Highlighting land grabbing of Karachi creeks and

islands.

- Food & Climate Justice.

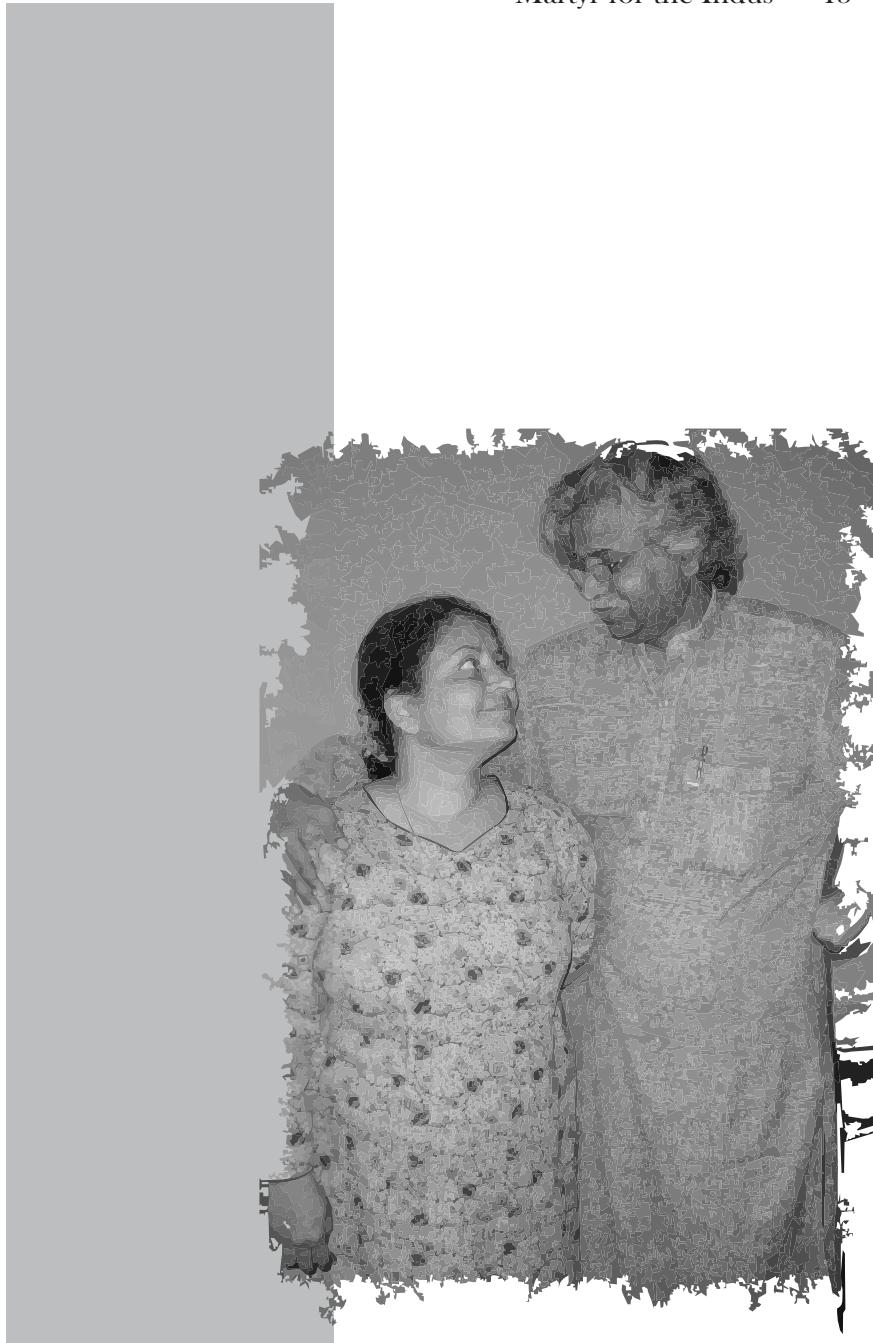
Her marriage

The struggle and the will to fight against the odds ran in her veins. She proved this when she married Mr. Shah in the midst of opposition from her kith and kin. She tied the knot with Muhammed Ali Shah on April 22, 1982. Marital phase of life brings about a change indeed. But her marriage to Muhammed Ali Shah was the defining moment of her life since it proved to be a catalyst for her activism, struggle and campaigning for the rights of the fishing and peasant communities. "Her activism geared up after the marriage and even after she had 6 children", says her daughter Yasmeen Shah Kazmi. With a joint family of a caring husband, 4 sons, 2 daughters and grandchildren she kept on playing a pivotal role in PFF's campaigns. She always stood by the side of her husband, continuing her commitment to the cause till her last breath. The fisher community along the coastal belt of Sindh and Balochistan is well aware of the roles she played in different movements, including one against Rangers in Badin and another against the occupation of Chutyarion Lake.

Circle of her friends

They say birds of feather, flock together. So was the case with Tahira Ali Shah. She was the leader of marginalized communities. She strongly opposed the corporate and commercial set-up that put the underdeveloped world at stake only to attain their vested interests. Along with Muhammed Ali Shah, Tahira Ali Shah remained in touch with Chandrika, Arundati Roy, Alexis Fossi, Catharine, Anees Haroon, Dr. Fozia Saeed, Feroz Mehdi, Herman, and others who remained comrades and advocates of their respective right-based movements.

Tahira Ali Shah is the soul from Pakistan who fought with her personal odds, overcame and then took to the streets for the cause of fishing and peasant communities of the country. She has crowned us with a heritage of struggle as depicted in her pictures. Her heritage shall keep imbuing us with the spirit that she had. Now it is our duty to make the most of this heritage of struggle.



The Beloved That Forsook Me

Muhammed Ali Shah

Last moments with my beloved

On March 10, 2015 when I woke up in the morning, I felt it was too late but then I came to know that we were on time for our planned day. In order to know if Tahira was awake, I went into the other room where I found that she was still asleep. As I entered into the room, Tahira greeted me with a beautiful smile. "Would I be getting a cup of tea today or not?" I asked. "I thought Yasmeen would make tea for us but she is still asleep. Well, let me make tea for you" replied Tahira to me as she went to the kitchen for making tea. I was lost in the thought that Tahira had made me so habitual of waking me up in the morning with her cup of tea that I never woke up without listening to her sweet voice. That day I actually forgot that we were staying at Yasmeen's home at Makli, Thatta. We were in continuous travel as part of PFF's Keep Rivers Free Movement. 14 March is International River's Day. Every year PFF marks the day with a 14-day long campaign throughout the country. This year the campaign for the River's Day also took start from March 01, 2015 from Kharochan, district Thatta.

Part of this campaign, we attended a program yesterday to pay homage to Indus River near Sujawal on March 9, 2015. While I still remained drowned into deep thought, Tahira spoke to me with her sweet voice. "Ali what are you thinking of? Here you are with the tea". While taking tea and looking at her I noticed more beauty on her face. Her face looked like a flower at that moment. That natural smile on her lips added more beauty to her face. Though it had been 35 years since we married but our love had not changed in spite of all the responsibilities of the organizational work. The love is still the same. Asking me the reason of my profound thinking she reminded

me of getting ready so that we might not be late for our work. I was not worried but I was indeed immersed in a thought process. Tahira asked me to share if anything worried me. Once more she asked me to get ready and finally I got ready for the day. That day we were going to Badin where we had to lead a rally as part of PFF's 14-day campaign of Keep Rivers Free Movement. Zulekhan also stayed with us at Yasmeen's home at Makli so together we left for Badin at around nine o'clock in the morning with Razak driver. Yasmeen bade farewell to her mother. And Natasha, Sahil and Darti bade bye-bye to her maternal grandmother not knowing that it was their last farewell to her.

When we left for Badin, I was sitting in front seat of the car while Tahira and Zulekhan sat in the back seat. Tahira asked the driver to play music. It was not a new thing since Tahira was always fond of music and without music her journey remained incomplete. I enjoyed the music even more whenever Tahira traveled along with me. It was great coincidence that the first song played in the car was the favorite of both of us. "*Zindagi har qadam ik nae Jangh hy, Jeet Jaengy tu agersung hy...*"

We all were enjoying the music while moving to Badin for the rally for our Keep Rivers Free Movement where many people were participating. I was busy in reading a book written by Akram Lodhi on *Food Security & Land Reforms*. I especially asked Ercelan Sb for the book who brought it from America. The book was really interesting and I lost myself in it along with the music. As I told earlier that whenever Tahira used to be with me during travel, the music became even lovelier for me. Tahira always used to sit in back seat while traveling with me. I could never understand the logic until she told me that she sat behind me so that she could protect me from any danger and that she could bear my trouble since accidents happen in life. Our car started moving closely through the dry and deserted mountains of historical place of Makli that was once very prosperous. While reading the book and listening to music I was occasionally looking at the beautiful natural scenery at both sides of the road near Sujawal. The morning sun rose by then with its rays warming our bodies inside the car. Birds were leaving their nests for their journey up in the air. When our car reached near River Indus after crossing the mountains, I felt that Tahira was also enjoying the

breeze and beautiful panorama at the point where River Indus had natural flow. Tahira wore a smile on her face while listening to the music and the chirping of the birds outside.

Even in my wildest dreams I did not know that those were the very last beautiful worldly scenes for my life and beloved Tahira. I did not know that her sweet smile was the last one she had on her lips.

Our car was now crossing that bridge built over River Indus near Sujawal. When I looked outside the car's window while the car moved over the bridge, I started imagining Tahira at one of the banks of River Indus chanting slogans for its restoration. When I pictured that moment in mind, I was being attracted towards Tahira. It occurred to my mind that for years I have been crossing the bridge but that day there was a new attraction nearby the River Indus where Tahira stood with her open arms at the river's bank attracting me and the river towards her, inviting me for raising voice and starting a renewed struggle for the natural flow of River Indus. That day, in my thoughts I heard Tahira's following words while crossing the bridge. "Ali, I am the daughter of this river that had been detained through dams and barrages by the people in power. Ali, come in my arms that are as wide as the mighty Indus Delta. Come and hold fast the flag for the restoration of River Indus. I wish that the natural waves of River Indus keep ringing like the sonorous ringing of the anklets in my feet. Oh my beloved Ali, you know my emotions. You know my feelings. I am the daughter of the river and water. I believe in the sacred philosophy of water. I worship River Indus and its sacred water. River Indus is what I worship and its water is my belief. River Indus is my life. River's natural flow is its life. Since water is life. The natural flow of River has died."

A sudden brake of the moving car pulled me out of the profound thought. I again realized that Tahira who was sitting in the back seat kept thinking of the reasons why I was so lost in thoughts when apparently I was reading the book in my hands. When I looked at Tahira through the side mirror of the car, as usual she was having a beautiful smile on her face and as if through her smile she asked the reasons of my being preoccupied. While looking at Tahira I could not stop thinking of her active participation in yesterday's program as part of PFF's Keep Rivers Free Movement organized on March 9, 2015 nearby that bridge that we were crossing. Tahira had a special

and active participation in that program along with Saeed Baloch, Ayoub Shan and Zulekhan from Karachi. That day on March 9th, 2015 the rally started off with Tahira's resounding slogans nearby Dhoola Darya Khan. The voice of Tahira's slogans against dams and for the restoration of the river was filled with more enthusiasm and spirit than before. The rally kept moving in tune with Tahira's voice where flowers were to be sprinkled into the River nearby the river's bank. Yasmeen, Natasha and six-month old baby girl, Darti were also present in the rally. The rally moved nearby the river's bank from the initial spot of Dhoola Darya Khan where the river was paid homage in the shape of flowers and candles. Tahira and many other speakers spoke against dams and for freedom of River Indus. In the end, Tahira also spoke to media channels in this regard.

While still recalling that great rally just the other day, I kept looking at Tahira through side mirror of the car. I also shared with her that I found her very active and enthusiastic yesterday in the rally right near the spot we were crossing. And that I did not know what kind of attraction for River Indus took birth in her when she looked at River Indus as I noticed her carefully yesterday. While we were sprinkling flowers into the River, standing into the River's water, I heard Tahira speaking to the River in these words.

*"Oh River Indus you are my life,
My life hinges on the flow of your water,
Oh Sindhu, you gave birth to the land of Sindh,
You are the mother of Sindh,
And your flowing water is the elixir of life for me,
And one day I will become an eternity in your water,
I know that the deaf and dumb people in power are destroying you,
Destroying you natural beauty,
But we promise that we will bring you back,
Ali, come and hold my hand to strengthen the struggle for the river's
restoration,
So that the River could flow its heart out to its Delta"*

While I was still lost in the world of imagination and thought, I

heard Tahira's sweet voice informing me that we reached Sujawal. I got the point that Tahira wanted me to come out of deep thought. Getting the point, I again started reading the book. When I barely finished a couple of pages, I couldn't help looking at Tahira in the side mirror of the car. I noticed Tahira looking at me with great love. That day Tahira's smile looked a bit different. The beauty of her smile made me feel as if she was showcasing her love for the first time. Her continuous gazing at me with such great love was very surprising for me. There was a glimmer and restlessness in her eyes. In my mind I was asking Tahira why she continuously looked at me so lovingly. I was experiencing Tahira's love in two different roles; one when yesterday she expressed her immense love for the River while chanting slogans for its restoration and against dams which showed that she loved the River recognizing herself as the daughter of the River Indus and its flowing water. I experienced her second role of love when I saw her immense love for me. It was clearly evident from the smile at her lips that her love for me would never decrease or change.

Looking at Tahira through the side mirror of the car, through my thoughts I also expressed my love for Tahira in following words; "I also love you to the extent you love me. To this day, the radiant rays of your love are the same as in the past. To this day, your smile is like the ringing of the anklet worn by that *Dancing Girl* from *Mohan-Jo-Daro*. But never did I know that this smile of yours would be the last one for me. I am really surprised at your smile and that glimmer in your eyes that is attracting me towards you. Your smile is my life and your love is my belief. You are the happiness of my home." I saw that Tahira was also immersed in the trance of love with an unusual smile on her face. Lost deep in her thoughts, I held the book with open pages in my hands. I was even unaware of the speed with which our car ran on the road. I was drowned deep into the heart-warming looks of Tahira that I felt as if our bodies were not present inside the car. I felt as if our souls were united and were singing the symphonies of love amongst the clouds up in the sky. We both were overwhelmed by a situation of being lost in each other.

The moment of loss

With a sudden jerk, the car's horn honked loudly. We heard the noise of car skidding off the road followed by a sudden fierce brake.

In an eye-blink the car turned upside-down coupled with a giant noisy blast and then badly fell in the deep pool of water. I felt as if our souls that were clubbed together and were singing up in the sky few moments ago came rushing down to the earth, torn apart and finally drowned into deep water. Our car ended up staying up-side-down in that water pond. I could feel I was drowning into the water while trapped in the car and the heavy stagnant water was rushing inside my mouth. The water all around was making me feel suffocated. I thought of dying immediately instead of this suffocated slow death. The thought of Tahira was troublesome at that moment. Slowly and gradually I was getting conscious and vomiting with great trouble. I was unable to recall what happened with us in an eye-blink. After hours, I came to know that I was present in a hospital. By then I could recall that Tahira, my life was also traveling with me. Where was she and in what condition? I started thinking. Nothing was being known properly. Not even about Zulekhan and the car driver Razak but after some time I came to know that Zulekhan and Razak were quite fine. No one told me about Tahira's condition. I was trying to speak but due to continuous vomiting I was unable to utter more words. Through gestures I kept asking where and how was Tahira, my life? But I realized that all around me were strange unknown faces.

I noticed that a lot of friends from PFF arrived there. I guessed that after being provided with first-aid at Dewan Shugar Mill's hospital, I was sent to civil hospital Thatta. I was consistently asking about Tahira. I was told that she was fine and was being brought in a separate vehicle following me. When the ambulance reached near Karachi, I again asked Gulab Shah about Tahira who told me that Tahira and Zulekhan were fine and were being sent to home. Upon this assurance from Gulab, I heaved a sigh of relief and thought that Tahira was finally out of danger. This was the great satisfaction for me that Tahira, my life was safe.

From Agha Khan Hospital

I was admitted in emergency ward of Agha Khan Hospital Karachi. After emergency treatment and different tests, I was kept in Intensive Care Unit (ICU) there. I was being treated with intensive care every single minute. Aly Ercelan, Gulab Shah, Qurat and Mir Hassan were present with me for my care. Many people were coming to see me along with my relatives. They were telling that a

large number of people came to see me outside and that the hospital administration seemed quite concerned. When Saeed Baloch came to me he told me that Tahira was very serious after the accident and that made me sad to a large extent. I felt as if a mountain fell upon my heart and soul. Forgetting my own physical pain, I asked Saeed Baloch for the hospital in which Tahira was admitted. He did not exactly tell the name saying that she was admitted in certain hospital of the city. I could not stop tears after Saeed went away. The only thing in my heart and mind was Tahira's safety. Whosoever came to meet me and asked me of my well-being, I immediately asked them about Tahira. For me, another biggest concern was when none of my four sons came to see me although it was night by the time. I was told that they were present with their mother for her care and that came as satisfaction for me. I thought that it was good that her children were with her since I could not be there. After sometime when Ercelan Sb came to see me, he also told that Tahira was in a serious condition and that she was unconscious since her body was paralyzed. With grave concern I asked Aly Ercelan about the hospital where Tahira was supposedly admitted. He told that she was admitted in Liaqat National Hospital Karachi. "Why was not she admitted in Agha Khan Hospital?" I asked Ercelan Sb. He told me that only one emergency bed was available in Agha Khan Hospital because of which she had to be admitted in Liaqat National Hospital. With a heavy heart I asked him whether or not Tahira was being properly treated in LNH. He said that LNH's treatment was better than the one in Agha Khan and that his mother was also treated from LNH. Since I believed his word, I tried my utmost to console my heart.

It was evening as the sun was about to set. I looked at the ward's window that was made of glass. The dim and sad evening rays of the sun were touching the window's glass in a way that showed as if the sun had faced an eclipse. Helpless and sad, I rested on the bed in ICU. On the one hand I was suffering from my physical pain and on the other hand I had the pain of Tahira eating away at me. Since the way I was told her condition, it hinted out that she had to go through loads of pain. And the fact is that I cannot bear seeing Tahira in such a trouble. With all that pain I had these painful thoughts in my head, "Oh my life you bore many a troubles for me. Where would I go if anything happens to you? I would for sure die without you. I promise you when I recover, I would definitely meet you before going to

home and I would not go home until and unless you get well soon."

Influx of memories

Lying on the hospital bed, all the memories of Tahira came rushing towards my mind. Immense love of Tahira, her sacrifices for me, sincerity, loyalty and her being a true companion of my struggle were revolving around my mind not letting the tears dry up. And I thought about this kind of tough test I had to pass due to our struggle for the rights. The moment when in the middle of the struggle, two lovers and companions face a fatal accident and are admitted in separate hospitals. I always knew Tahira became very concerned at the slightest trouble of mine. I remembered when once I was admitted in the same hospital and she never moved an inch away. But that day the destiny brought two of us at the juncture where we could not even see each other.

As the sunlight gradually decreases, the sun sets at a place where the earth and the sky experience a get-together. How beautifully the nature has tied the earth and the sky in this lovely relation. Our love is like that meeting of earth and the sky. Tahira was the sky and I, the earth. I believe as the meeting of earth and sky cannot end, our love cannot end up in the same way.

The darkness of the night was spreading in the sky exactly as the lights are turned off in a cinema before screening a picture. The curtain of the picture is removed before me. And in my mind's eye, the story began from the moment of Tahira's first expression of love for me and her long companionship in our joint struggle for the rights.

Once in serene moments of evening, I was sitting in a boat at seashore. The cool breeze rising from the sea crossed ahead after touching me. The sun was sinking at a point where the earth and the sky meet. I was feeling as if the sea was letting the sun take an asylum in its lap. The scarlet light of the sun was turning dim and was submerging into the mighty sea. The dancing waves of the sea after hitting the boats at the seashore created a melody from the dance of the sea. The twilight and then the darkness followed soon after the sun sank into the sea. The moon was rising in the east. It looked as if it was being lifted up gradually by the dancing sea waves. The increasing darkness of the night added up to moonlight. I was staring

at the moon carefully and I could vividly see the shining face of Tahira in it. I felt as if Tahira was calling me standing above the moon with her open arms.

After our social rebellion, Tahira and I had a court marriage following which she went to her parents' home. Sitting at the seashore and having virtually dived deeply into the sea of profound thoughts, I kept on thinking of Tahira's momentary separation from me. While I still kept on thinking, suddenly the good news fell upon my ears. When I looked back, I saw my cousin who told me that Tahira's parents have endorsed our marriage and that she will be living with me with their full consent. I was overjoyed to learn that. That was the biggest happiness for me that my beloved Tahira became mine forever. I was feeling like dying out of this happiness. I went rushing towards home and began to jump out of the joy.

The genesis of our love

Our love had succeeded when we tied the knot of love once and for all. I felt that Tahira was a girl of immense patience and courage. I still remember how I never went away from her for even a month and would keep looking at her lovingly. We used to live at our uncle's home since we did not have our own home. Because of living at my uncle's home Tahira was compelled to do more household chores. Even she had to clean animal dung at home. Upon the orders of the family members of my uncle Tahira even had to ensure availability of water in the bathroom so that my cousin could take a bath. Tahira had to go through such hardships only because of me. But Tahira neither complained nor told me that what kind of work she was compelled to do at home. I remained unaware of all this since I used to search for job from dawn to dusk. Every time when I returned home, I was welcomed by the beautiful smile of Tahira. This vanished away my day-long tiredness and worry. I remember during Zia-ul-Haq's worst regime of Martial Law when securing a job was itself the hardest job, I knocked at the door of every public and private institution available for a job. I also submitted a job application in State Bank of Pakistan but could not get the job on merit basis.

Making both ends meet

When I felt that getting a job was very difficult, I had to borrow loan from my friends. My father gave me some amount of money by

selling his cow. So I was enabled to establish a medical store in partnership with my cousin. Ahead of running a medical store, I had to commute to Bhunder road to learn how a medical store is run. The income from the medical store was insufficient for me to repay my loan and bear the expenses of my home. For the whole one year, Tahira had to live a troubled life full of hardships along with me. Because of the hard circumstances, Tahira fell ill and I was even unable to afford Tahira's proper treatment owing to the abject poverty. I had to do different odd jobs for her treatment. I had to work as an assistant to the chairman, Zakat Committee so I could afford her treatment. We were unable to make both ends meet coupled with discriminatory behavior of the rest of the family members. I made up my mind to go for fishing and I did it. I even had to sail to Balochistan for fishing. Once during fishing, I got my feet seriously injured. When Tahira saw the injury, she could not help shedding tears and said that I had to face such hardships just because of her. But in reality it was Tahira who left all her comforts only to be loyal with me. She remained happy living with me no matter what hardships life brought for us. Tahira prohibited me from fishing since I had to be on bed because of the injury. I salute Tahira's courage and patience that never made me realize my inability to earn a living. She always encouraged me and said that she strongly believed in the power our love and that someday our circumstances would change. One of her greatest qualities was the way she beautifully smiled and with great love and brought me a glass of water upon my arrival at home. That exempted me from all the financial worries. We had to go through years of financial depression that made us dependent upon others for our bread and butter.

When life began to improve

When Yasmeen, our first baby girl was born, I got a job in Union Council Office, Ibrahim Hydri as a clerk. Our financial conditions began to improve after that job. The first thing we did was to establish a separate kitchen as Tahira had to suffer a lot in terms of household chores when we had a joint kitchen. I still remember Tahira's joy in the shape of her big broad smile when we separated our kitchen. She was overjoyed to serve me with my favorite dish. Slowly and gradually we built a separate bathroom for us since we had to use the only common bathroom available at home. Our little

Yasmeen grew six months old but still we could not afford our own separate room. I still remember that the roof of our room was very weak during monsoon rains. The rain poured in the old room and that made us very worried for our little baby girl. Once when it rained cats and dogs, Tahira protected Yasmeen from the heavy rain by using the only plastic sheet available at home. She laid our infant on the bed and covered her with the sheet just to save her from the rain that heavily poured in. Tahira and I had to stay under that wooden bed to protect us from the rain. Such were the hard days that Tahira spent with me.

Tahira's qualities

Tahira had several in-built qualities. She was a great lover, a beloved and a mannered wife with a great spirit of sacrifice for me. Different colors of her life dawned upon me when I saw her role as a mother. I closely observed her love for children. When Yasmeen slightly woke up from sleep or turned side-ways, Tahira would suddenly wake up from the sleep in spite of all the tiredness and workload. I must say that my father had a lot of love and affection for Tahira and cared a lot for her. Tahira also cared and respected him in return. She used to look after my father as a real father. My father had to spend two days in jail because of our decision of court marriage and that made Tahira respect my father even more. My brothers used to scold and disregard her every time. In spite of such behavior of my brothers, Tahira used to wash their clothes. When Yasmeen grew one year old, Tahira celebrated her birthday with a lot of festivity. Because of her good behavior and sociability many of our neighbors participated in Yasmeen's birthday. I used to hand over all of my monthly income to Tahira who managed all household expenses as per our needs and also saved for us. Saving from Tahira enabled us to get our room repaired and avail an attached bathroom. We began to live a happy life in a small income. Life had to be joyous since a life partner like Tahira was always there for me.

I was in the habit of taking Tahira to cinema for movie every week. This remained a secret for the family members. In spite of this when I took Tahira to the hospital, we used to go outside for fun. Upon the late arrival at home, we had to face a number of questions. I was even labeled as a henpecked husband. I was surprised that the act of loving and caring for our life partner was stereotyped as being a

anything for her own self. When I took her to the market and told her to buy clothes for herself she always denied saying it cost a lot of money. And upon her denial, I myself used to buy her clothes. Chaat (spicy food) was a favorite thing for Tahira and that is why I used to bring her Chaat every week. Once upon a time when I took her to the doctor, we visited *Mazar-e-Qaed* after seeing the doctor. We were sitting under the shade of a tree when the two police men came to us and started inquiring us the way they inquired the unmarried couples. At that time, we did not have any proof of being married. We got rid of the police with great difficulty since they wanted to take us to the police station.

The moments passed by with happiness, the days, the months and then those joyous years. We were living a successful life filled with immense love. We neither had greed for wealth nor for a big luxury home. The fulfillment of daily life's needs was a blessing for us. The love and smile of Tahira was the greatest wealth ever for me. Because Tahira is the princess of my dreams, my life and my flesh and blood. I cannot live a single moment without Tahira. Once more, life brought happiness for us with the birth of Asif Ali Shah. Tahira always said that our children are the symbols of our eternal love. Tahira herself was very innocent and she had the same innocence in her humor. Before our marriage she used to write letters to me. In one of her letters, she funnily wrote, "Thirteen children of yours tease me a lot". After Asif, Tahira gave birth to little doll Erum Ali. When Erum grew old, she became a good friend of Tahira.

Our social rebellion, marriage and activism

Zia's Martial Law was on top in 1983. Democratic politics was almost banned. No space was left for the freedom of expression with a complete ban on the press. Arrest of politicians and political workers was the order of the day. Whosoever stood for their right or demanded the restoration of democracy was arrested and tortured. Zia's Martial Law broke the record of all previous Martial Laws in past. Religious extremism and theocracy were being promoted throughout the country. Everyday new unjustified laws were being imposed. The whole country fell victim to political, social and economic meltdown. I was basically a political and social worker. I was keenly interested in reading politics, economics, history and

social literature and that I consistently continued. I kept on studying and analyzing national and international politics and political trends. Being a nationalist political worker, I served as Secretary General of *Jeay Sindh Students Federation*. Along with this, I laid the foundation of a social organization in my village Goth Ibrahim Hydri along with the rest of my like-minded friends. We started working on education from that platform.

When Tahira and I got married after a social rebellion, we faced lots of criticism from the out-dated conservative society. Part of this opposition of our marriage, my membership from both the mentioned organizations was terminated. After our marriage when Tahira became the integral part of my life, I called upon the general body of our social organization and submitted my application for the restoration of my membership in the organization. The majority of the votes as regards my membership were cast in my favor and that enabled me to stay in the organization. I was then elected as the president of that organization. I activated the organization to a greater extent to work for our area. Behind all this spirit, the one who stood with me in my thick and thin was my life, Tahira. Had I not been blessed with her company, I would have never been able to undertake my social and political work with such zeal and zest. After the termination of my membership from Jeay Sindh, I did not join it again. But that spirit of progressive nationalism stayed with me. I did not give up reading political literature but even read extensively. I started off with reading progressive political literature with the book "Moosy sy Marx tak" (from Moses to Marx) written by Sibte Hassan. The book entirely changed my mind. When I would read the book at night, Tahira would sit by my side after finishing her household chores and I would read out the book to her. She would listen to me carefully and asked me questions in between the readings to fully grasp the idea. During the readings, whenever there was a mention of the life partner of Karl Marx, Tahira would grow more curious in the lines and would fix me with her eyes ultimately leading me to look back at her and ask, "Tahira, would you be my Jenny?" Yes indeed I would be your Jenny and would accompany you in your political struggle", she would reply. I noticed for a number of times that Tahira herself used to read the book. When she could not understand any idea in the book, she used to discuss it with me at night and until she fully developed her understanding, I kept on

explaining her queries.

I remember when once Tahira and I were jointly reading the book; we arrived at a chapter where the Karl Marx's financial circumstances had deteriorated to the point that their children fell ill because of mal-nutrition. Marx and his dear Jenny did not have the sufficient amount of money so that they could afford their children's treatment and their children were dying one by one. Jenny also fell seriously ill. In spite of the fact that Jenny belonged to a wealthy ruling class, she kept on supporting Marx's struggle against the class structure. Jenny's brother who had lucrative job in Germany offered her to live with him and give up living a life of hunger with Marx. Jenny replied to her brother that she had not only married Marx but her philosophy as well. I had to stop at this point because I saw that tears welled up in Tahira's eyes and resultantly tears rolled down my cheeks too. We took each other's hands. "Ali, I would also become a companion of your social and political struggle", said Tahira in a low deep voice.

During the barbaric regime of Zia, students as well as labor unions were completely banned. Religious extremism and sectarianism were being propagated at state level. Whenever a voice was raised for rights from any corner of the country, it was suppressed and crushed under long boots. In 1983, some of the political networks that believed in electoral democracy and the few who believed in progressive politics made an alliance named as MRD with an objective of opposing Zia's dictatorship and the restoration of democracy. The struggle for the restoration of democracy began as nation-wide struggle which finally was confined to Sindh mainly because of two reasons. First because the whole Sindh was angry over Zulfiqar Bhutto's hanging and second because Sindh's deprivation and feelings of inferiority were more than other provinces of the country. The army tried its level best to suppress and crush the struggle but the people of Sindh bravely fought against the Zia regime. Politicians from all over the country were being arrested. But this struggle could not be stopped since by then the struggle was massively carried forward by the people more than the politicians.

I was keenly observing that struggle for the democracy. After being free from work, Tahira and I used to discuss the MRD struggle and the political situation at night. Apart from this we would regularly listen to BBC Urdu

news. I was impressed by a Sindhi nationalist and progressive political party named as Awami Tehreek that was playing a good role in MRD struggle. Some of my friends from Ibrahim Hydri were affiliated with Awami Tehreek. They proposed to the party that if I join it, more work could be done in Karachi. I vividly remember in 1984 the central leaders of Awami Tehreek, Doctor Ali Gul and Doctor Zafer Qadri came to meet me at my medical store and had a discussion about Awami Tehreek with me. They finally offered me to join Awami Tehreek to which I replied them that I also wished to carry out progressive politics, that I was also looking for a progressive political party and that I was impressed by the work of Awami Tehreek. I told them that I would soon inform them about my final decision of joining the party. I consulted Tahira regarding my decision of joining Awami Tehreek. She favored and approved of my joining Awami Tehreek. So I joined the party as a worker. With activism, I played my role in the party. Awami Tehreek also joined in when the national alliance of the progressive parties was formed. The alliance was named as Awami National Party. At first, I was elected as vice-president Karachi East and then Senior Vice-president Karachi Division. Along with my political work, I also kept on carrying out my social activism. I played both social and political roles with great honesty, responsibility and commitment. The only reason behind this spirit was the encouragement and companionship of Tahira. She also participated in rallies and other mega events as part of the struggle. Tahira strictly prohibited me from slogan engineering only for idealism and I acted upon this advice of Tahira.

From 1984 to 1988 I actively participated in progressive and national politics from the platform of Awami Tehreek of Awami National Party with great activism and honesty. Despondently, with the span of time Awami National Party was squeezed to the party of Pashtoons. This led Awami Tehreek to part ways with Awami National Party. I was also disappointed politically, therefore and made myself aloof from political platforms with the sole aim of struggling for basic social rights of people. I began with the establishment of a platform from which a social and political struggle could be initiated. In the very start Tahira and I continued working for a considerable period of time for the issues of fisher folk of Ibrahim Hydri along with other basic issues. Tahira kept on working voluntarily as lady health worker for many years in a Health &

Maternity Center of Goth Ibrahim Hydri.

While dividing my sorrows and multiplying my joy, Tahira loved activism and education

During the course of life many ups and downs came into our life. My income and earnings also faced depression. Tahira being a woman from a well-off class stood the test of the tough times. Tahira always stood shoulder to shoulder with me and kept on infusing spirit and courage in me. The day came when Tahira also expressed her desire of doing a paid job along with looking after home, children and doing social, political and volunteer work. The desire for a paid job was expressed with intent to lessen my financial worries. This was one of the major decisions for me since the traditional Syed families did not allow their daughters to do jobs outside of their homes. Covered in veil, Tahira used to participate in social and political events along with me which was already opposed by my family. But when my family came to know of Tahira doing a job, we faced a lot more music. Tahira never lost courage and kept on working as teacher in a school. By this Rs. 500 per month paid job, Tahira began to divide my financial sorrows.

Tahira remained much worried due the age-old conservative traditions and ideas of her Syed family. Girls were not allowed to be educated. She began to break this age-old conservatism. She started educating girls of her age group by buying books and copies for girls from her own money and began to teach them secretly. If any male family member entered into home when Tahira secretly taught the girls, the books were hidden underneath the bed so that they could not know of their reading and writing. One day when Tahira was teaching the girls, she was caught by one of the male family members. Tahira was strictly forbidden from teaching girls at home. She was told that if she continued to teach the girls at home, they might follow her and marry of their own choice. Despite all odds, Tahira continued her mission of teaching all the girls in her in-laws. Tahira carried on teaching girls, doing her household chores, doing a job and also actively supported me in social and political campaigning. Before Tahira started her secret mission of teaching, girls were only taught the Holy Quran at home and were never permitted to step outside of home for school. The day came when the girls learnt reading and writing due to the untiring efforts of

Tahira. As a result, my family allowed the girls along with the boys to go to school. Soon after Tahira's in-laws allowed their girls to go to school, girls from the family of Tahira were also allowed to attend school as well as collage. The credit of all this remarkable change goes to Tahira.

Those were the memorable days when I formed social networks for men and women. The women's organization was named as "*Saheriyan Sath*" and the men's was called "*Anjuman Samaji Behbood*". Tahira actively participated in both the organizations. Despite all the opposition from family, Tahira started off with her participation in a theatre that revolved around social awareness on health issues. This was the first time she was seen on stage and she received a lot of appreciation for her performance. The way Tahira performed in her first appearance on stage seemed as if she had been performing since several years. The fact that Tahira had to undergo many hardships to support me and even being a woman she remained patient on the blame-games against her. The courage of Tahira can only be saluted because of the way she managed all the engagements of her life. Every time I heard Tahira saying that until and unless she stayed alive, I must not meet any trouble and remain safe and secure. She was seen immensely loving her children. Tahira's looking after her children with heart and soul was manifest in the good manners of the children. No matter how many hardships, her face was always seen smiling. While sitting in a gathering every time when a smile would flit across her lips, the air would resound with music.

Tahira was not highly educated. She managed to study up to sixth grade in her parent's home. Since Tahira also belonged to Syed family having a bit of age-old traditions. Tahira's father loved her a lot. She was six years old when her father died. Tahira's elder brother Mushtaque Ali Shah was stiff by nature and had a conservative mind-set who only allowed Tahira to study up to sixth grade and that too with great difficulty. Despite many efforts of Tahira, she was not allowed to study more. When Tahira fell in love with me, I used to meet Tahira every day before going to college in the morning. She would become very happy when she saw me going to college. "If I had been allowed to go to college, I would have gone with you. But alas, in this male-dominated society of ours women neither possess

the right to live freely nor to be educated", Tahira would say to me. Such ideas of Tahira were unfathomable for her family that underestimated women's right to freedom and education. Let me admit that I was also influenced by such age-old ideas. Before falling in love with Tahira I had joined nationalist politics that did not give importance to women. But the love of Tahira entirely changed my mind. The love, sincerity and the smiling face of Tahira had brought a wave of change in my attitude and behavior.

Long after Tahira participated in social and political activities, she became interested in passing her matriculation. It was around 1992 or 1993 that Tahira and I had a little family of six children. Yasmeen, Asif and Erum had come of age while Kashif, Mustafa and Saddam were still little children. Amidst these lovely moments of our family life Tahira expressed a desire of completing her studies up to matriculation. Tahira suggested that she would complete her secondary education from the educational center that was run by our organization where girls were being taught. I became happy on her desire and will. After a hard work of around two to three years Tahira passed her matriculation. Tahira could not take out time for further studies because of her social and political work. But based on her experience and intelligence she was far more qualified than any other literate person as she had several qualities.

Focusing fishing communities

1994, *Anjuman Samaji Behbood* and *Saherian Sath* had both become quite active in social and political work and had earned a country-wide recognition in the work. They had networked with different renowned national NGOs. They had even networks at the regional level. Through continuous work and struggle I learnt that the area where they were working was inhabited by fishing community that faced the environmental and livelihood issues. Their sole source of earning is fishing from which they earn their children's bread and butter. So I concluded that until and unless the issues of fisher folk are taken up and the struggle is initiated for them a final solution could not be achieved. Apart from this until and unless there is an increase in the income of fishing community, prosperity will remain hampered. The social, political and economic issues of the fishing community were interlinked. Taking all these concerns into consideration, I convened the meetings of both the

mentioned organizations. Issues of fishing community were discussed at length in the meetings and it was decided that a country-wide organization for fishing community will be formed. But before this fact-finding and a compressive research and survey of the issues of fishing communities will be carried out through visiting all areas of fishing communities. The issues whether geographical or linked with fishing will be addressed. A large congregation consisting of the representatives of the fishing communities from all over the country will be convened in which the decisions of the formation of a country-wide organization for fishing community will be announced. Afterwards with an aim to understand the issue of fishing community, a survey of the areas inhibited by fishing community was carried out in Karachi, Thatta, Badin, Sanghar, and in two districts of Balochistan including Lasbella and Gawader. Consultative gatherings were also held with the fishing community.

Many a times Tahira accompanied me in meetings aimed at understanding the issue of women from fishing communities of these areas. In order for expanding this organizational work, myself in consultation with the rest of the companions, temporarily suggested the name of this country-wide organization of fishing communities as All Pakistan Fisherfolk Federation that was endorsed by Tahira along with other companions. After this the struggle for the rights of fishing community was kick-started from this platform. Apart from this, other companions of the organization and I had attended several seminars and other events at regional level focused at fishing communities. This also added to our experience. It was in 1997 when I had good networks with an international level organization working on environment and one other national organization called *Shirkat-Gah*. Fisherfolk Federation worked along with *Shirkat-Gah* on marine ecology and protection of mangrove forests. I felt that a comprehensive research on the issues of fishing community must be carried out so as to deeply understand their issues. *Shirkat-Gah* was contacted in this regard and it was proposed that they conduct such research. *Shirkat-Gah* agreed on this. In addition to this, for the implementation of this work the services of Dr. Aly Ercelan were requested who very happily agreed to carry out this work. Aly Ercelan finished off with this research along with me.

Surveying fishing communities with Tahira.

It was the chilly month of January, 1998. I had to visit the fishing communities living along the shore of Hawks Bay, Karachi. Tahira woke me up on Sunday morning and served me with usual cup of tea. Waking up from sleep, I looked at her with dreamy eyes. Before me was her smiling face with the greetings of love. "Now that we are parenting six children but still you have continued to wake me up in the morning with a cup of tea and loads of lovely greetings", said I taking the cup of tea from Tahira. Clutching my hand with both of her hands and putting it on her lips she replied, "For me every new day is the day of love!" And then I saw that Tahira's eyes welled-up with pearly drops of water. "Tahira please do not be sentimental, I was just kidding with you", said I taking a sip from the tea cup. "Last night you said that you will go to Hawks Bay for surveying fishing communities." said Tahira. "Yes indeed", I replied. "I wish to join you to Hawks Bay so I could also understand the issues of women." said Tahira. "It is a pleasure that you wish to join me. We will leave for Hawks Bay after lunch so that we can also see the sea there after sunset.", said I. Tahira happily agreed to the plan accordingly.

Covered in Burqa, Tahira sat in car with me. When the car left for Hawks Bay, Tahira took a cassette of old Pakistani songs and handing over to me asked to play it. As the vehicle kept moving to the destination, lovely songs were a source of entertainment amidst the chilly weather. The chilly weather filled with fragrance was hitting our bodies creating ripples of strange lovely feelings within us. This chilly weather was heart-warming. The sunlight was a bit dim that day and that made the weather really lovely. "Ali, when will women from Syed family get rid of Burqa? It is hell-like for them", said Tahira taking off her Burqa when the car moved away from our village. I agreed and said that until and unless this stinking feudal system remains intact women will not be free from such age-old out-dated traditions and restrictions. "I have a feeling that you are also in the habit of reading the books on politics read by me", I said to Tahira. How do you say this?" she asked. "Your rebellious thought process hints that you keep reading those books", said I. To which she said that she read the books when she got free". Amidst our discussion we were unaware of the fact that we crossed Maripur and that our car was moving on the road along the coast. The salty perfumed air

of sea after hitting the mangrove trees when touched Tahira's face, spread its fragrance across her face. Brisk gusts of the coastal winds touching Tahira's lips created a strange tinkering feeling. This made her lips even more scarlet and her smile more elegant.

When our car arrived at Kaka Peer village after crossing Younisabad mighty whitish waves of the ocean were seen at a distance. It was felt as if these whitish ocean waves were producing milk for the fishing communities living over there. There was a big crowd of picnickers at Hawks Bay as it was Sunday. "Ali, first of all I would like to present roses to this mighty sea that looks like god of fishing community. And then I would love to walk barefoot on the seashore and enjoy its humid salty air", said Tahira. "Okay, we first go nearby the sea and then go for meeting with fisher folk at their doorstep." I said to her. We left our shoes in the car and then paid tribute to the mighty sea by sprinkling flowers brought by Tahira. We also prayed for our eternal companionship. We then walked together along the seashore. Ambling across the shore Tahira and I held each others' hands, opened our arms and started looking at the mighty whitish waves. While we stood in front of the sea and the waves that came rushing towards us, we felt as if the waves were coming to give us an eternal asylum in their hugs. These waves that danced like the *Dancing Girl* from *Mohan-jo-Daro* retreated after hitting our feet, we closed our eyes and a feeling as if we both were dancing above the sea waves entered in both of our souls coupled with the feeling that as if the music of the anklets in Tahira's feet was resounding up in air, creating music. Then we moved towards the dwellings of the fishing communities. "After being free from the meeting I would love to see the sight of the sun sinking in the sea", said Tahira.

A large number of men and women had gathered for meeting in the neighborhood of Kaka Peer, inhibited by fishing community. People started to tell their problems one by one. I was advising them for gathering under one platform for the protection of their rights and their livelihood. I was telling them how deep sea trawlers were destroying their livelihood. Moreover, the industrial, agricultural and municipal waste was being dumped into the sea that polluted it to a greater extent. I told the participants that 500 million gallons of industrial and municipal waste only from Karachi was being dumped

into sea polluting its ecology and environment. Tahira was also making them understand the importance of getting their rights in an elegant manner. She told them that the real heirs to Karachi are fisher people and those who established the city basically belonged to fishing communities. During her emotional speech she said, "We are proud of Mai Kalachi who was the leader and creator of Karachi and that Karachi is named after her. Fishing people of Kaka Peer were surprised to see a smiling sociable Jeeji Tahira speaking in an emotional manner. This emotional speech of Tahira caught the attention of the fishing community present there in the meeting as they were seen deeply thinking about her. She said that it was a great pity that all over the coast of Hawks Bay palatial huts were built by the influential wealthy class just because of their own fun and sightseeing. Those huts had every luxury needed. But on that precious beach there are poor dwellings of the poor fishing people that lack even the basic facilities of life. She said that it was the biggest injustice and human rights violation. As soon as Tahira finished her speech, it received a great applaud and everyone said that Jeeji spoke their mind. As the meeting ended the women present over there surrounded Tahira and hugged her expecting her as their Messiah. I became very happy to see these moments when Tahira received that much love. There was an added beauty in Tahira's smile and her elegant laughter won every one's heart. It was sun-set by then and Tahira had to see the sun sinking in the sea. So we got out of the place and reached at another hamlet of Hawks Bay named Soomar Goth.

That evening was more beautified by sun-set. Tahira and I reached the coast after crossing Soomar Goth to meet a large crowd of the people over there. The giant noisy sea waves hit the pebbly beach and then ran back into the sea. This repeated hit and run sight of the waves made the environment more serene. The sun was preparing to set in the sea in the distance. The scarlet sun rays were gradually disappearing behind those mighty waves. When Tahira was looking at that gradual setting sun and that mighty sea, she felt as if the waves were like layers of a thick carpet. She looked at the most distant point where that blue sky and the sea seemed to have met with each other. While feasting her eyes with the scene Tahira said,

"This lovely meeting of the sea and the sky is like the meeting of two souls loving each other. She kept on looking at the sea waves amidst those wintery moments. For her, the movement of the waves was like a giant carpet being folded here and there.

All the huts of the wealthy people at the coast were well-lit and decorated. The light from those exotic huts was reflected back into sea waves, whereas the poor dwellings of the village Soomar Goth at the coast were lit with dark dim light of kerosene lamps. After observing this Tahira could not help saying that the real owners of Karachi were deprived of the basic facilities whereas the huts of the wealthy were lit day and night. This was indeed big discrimination. This was clearly an unequal distribution of resources. Tahira looked at me smilingly and pointed out to fishermen's boats lit by dim lamps. The fishermen were talking and laughing out loudly, may be they were preparing to go for fishing. The boats were in a gradual movement at the seashore. Songs were being played in one of those boats. The melody of the songs, the music of the waves and the loud voice of those fishermen showed the hustle and bustle of life. Enjoying this jubilant environment Tahira also began to sing a song happily, "*Sathi tera mera sathi lehrata samander haya ho haya ho...*"

After the meeting with the fishing community of Soomar Goth, Tahira felt it might rain even in that wintry January. She said she wanted to visit the homes of those poor fishing people. I asked Tahira to visit Baleji village which was also situated at the coast. After covering some distance when we reached Baleji Village, Tahira and I saw that mighty waves of sea were hitting the sea shore and as if the old weak boats of the poor fishermen were shivering out of coldness.

It seemed as if the moon in the east was beautifully smiling. Thy blue sky was adorned with shining stars and the clouds were trying to hide their beauty. The air became even more immersed in the salty sea water. There was a sad scene of poor huts of the poor fishing communities of Baleji village. It looked as if those poor huts were sharing their grief with one another. These huts were the roofs over the heads of the ones who were the owners of Karachi. Tahira saw that the door of one of the huts was open. That poor family's hut was

a bit enlightened by some moonlight. Tahira entered into the hut while I stopped myself outside. Tahira saw that a fishing net, some broken plates and bowls were glistening in that dim moonlight inside the hut.

A wooden cot was present in one of the corners of the hut covered by old ragged blankets. Four little children were in a deep slumber on that broken cot. Sitting beside them was their mother who was singing Shah Latif's *Sur Samoondi Waai* (*verses from the poetry of Shah Latif*). The sudden noise of the waves took Tahira by surprise. It looked as if the noisy sea waves were apprising of any danger amidst the darkness of the night. The mother of those children stood and properly tucked her children in the blanket and then began to pray so that they can be safe from any danger. "O God of the fisher people, Oh God of the poor fisher people of the world, You know that the only guardian of these children and my life partner has gone for fishing even in the darkness, mighty sea waves and rough weather. Oh God please take care of my husband in case of dangers in the sea." In spite of noisy waves Tahira could still hear the prayers of that poor helpless woman.

After listening to the woman's prayers, Tahira put her hand on the shoulder of that woman. Her hand was wet because of rain drops out there. Feeling Tahira's hand the woman looked back and found Tahira standing behind her smilingly. The woman asked Tahira who she was and that how did she manage to come to that poverty-stricken village amidst heavy rain. "My name is Tahira and you can also call me Jeeji Tahira", Tahira told the woman. "Oh, so you are Jeeji Tahira! We heard a lot about you since some of our villagers were also present in the meeting at Soomar Goth and all of them were appreciating you. Jeeji you better know our poor conditions and troubles." said the woman to Tahira. "Yes I know all of your hardships and I also heard your prayer", said Tahira. Tears welled up in the eyes of Tahira as she hugged that poor woman with great love. The poor fisher woman began to cry in the hugs of Tahira and said that her husband took the risk of his life in order to bring bread and butter for his family.

Afterwards Tahira sat on a torn blanket along with that woman. While talking to her Tahira told her woman that she knew that fisher people are compelled to risk their lives in the sea only because of family. The woman woefully said that her children are also not grown-ups so they cannot help their father in fishing. It seemed the woman was having strange low feelings when she asked Tahira, "Jeeji would my children also be fisher men when they grow up? If yes, then I will be much concerned." While responding to her Tahira said, "After visiting the down-trodden village in the middle of this rough weather and rain, I feel that the story of Moriro and how he fought with that giant crocodile in the sea is still alive here in your life. Every day the fishermen have to snatch their bread and butter from the giant mouth of the colossal sea with great hardship. The sea is the only source of earning of fishermen and it is being polluted and exploited continually. My other concerns also include that your husband goes for fishing risking his life but the ones who benefit from his hardships are middle-men, traders and the market making a lot of money without facing any hardship. This is a great injustice."

Tahira told the woman that she heard of a woman from that village whose husband was arrested while fishing and detained in an Indian Jail. The woman said to Tahira that she lived nearby her home. She said that she would take Tahira to her home. "Jeeji, one way or the other, we all fisher people remain detained whether in Indian Jails or controlled and detained by middle-men, traders and the market", said the woman. When Tahira looked outside the hut, dark clouds in the sky painted a dreary picture. The dark clouds were occasionally hiding the moon putting a dark cover on the sea.

The poor woman then took a dark dim lamp to take Tahira to the woman whose husband was detained in Indian Jail. That woman also lived in a poor shanty amidst the rainfall. The door of that hut was very weak and closed. There was no light in the hut. The woman with Tahira said she was seriously ill. Tahira could see that the hut belonged to a woman whose husband was detained in India only because he ventured into the sea risking his life for his family meals and was arrested without any crime.

Looking at the sky Tahira heaved a deep sigh and thought that yes this hut belonged to the women who along with her two little children was deprived of one time of meal and was dying of hunger. The noise of the waves and the gusty winds created a panic amidst these feelings. The woman with Tahira knocked at the door but no one opened the door. After few moments the door opened with the sudden blow of wind. When Tahira and the woman entered into that poor hut it was pitch-dark inside. With the help of their lantern they came to know that the wife of that detained fisherman was sleeping on a torn ragged blanket along with the two little children. The woman with Tahira tried to wake her up by calling her and shaking her shoulder but the woman did not move at all. Then Tahira started to gradually remove that ragged shawl from the woman to wake her up but the wife of the detained fishermen did not move. Tahira and her companion finally came to know that the woman had gone to an eternal sleep waiting for her husband and some meal for herself and for her children.

Tahira began to weep a lot upon knowing of her death. The woman was dead due to poverty, injustice, malnutrition, lack of resources, border conflicts and other reasons which were not her fault. Tahira started to ask in a sad tone that when the poor fishing communities were to be freed from all these human rights violations and injustice. Why both India and Pakistan make these poor fishermen suffer from the injustice? The woman with Tahira took the children of the dead woman and said she was already parenting her four children. Tahira said to the woman that until the detained father is released, she would be sending some amount monthly for these those children. Tahira also gave some amount for the funeral of the dead woman. Tahira finally left the hut with tears and questions as to whether hardship of fishermen would lessen or not.

The heavy rain stopped and sky became clear allowing the moon to lessen the darkness over the village. It was too late so Tahira and I left for home in the car. When the car started moving away from the dwellings of these fishing communities, Tahira noticed that dwellings of fishing communities presented a picture of a graveyard

with pitch darkness except for few lanterns. When the sky became a bit clear from somber clouds the surroundings were lit with the moon-light. The moon-light when fell on the mangrove trees on both sides of the road presented a beautiful picture. When exotic birds found in the mangrove trees chirped, the listener felt as if a woman was singing a great melody. The birds and other aquatic creatures were singing their own unique songs. The intensity of the sea waves had lessened a bit. The fishermen were heading to the sea shore with their boats. All this sound and noise of boats, fishermen, their crews and the birds was breaking the silence amidst the early dawn. The wives of the fishermen awaited their life partners who reached home with the small fish catch.

Formation of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum

In February 1998 a large gathering of fishing community representatives was held in Ibrahim Hydri participated by fisher folk representatives from across the country. I announced in that gathering that on May 5, 1998 a conference shall be organized on the issues of fisher people. I said that a movement was needed for several issues of the fishing communities. Afterwards preparations of the conference started and invitations were sent including civil society.

The conference was to be held in Mehran Hotel Karachi on 5th May 1998. This was going to be the biggest event for the issues of fishing communities. But on the same day my beloved Tahira had to undergo a medical surgery. And on the other hand I was leading the conference. But it was the love and courage of Tahira who infused the same spirit in me by telling me that we were never separate but we were one soul. And that struggle of the rights of fishing communities was our collective struggle.

With all this support from Tahira, I participated and led the conference by making the inauguration speech. The rest of the friends presented the issues in their speeches followed by the opinions from civil society. Afterwards, those representatives from fishing communities, civil society members and the rest of the participants were divided into groups for further consultations. Some of the decisions were also made at the end of the conference. One of the major decisions was the formation of some committees based on fishing community representatives and the civil society

members. But sadly these committees could not deliver as expected.

The last three speakers of the conference included, Karamat Ali and Aly Ercelan and me who further elaborated the issues related with fishing communities. In my presidential address, I formally announced the formation of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum. I stressed the point that PFF was to be made a country-wide social and political movement. I also announced that PFF would not receive any donor funding. Initially it was followed but then afterwards PFF began donor-dependent. I was made the convener of PFF.

Formation of World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP)

In November 1997, an international conference for fisher people was organized in Delhi India that was participated by representative from 40 countries. From Pakistan, All Pakistan Fisherfolk Federation's chairman (myself) and Saeed Baloch from Fishermen Cooperative Society were invited. From PILER Sharafat and BM Kati, Khadim Hussain from Oxfam and Ayoub Shan from Anjuman Samaji Behbood were invited as observers. I was made the representative for Asia representation in inauguration ceremony. This was a proud moment for Pakistan. After a week of consultation and discussions, World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP) was founded to address issues of fishing community internationally. Apart from the central office bearers of WFFP, two members from each continent were elected for the central committee. I was offered male membership from the Asia. I declined the offer since I was busy in strengthening our own organization in our own country and since I was leading that organization. The second big decision of that international conference was the celebration of November, 21 as World Fisheries Day starting from the year 1998. It was then decided in the first meeting of PFF that the World Fisheries Day would be celebrated at Ibrahim Hydri. World Fisheries Day was the first biggest event to be organized by PFF. That was a new challenge for Tahira and me. I started to collect donations from community, citizens and civil society. I thought of presenting a theatre on the issues of fishing communities on World Fisheries Day. I managed to formulate a male team for the drama but a female team for the task was a challenge. The central team of PFF was not that much active since PFF was newly set up.

Tahira's participation in Asian Social Forum in India

Asian Social Forum was organized in Hyderabad Dakhan, India in 2003. In those days PFF started working with ActionAid Pakistan. Two female social activists from Pakistan were to be sent to the Forum by ActionAid. ActionAid's country Director Fouzia Saeed proposed Tahira from PFF to participate in the Forum. After passport and visa processing I accompanied Tahira to ActionAid office. While driving the car I kept on looking at Tahira's face who was thinking that I might feel alone at home after her departure. We had to go to ActionAid's office because Tahira's passport and the visa were there at the office. Tahira reached at the office along with me but the friends at the office were delaying in handing over her passport and visa. After a lot of delay Tahira and I left for the airport one hour before the flight. I had to drive too fast to catch the flight and reached at the airport half an hour before the flight. But the friends from ActionAid who had Tahira's passport reached at the airport when doors of the plane were finally closed. Tahira and I were utterly disappointed at this. Tahira still thought she could manage and she told me that flight for India was from Islamabad so something could still be done. I talked to friends in ActionAid. Upon queries it was known that one flight for Lahore could be availed from Karachi. So I saw her off for Lahore finally. Tahira was then brought to ActionAid Lahore office after reaching Lahore airport. Tahira told them to help her reach Islamabad immediately so that she could catch her flight. But ActionAid Lahore staff told Tahira that late-night travel on the Motorway was risky and since there was little time left for Tahira's flight so it was almost impossible for her to reach Islamabad in time. Upon her insistence the staff contacted Fouzia Saeed who told them that Tahira being a lady had struggled to reach at Lahore with great trouble from Karachi and that they must help her reach Islamabad. Finally Tahira left for Islamabad from Lahore in late night and reached at the airport just 15 minutes before the flight. Upon meeting Tahira for the first time, Fouzia Saeed praised her boldness and hugged her and they became friends forever. This boldness of Tahira made me proud of her all the times. Tahira actively participated in the Forum. Fouzia told Tahira and Aqeela Naz that she wanted to see them proving their presence in the Forum. So Tahira tried to participate in

all the events of the Forum and also made a speech. Fouzia was impressed by Tahira's active participation. Since Tahira had started her struggle for fishing communities so she also wanted to meet representatives from fishing communities. In this regard she got to meet with Thomas Kocherry. Tahira became very happy to meet with Thomas Kocherry since he had father-like affection for her. During her initial meetings Thomas asked Tahira if she knew Muhammed Ali Shah and when he came to know that she was wife of Muhammed Ali Shah, he became really very happy. He took Tahira to different events during her visit to India and encouraged her to make speeches. At the end of World Social Forum, Thomas Kocherry took Tahira to market and asked to buy what she liked so that he could pay the bill. He said to Tahira that he was like her father. Due to such respect Tahira bought an inexpensive item to make him happy. Thomas admitted that Tahira was the real leader of fishing communities and the boldness, courage and hard work with which Tahira worked must indeed be admitted.

Tahira's work for women's engagement in PFF's movement

Once upon an evening, I was quite obsessed with making November 21 event as the successful one. Tahira was busy preparing dinner and noticed that I was pre-occupied and much concerned. She silently came to me. I felt a tender touch of her hands and she hugged me from behind as I sat thinking about the event. "Why you are so worried my beloved", asked Tahira. I told her that I was worried because of World Fisheries day since there was no team of female members to present the theatre. At least three females were required for the theatre. "Ali don't you worry I will myself perform in the theatre and would also arrange couple of other women", said Tahira. Showing my concerns I said that how could Tahira perform when she recently underwent a medical surgery? There will be a crowd of around 10000 people and that our family would not approve of this. But Tahira was ready to sacrifice for this great cause and ensured that she was physically fine. The first mega event became an achievement because of the efforts of Tahira and her children who also performed on stage. Afterwards, PFF was systematically organized as a country-wide social movement advocating for the rights of fishing communities and their issues. Tahira was always there to ensure women participation in all PFF

events. In the year 2000 I organized a large gathering of fishing community in Badin. The gathering only comprised of men. Pakistan Rangers (para-military forces) were influencing the fishing communities at that time. Through their illegal occupation they became the contractors of inland waters. This was the case since 1977. A kilo of shrimp fish worthy of Rs. 250 in the market was being bought at the price of Rs.10 or 20 by the middle-men and contractors of the Rangers. Fishermen were not allowed to take even a kilo of fish to their home for food. Whereas the fishermen of Badin demanded that the Rangers increase the rate of their fish catch. But I finally educated them that Rangers' contracts on fishing were illegal and that instead of demanding high rates they should struggle against illegal occupation of their inland waters. I said to them that their struggle against the system would not succeed until fisher women join in the struggle. To which the fishermen were surprised and did not agree on women participation. So it was decided that another meeting would be held next week.

I discussed the meeting with Tahira. I told her that the fishermen of Jati and Badin were quite unwilling to include their women in the struggle against illegal occupation of the Rangers. I asked for the consultation of Tahira. Understanding the concerns Tahira took my hand and smilingly said, "Ali I take the responsibility of organizing and mobilizing women. I will accompany you in your next meeting." Tahira also asked me not to tell meeting participants of her attending the meeting because they might not come.

Tahira and I left for the meeting on the next day early in the morning. Moving from National High way and crossing Thatta when the car reached the bridge of Sujawal that presents a beautiful scene of River Indus, Tahira asked to stop the car for a while so that she could enjoy looking at River Indus. It was 10 am in the morning and the River Indus was glimmering with sun rays. An unknown happiness entered Tahira as she started smilingly looking at the scene. I looked at Tahira's eyes that were filled with great glimmer when she looked at the waves followed by a beautiful smile on her lips. The sight of the River filled her with strange satisfaction. After few moments Tahira, folding one of her hands around my waist said, "Ali let us go because in front of this mighty River, I am done with praying for the long life of my beloved." So we left for our destination

again. When we reached at Seerani road, there were lush green crops on both sides of the road. Tahira noticed that only women were working in the fields and men were seen spending time in hotels. She pointed out that women are always the ones who suffer the most and men enjoy all their time as leisure and women never know how to waste their time.

After half an hour we crossed a historical place called the shrine of Dodo Soomro located in the coastal belt of Badin district. The heat of the sun was also increasing. There were scenes of barren land on both sides of the road. Several shanty houses were seen at a distance, which were the homes of fishing communities. There were few people who were seen around the place. Because of the barren land and the lack of basic facilities people were seen in a deplorable condition. They suffered from mal-nutrition; unsafe drinking water and many other issues that made them look feeble and physically weak. Fishermen were seen carrying their nets going for fishing.

Finally we reached the village Shaikh Keerio where hundreds of people waited for us. They welcomed us warmly. "Who is that Adi with you Sir?" they asked since they were surprised to see Tahira with me. When they came to know that the lady with me was Jeeji Tahira, all of them lowered their eyes in respect and became very happy. They wanted Tahira to sit separately with women in home. But Tahira told them that she wanted to sit with men in the meeting. As the meeting started, I began to make people understand how the struggle against the Rangers could be fought and how the planning and organization could be done. At the end of the meeting all the participants of meeting said that since Jeeji Tahira had come to their home to participate in the struggle, they would approve of letting their women be part of the struggle. "I will participate in the first protest against the Rangers in Badin", added Tahira. Sajan Shaikh and Mithan Mallah were among the first ones who announced the participation of female family members in struggle against the Rangers.

It was too hot while Tahira spoke in the meeting. Sando Lagoon located in the west of the village was glimmering in the sun. Her speech was emotional. She pointed out all the injustice that was being done by the Rangers and how the state was inactive. She said they were fed on our taxes and were snatching all our human rights.

Tahira very emotionally said in that speech that she had vowed to mobilize the women of Badin and Jati for struggling against the Rangers since the women only suffered the most.

Afterwards Tahira conducted a separate meeting to mobilize the females for a struggle against illegal occupation of the Rangers. Meanwhile one fisherman while fishing in the Sando Lake nearby began to sing *Sur Samoondi of Shah Latif (verses Shah Latif's poetry)* depicting the hardships and grieves fisher people face. The sad song caught Tahira's attention as she began to search the singer. A female participant of the meeting told Tahira that the one who was singing *Shah Latif's Waee* was Hanif Mallah. She added that he was arrested by Pakistan Rangers (*para-military forces*) last year only because he argued and fought with them and demanded his rights. Because of beating of the Rangers he became a mental patient. Tahira became saddened to know that, she said told to the participants that only women from the area would end injustice of the Rangers to which all the women agreed.

PFF convened a seminar on the issues faced by fishing communities in Badin in September 2004. Tahira and I announced a struggle against the illegal occupation of the para-military forces of Badin's inland waters. It was announced that in the first phase the struggle against the forces was to be continued until November 20. The second phase of struggle would be announced on November 21 on World Fisheries Day. From November 22 the fish shall not be sold to contractors. It was the evening when residents majorly the females in Kundri village in the coastal belt of Badin area were busy in their household chores. Armed Rangers suddenly raided the village. The Rangers broke into the homes, disrespecting the females. The Rangers fastened few fishermen present in the village with ropes. Upon this injustice of the Rangers, the females who were already sensitized by Tahira took batons that were used for washing clothes. The women got united and attacked the Rangers with the wooden batons that they had. Those bold brave women finally got their men freed from the Rangers. In the end they were even compelled to flee away from the village because of such boldness of the women. Those brave fisher women fastened some of the personnel with ropes while the rest managed to flee away. When the representatives of PFF Badin along with villagers informed the police about that clear

injustice, the police and the Rangers even arrested more fishermen. Following the incident, PFF's central office bearers and PFF management gathered in PFF Head Office at Ibrahim Hydri Sachal Hall. I was in Italy in those days to attend an international conference. Behind the closed doors of Sachal Hall it was being discussed that the situation had gotten worse and that going to Badin was very risky. Some of the friends even thought that Sachal Hall could also be raided by the Rangers. There was the same situation in PFF Badin and also all the fishing community was fearful. No one dared to protest against the Rangers. During the meeting in Karachi it was only Tahira who said that Muhammed Ali Shah was not present so she was to go to Badin. All the meeting participants became silent. They finally agreed that Tahira would go to Badin.

Before sun-set Tahira left for Badin along with her daughter Yasmeen and another woman Naseema Gabol and reached at the office after a three-hour journey to find out that office looked abandoned. Tahira summoned a meeting and decided that the protest against the Rangers was to be organized on that same day. Meeting participants said the people were scared and would not come out. Tahira was determined and said that she herself would organize and make people come out of homes. She did the same, went to the villages nearby and organized a large number of women with small number of men. A successful protest against Rangers was made possible. Tahira spoke fiercely in that protest which put pressure on the administration and as a result further arrest of fisher men was thwarted. Tahira returned to Karachi late in the night after activating the movement against the Rangers in Badin. That was big achievement of Tahira and due to which protest against the Rangers took a new phase throughout the country.

When I arrived back from Italy, I held a press conference in Karachi press club and announced a movement against the Rangers' illegal occupation and contract system. The next day a consultative meeting with politicians, civil society and media was held to get their solidarity and support. PFF also got international support and solidarity. As a result of month-long struggle against Rangers, the then President of Pakistan Gen. Pervaiz Musharaf summoned a conference and announced to end the illegal and unfair occupation from the coastal belt of Sindh. The arrested fishermen were also

released. After that, November 21 day was celebrated with great happiness.

But it is a pity of our society that it does not recognize the heroes who make the movements triumphant. Even recognition given to Tahira by the then Zila Nazim of Badin, Kamal Khan Chang was more than any other friend. When PFF was celebrating its successful campaign against the Rangers in Badin, number of people including the central office bearers of different political parties were also present. While addressing the celebration, Kamal Khan Chang said both para-military forces and the administration were angry because of this success and that they kept the pictures of some selected persons with them for further surveillance. Kamal also had the pictures who were bad guys in eyes of the Rangers. While speaking, Kamal Khan said that the lady in yellow dress was the one who had annoyed the Rangers a lot through her activism. Since he did not know Tahira so he referred to her in this way in his speech. But this was still less admitted and recognized by the friends. After that successful struggle when Tahira and I went into the villages, the poor fishermen and women showered us with roses and presented Ajrak to us as a sign of recognition and honor.

After the end of illegal occupation of the Rangers from Badin, the then chief minister of Sindh and other corrupt ministers tried to restore that contract system. Even a large gathering was organized in Badin attended by Chief Minister Arbab Ghulam Raheem, DG Rangers, other ministers, media and elected parliamentarians. The then DCO Mumtaz Ali Shah and Zila Nazim Kamal Khan Chang invited me in that gathering. Tahira also joined in there with me. The objective of the program was to promote contract system by Sindh government. The Chief Minister after announcing his decision, asked for the stance of fishing communities on the decision. Representing the fishing communities, when I started speaking, the then Chief Minister stopped me in between my speech and asked for my identity. I introduced myself and said that I was chairperson of PFF. Disapproving of my speech, the Chief Minister then said Syed had nothing to do with Mallah community.

After observing this situation Tahira left the gathering and immediately went to the nearby villages of fishing communities and gathered a large number of fisher women who took batons in their

hands. Encouraged by the bravery of the women men also followed the women. When I was prevented from speaking in the program, Mithan Mallah and Sajan Shaikh demanded they would represent the fishing communities but the DG Rangers termed them as bad guys and did not allow them to represent fishing community. The very first slogan against Arbab Ghulam Raheem was raised by Tahira "Arbab Raheem Murdabad!" Then the women along with the Tahira started chanting slogans against Arbab Raheem. Large number of women and men with batons in their hands reached where the program was held. Fishing people sitting in the program also began to raise slogans against the Chief Minister and slowly and gradually a storm of slogans and a strong protest emerged there and then. All the government servants including the Chief Minister started fleeing away. The Chief Minister asked the district administration to control the crowd but the DCO said that the crowd was totally out of control. The Chief Minister found it difficult to approach his helicopter as Tahira along with other women planned that they would surround him before he reached the helicopter but the Rangers and the security stopped the large crowd of women. So it was the planning, boldness and the courage of Tahira that dismantled Sindh Government's bid to restore contract system.

If the companionship, support, dare and boldness of Tahira had not been with me and with PFF's social movement in dismantling the 30 years old illegal contract system of the Rangers in Badin particularly the way she mobilized the vulnerable women for the struggle, the poor fisher folk of Badin would not have become independent and the owners of their inland water bodies and that they would not have seen any change in their life. The credit to all this goes to Tahira. Tahira used to spend 4 or 5 days a week with me in Badin leaving his children alone at home. People even started questioning the capacity of Tahira and mine in fighting against the Rangers. They used to say that Shah and Tahira would put the life of poor fisher men in jeopardy along with their own. As everyone owns the success but no one owns the failure and when the movement of PFF succeeded every one embraced and owned it and if the movement against the Rangers had failed it was obvious that only Tahira and I would have been held responsible for that failure.

The struggle against the Rangers succeeded in times of the

dictatorship of Gen. Pervaiz Musharaf when the political struggle was in complete inertia. In such time of stillness, PFF had thrown a stone in the stagnant waters of the country's political inertia by launching a full-fledged struggle against the Rangers. This struggle of PFF gave way to a political movement in the country. Up until now, whenever the political and social struggle of that dictatorship is discussed, the name of Tahira shall always be remembered. After the success of PFF against the Rangers in Badin, that struggle and movement of fishing communities began to spread throughout the province. Fishing communities protested against Sindh Government's illegal contract system in the rest of the province. But this movement became even stronger in Badin, Sanghar, Jamshoro, Thatta, Karachi, Sujawal and Hyderabad. Because of which the then Chief Minister Arbab Ghulam Raheem, the feudal lords, contractors and other aids were very reluctant with PFF especially with Tahira and me. There was not a single day without protests. This created a great trouble for Arbab Raheem and Sindh Government.

It was June 2005 when Tahira and I led the crowds of thousands of fishermen and women against the end of illegal contract system in Hyderabad and Karachi. The slogans of Tahira, Muhammed Bajro and thousands of people from fishing community resounded in Chief Minister House. During those days, a meeting presided over by the Chief Minister Arbab Raheem was held. In that meeting Arbab Raheem expressed his grave concerns over the successful movement launched by PFF against Sindh Government. He said that until and unless I was arrested, his Government would not be relieved. So he demanded my immediate arrest. He was told that if I am arrested from the protest, thousands of fisher people would resist so it would be difficult to arrest me from there. Afterwards a secret plan was conveyed to Arbab to which he agreed.

Our arrest during the struggle against contract system

The protest in Hyderabad by PFF was on its peak without a minute's break in the slogans against the contract system. The police of the area came to me and said that DPO Hyderabad wanted to meet me to solve the issue of fishing communities along with the consultation of employees of Sindh Fisheries department. After ending the protest, I went with the police along with Sami Memon, Jamal Shoro and Allah Dino Mallah. We all were arrested. I was blind

-folded and taken away from the police station by intelligence agency personnel and then I was brought back. In spite of having proven not guilty of any charges we were not released from the jail since there was order from Arbab Raheem not to release me in any case. The news of the arrest spread like fire and protests started throughout the province Sindh. Tahira also came to know that her beloved better-half was arrested. She remained restless but still continued to stay strong. When the leadership of PFF seemed to be weak, Tahira used to encourage them. She challenged the illegal arrest of mine in Sindh High Court. After a struggle of 25 days of PFF led by Tahira, the government was compelled to free me and my friends.

Hundreds of workers of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum gathered outside the Nara Jail Hyderabad to meet me on my release. My friends and I were brought to Kotri in a rally. After the program in Kotri I moved to Karachi. Hundreds of female and male workers of PFF were already present at Karachi Toll Plaza for welcoming me. Tahira and her children hugged me after the arrest. Afterwards I was brought to Sachal Hall Ibrahim Hydri amidst slogans. That was the jubilant day. It was the happiness of Tahira. It was the happiness of fishing communities and that of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum. This was the triumph, the triumph of the right-based movement.

Soon after I was released from the jail, I resumed the struggle against the contract system of the Rangers. Sindh government noticed that the struggle of PFF against the system still persisted. So they were compelled to bow down before the movement of the fishing communities. Chief Minister Arbab Ghulam Raheem was compelled to announce the end of contract system on inland water bodies of Sindh. The fisher people finally got rid of the curse of the illegal contract system. We must admit that if the women from the fishing communities had not been sensitized by Tahira and if they had not participated and raised their voice, the freedom from the illegal occupation would not have been possible. All this credit goes to the planning, organization, hard work and boldness of Tahira.

PFF had been struggling a lot for the issues and rights of fishing communities which is still continued. Be it the struggle against the sale of Islands (Bhandar & Dhingi) to the foreign companies, the

issue of the fishing community of Gizri Karachi regarding Defence Housing Authority's injustice, the struggle against land grabbing of the invaluable land of Karachi's coast and cutting of mangrove forests, the struggle for detained fishermen of India and Pakistan and all other basic human rights of fishing communities, the fact that all these phases of movement and struggle remain meaningless and incomplete without the mention of Tahira. When we look at the rallies, protests or hunger strikes of PFF, the roaring slogans of Tahira resound in our ears and her fiery speeches against the perpetrators are vivid and visible.

Tahira always worked and struggled as a revolutionary leader as well as a worker. All the qualities of true and real leaders are evident in her personality. Being a leader, Tahira never liked the idea of merely passing orders. One of her best qualities was that she never discriminated between the organizational workers of PFF and its associates or the staff members. She equally treated everyone be it the office peon or the manager. When lower staff complained to her about the kind of attitude and behavior they faced, she counseled them about equality making them understand that everyone stayed equal apart from the roles and the responsibilities. She used to explain that the peon or the chairman hold equal respect but there were different responsibilities for each one of them. Everyone has one's own self-respect and no one can deny that sense of respect.

From the hospital

While lying on the hospital's bed and watching the picture of Tahira and my life in my mind's eye suddenly I heard someone saying; "Shah Sb how are you now?" It was the doctor's voice when I got to look at him. After the doctor went away, Aly Ercelan and Gulab Shah were standing in front of me. There was only one question in my mind and that was about Tahira's well-being. In reply I only got to hear that I needed not to worry and that Tahira was quite fine. How could I not worry for her, I was totally incomplete without her. I did not know of how she was and what ordeals she was facing? I implored them to take me to Tahira so that I could see her to persuade my heart. But the friends told me I was not in a condition to be taken to Tahira.

I woke up from the sleep the next morning. It was the third day of

my being kept in Agha Khan Hospital's ICU. The strange smell of hospital's ambience disturbed my smelling sense. The situation of not getting a satisfactory reply regarding Tahira's well-being was overwhelming me with a heavy grief. The mind fell numb out of persistent thinking and the heart pounded heavily. The painful voices of the rest of the patients were making me even more worried. I was even trying to run away but my physical weakness did not allow my movement. Every wave of pain made me call my beloved Tahira. The window in front of me made me realize that the sun was spreading its wings of light upon the earth. I felt it strongly that no one told me the exact situation about Tahira though many people came to see me. Many friends were still coming to see me and I had the same question for all of them; "How was my Tahira?" I told all of them I would not forgive anyone if anything happened to Tahira.

It was around afternoon by then. I felt that for the first two days of my stay in ICU, none of my sons and daughters came to see me in the hospital. Even Faiz Pirzada was also not coming to see me. While I was immersed in this thought, all four of my sons came to see me. I beseeched them to tell me about their mother. I asked them why they did not come to see me for the past two days. "Jani baba, you do not worry about our mother, she is fine and we all are with her", told all of my sons to me. After this assurance from my sons, I was a bit convinced but still grieved a lot. Two hours after my sons went away; one of my friends Mega Mall came to meet me. He told me that he could not see me earlier since he was in the funeral.

Out of the sudden shock I asked him in whose funeral he participated. Quickly getting the point of my being unaware of the reality, Mega, changing his statement said that he went to his village to participate in the funeral of one of his relatives. He went away making me heavily sad. I felt my mind was about to blast out of the shock. My heartbeat grew faster to the point that I felt my heart coming out of my chest. I wondered what to do, where to go or who to tell all that grief. After few minutes Qurat Mirza came in. I beseeched her to tell me the reality of what happened to Tahira. I saw that tears welled up in her eyes. While crying she told me that Tahira was no more with us. I could not stop a sudden scream upon hearing her last words. I felt I heard a sudden powerful blast. I felt as

if my body and soul experienced a sudden powerful electric shock. Tears began to roll down my face endlessly. The whole of my body fell numb. The spring that blossomed in my barren heart forsook me forever. My world fell apart. Tahira was my voice and my boldness. How would I continue such giant struggle without her? With endless tears in my eyes I thought how unlucky a person I was who could not even see his beloved and life partner for one last time. There is no existence of mine without Tahira. This entire struggle, this movement of PFF and all this success was only because of Tahira. Tahira was the only courage of mine. How would this movement be carried forward without Tahira? All the people present in the hospital's ward looked blurred and faded to me. I felt as if the walls of the hospital were falling upon me. Memories of all the years of happiness spent with Tahira, like cool breeze and the warm cozy waves of the sea were colliding with my heart and soul. Diving deep into the lovely memories of Tahira, I started loudly calling Tahira and requesting her not to leave me alone in this world. I was telling her to take me with her since I was not able to bear her loss.

In the middle of that strange situation, lying on the bed I was bitterly crying until Ercelan Aly came to me to console me. After few moments Saeed Baloch came and he also tried to console me by giving me courage for bearing such a big loss. But it is impossible that I can bear Tahira's loss. No one knows how much I love Tahira and that I never left home without her beautiful smile. No matter how long I stayed away from the home, be it one day or one week, I remained so trapped in her love that whenever I returned home I always longed for looking at the smiling face of Tahira and then I met with rest of the family members. I was immersed in the thought that after being discharged from the hospital and arriving at home all other family members would be there without the smiling face of Tahira. Condolence from my friends did not help much in such a situation. Meanwhile I was told that I was being shifted to a general ward from ICU and that next day afternoon I was going to be discharged from the hospital.

I found myself in general ward of Agha Khan Hospital the next day when it was early in the morning. Not for a single moment during the night I could fall asleep. Because the sad faded night painted a picture of autumn for me. I felt that the dawn was not the one that

was usually perfumed by the fragrance of Tahira's breath. Tahira, the soul I loved from the core of my heart. Ever since we were tied in love's knot, the mere thought of separation was troublesome. It was a fact that the touch of Tahira's hands was more than all the joys in the world. Her smile was so comforting for me that I felt like dancing, running and flying over waves of the sea. They say love knows neither boundaries nor even the age. That is why we were still the same for each other in spite of parenting six of our grown-up children. She is even more than this for me. She is my life since I can see nothing without her on earth. I neither longed for anyone without her nor even lived for anyone else.

It was afternoon when the sun rays were rushing inside the hospital's ward from the window pans. Faiz Pirzada and Gulab Shah were present with me. Both of them told me that discharge documents were to be shortly handed over to us and afterwards we were to head for home. Friends from PFF decided that at first flowers were to be sprinkled on Tahira's grave and then I would arrive at home. I thought how tragic the accident turned out to be that shook the world out of me breaking the giant forts of my dreams into pieces. I knew that this arrival of mine at home was going to be without Tahira's smiling welcome. This appeared to be a dagger of despondency drawn forever inside me. I was going to sprinkle flowers on the grave of the soul whose smile remained inherent of wherever I looked. The thoughts were bringing endless tears to my eyes.

With tears in my eyes and the pinching sunlight, I waited for the vehicle outside the hospital along with the rest of my friends. Faiz and Ahmed Bukhari were with me in the car when we left for Ibrahim Hydri. That day the atmosphere outside seemed blurred to me. I kept on thinking of the moment when I could not even see her for one last time while she left me. The heart was saddened and heavy. This feeling was overwhelmingly cutting through my heart and driving me insane. The moment was strangest for me. Tahira was so unique for me; she was the glimmer of life. Tahira was the kind of life partner for me with her eyes filled with infinite immense love for me. Her voice gave birth to the sea of happiness for me. In an eye-blink she disappeared. This moment thrust upon me was the one in which Tahira; my life was lost in the dark valley of death once and for all.

Rest in peace my love

When we reached at the graveyard, a large number of friends waited for us. Asif, my son hugged me tightly. Eyes of all the friends were wet. Tahira was a bold leader who lost her life struggling for fishing and peasant communities. I saw that a strange silence hovered around the graveyard. I felt as if Tahira was waiting for me sitting in the middle of roses. I could hear her saying; "Ali you are too late". Tahira was saying that she did not die a natural death. She was saying that like me she could also be saved but since she was a female she could not be saved and because she hailed from a Syed family. That instead of saving her life she was covered with a shawl. That she fought for the rights of women throughout her life and in the end she was left alone dying only because she was a woman. Tahira was saying that her death was social helplessness and a social murder.

After sprinkling roses at my beloved's grave when I arrived at home, a large number of people were waiting for me. After meeting with men outside when I entered my home, countless women was present there. I looked around the home as if I was looking for someone lost in the wilderness. My daughters Yasmeen and Erum hugged me bitterly crying for Tahira. My sons Asif, Kashif, Mustafa and Saddam also cried their heart out while hugging me. All of my children were deeply grieved. Erum who was the closest to Tahira was also a great friend of hers. I thought I was incomplete without Tahira but how would Erum live without her mother. I knew that Erum used to make a number of phone calls to Tahira whenever she was a bit late while returning to home. Erum never went anywhere without her mother. Erum said Ami had not to leave our home as she was waiting for me. Erum said she recalled a memory at that time when once she asked Tahira; "Ami Jan, how much you love Baba Jani?" Tahira replied to Erum; "I love your Baba Jani to the extent that if he calls me while my dead body is laid to rest, I would be alive for him". While shedding endless tears Erum then said to me that her loving mother would have come out of her death had I been there and had I called her once.

It was the sad evening. I was screaming out the loss of Tahira. The whole air around seemed blurred and grieved. Throughout our love's journey, it was for the first time that I entered in home without

the smiling welcome from Tahira. The moment was hell-like for me and I felt like it was doomsday. And if it was not the doomsday then why that usual soothing air around turned so blurred and faded? The atmosphere of my home drowned deep into sadness in absence of my life partner and the companion of my struggle. My heart was throbbing every minute while going through the grief. My home was blanketed with strange silence and sadness.

To Tahira I say, "How can I forget that your smile always spread happiness around the home? Your sonorous sweet voice when echoed around the home beautified it even more. I always saw you spreading smiles and joys. You taught me about the love and the act of loving. Sometimes I still think of how you carried out so many responsibilities simultaneously. You completed all of your duties with great love. Being my life partner, you gave me immense love. You made me so much habitual of your love that I felt like I was spoiled by it. You forsook me my beloved."

Tahira played a pivotal and a leading role struggling for the rights of fishing and peasant communities and women rights. I always felt that Tahira was exactly like that character of Maxim Gorky's novel, "*mother*" since Tahira always organized, trained and led the marginalized communities with motherly affection and that became the reason of PFF's success. I would never hesitate to say that Tahira was also the real character of the great socialist and communist leader Karl Marx's philosophy of love. According to whom the real and sincere love of the two souls is not when injustice, victimization, tyranny and violation of human rights take place in front of them and they turn a blind eye to all this saying that they do not have any business with it. Marx's philosophy of love teaches us that the two souls who immensely love each other also love the marginalized humanity and that their love is of entirely different nature.

The fact that Tahira was a living example of the Marx's philosophy of love cannot be denied. Tahira, who loved me immensely, also loved her children, loved with the objectives and principles of PFF and equally loved her colleagues and companions. Tahira strongly believed in the struggle for the rights of fishing and peasant communities and especially women. So Tahira loved everyone immensely the way she loved me. But the nature of Tahira's love for everyone was different and this is the reason why Tahira was the

living character of Karl Marx's philosophy of love. One of the greatest qualities of Tahira was that she always wore a beautiful smile on her face, a smile that had music within. With a closed fist and raised arm she would start revolutionary sloganeering that shook the corridors of power.

There is no doubt in the fact that the light inside my heart has been put off with the loss of Tahira. My love has forsaken me. The joy of family and the great friend of my children has left us alone. Tahira's loss has created a big vacuum in PFF. Filling such a great vacuum seems impossible in future since she was a great leader who represented, organized and empowered the fishing women. Be it Sachal Hall or any other place, she remained present among the friends of PFF along with her resounding beautiful smile. Be it the silence of the night, moonlight or the sizzling heat of the noon, her smile keeps spreading the fragrance of roses in every nook and corner of my home. Now our only strength is her jolly laughter and beautiful smile. Long live Tahira...!

Condolence Message:

Dear Muhammed Ali Shah,

It is with utmost sadness that we learned about the tragic demise of your wife, Adi Tahira, and about your hospitalization. Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum has been a respected partner of International Rivers for many years, and you and your wife have been tremendous leaders for PFF and for the water justice movement in South Asia as a whole. We understand that the accident happened on a road trip that was part of your and Adi Tahira's tireless commitment to the good cause. I have fond memories of my visit to PFF in 2006, the impressive outreach trip that PFF's staff organized for me, and your generous personal hospitality. On behalf of International Rivers, I convey our warmest condolence for this tragic act of fate to you. We are thinking of you at this dark hour, and will always remember Adi Tahira with highest respect. I used a PFF image in honor of Adi Tahira in our blog post on the International Day of Action for Rivers.

Best wishes,
Peter Bosshard
International Rivers Network



**TAHIRA ALI SHAH:
A MARTYR FOR
WATER RIGHTS AND
WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

World Forum of Fisher People-WFFP

The tragic passing away of Tahira Ali Shah is an intimate loss of fishing community and especially fisher women of Pakistan and across the world. For us, in WFFP, we mourn her death. She will be sorely missed. We would like to express our deepest sympathy to you, Muhammed Ali Shah and your family.

“Watch out Ami, lest you fall into water”, cautioned one of the PFF members standing in the boat. “If I succeed in my struggle of water rights of Rivers Indus, I don't dread falling off the boat and into water, I don't dread scarifying my life”, replied Tahira Ali Shah who stood in a small wooden boat packed with people during a flower-tossing ceremony organized to pay homage to River Indus on March 9, 2015 at district Thatta. The ceremony was part of 14-day long campaign of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum ahead of International Day of Action for Rivers on March 14, 2015. On the very next day, March 10, 2015, Tahira Ali Shah lost her life in a road accident while the car skidded off the road and fell into deep water. She was on way to district Badin for an event of PFF's 14-day campaign for protection of Delta and River Indus.

Tahira Ali Shah in her early fifties was the wife of Muhammed Ali Shah, chairperson of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and co-chairperson of the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP). One of the founding members of PFF, she also remained PFF's senior vice-chairperson. Afterwards, she became the founder of Noori Development Foundation, an organization working for fisher women's rights.

The fisher community along the coastal belt of Sindh and Balochistan in Pakistan is well aware of the leading role she played in

different movements, including one against Rangers in Badin, against illegal occupation of Chutyarion Lake in Sanghar, long standing issue of detained fishermen of Pakistan and India, struggling for restoration of Indus Delta, protecting mangrove forests in the coastal belt of Sindh, restoration of Keenjhar and Manchar Lakes, campaigning for the rights of peasant communities, campaigning for climate justice, struggling against land grabbing at Gizri Creek, Karachi, Illegal sale of Islands along the coast of Karachi and others. She led the historic People's Caravan under the campaign of "Keep Rivers Free" On March 14, 2012, in which PFF launched a year-long campaign for the restoration of River Indus and Indus Delta on the eve of International Rivers Day.

Tahira infused the spirit of struggle in fishing and peasant communities whose voice was muffled amidst the oppression and denial they faced. Her daring oratory and slogans gave them words that they did not have, the thoughts that were only a figment of their imagination. Tahira Shah gave them the political will that paved way for them in their struggle. She made them come out of their homes, to raise voice about issues that cost them their bread and butter, their sons and the melodies of a free life.

Her struggle for the rights of fishing communities took start in the year 2004 when para-military forces known as Rangers in Pakistan illegally occupied the fresh water bodies in one of the coastal district Badin in Indus deltaic region. The deprived fishermen of Badin approached Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum for helping them in ending illegal occupation of their water bodies since their life was dependent on them. When PFF leadership asked these fishermen to take their women on board for the struggle against the occupation, they denied saying taking their women out of their homes was against their ancestral traditions. They said they were ready to sacrifice their own lives but taking their women out of homes was against their age-old traditions. Being a rights activist and mature leader, Tahira Ali Shah understood that they were confined in their mental jails when it came to women. She knew that until and unless she herself took to the streets to demonstrate, these fishermen would not let their females be at the forefront. Tahira then took the initiative of mobilizing and persuading the stubborn men adamantly, and in no time she succeeded in making them believe that letting

their women be shoulder to shoulder with them in their struggle against Rangers was the prime need of the hour. The day came when with the massive support of fisherwomen of the region, illegal occupation of fresh water bodies ended and the Rangers finally retreated. Tahira Shah's struggle in empowering the suppressed fisherwomen became the torch that guided the less privileged in every dark they faced. Tahira became their leader, their love and their torch-bearer.

Breaking taboos

The place where she grew up is a male-dominant society where women are deemed to be nothing more than house-wives. Moreover, she hailed from the SYED family which is prominently known for strict '*parda*' (veil) when it comes to the females. Women of this family background are stringently confined within the premises of their homes. Breaking all such societal and family taboos, Tahira Ali Shah accompanied her Husband Muhammed Ali Shah in every thick and thin during the struggle for water rights. Upon her stepping out of the home for the cause of poor masses, she faced a lot of criticism from her family and relatives. But she remained consistent since she strongly believed that women; especially the one whose voice is suppressed must be prodded into action. Her struggle for the rights of rural women, especially fisher women, is incomparable and will always be.

Laurels for the great lady

Tahira Ali Shah had a sort of unconditional love with roses. Leading the massive crowds amidst her struggle for water rights, whenever she threw Rose petals in the flowing water of rivers and lakes, the surroundings would echo with slogans of the crowd around her. The rose petals that fell off her hands were a sight for the sour eyes of the poor fishing communities throughout the country. Her picture with a garland of roses around her neck, the smile and the fragrance of those roses shall always remain a reason behind the struggle for the rights of deprived fishing and peasant communities in every nook and corner where the poor live. The seeds of an untiring struggle for water rights that she has sown, shall surely blossom as buds of bravery and as the flowers of freedom of Rivers. These flowers will then spread a fragrance around. Tahira Shah is a flower and a

fragrance too. A flower can stop breathing but the fragrance shall always remain in the firmament. Human rights activists, her friends and fans believe that Tahira Ali Shah is the only *Martyr for Water Rights* in the world. Her daring struggle for the rights of fishing and peasant communities of the world shall always reverberate in memory. The spirit and soul of Tahira Ali Shah will be with us forever.



**THE QUEEN OF
FISHING COMMUNITIES
WILL NEVER DIE**

Fouzia Saeed

I received the shocking news of Tahira Ali's death on the morning of March 10 when her daughter, Yasmeen, called me from Thatta. Mohammad Ali Shah, the chairperson of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and Tahira Ali, who ruled the hearts of the fishing communities like a queen, met an accident. Shah is under treatment at the Aga Khan Hospital but Tahira has left us. Our rani has left us but I strongly believe that we should not leave her and keep her dreams a part of ours. She had been trying to get an organization, Noori Development Foundation, off the ground for many years and we should help Noori fly. The inspiration we get from Tahira's commitment and energy alone is enough for the next generation.

I have known Tahira since 2002 when I was heading ActionAid and we developed a partnership with the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum. The real contact with Tahira was made when I took Tahira to represent the fishing communities and Aqila to represent the peasant movement, with me to the World Social Forum in India in 2003. It was the three of us staying together, sharing our dreams, fears and aspirations. Tahira mentioned that trip several times later as it was the first time she made a speech for an international audience and said that I had been a big source of support.

Tahira taught so many women from the fishing communities to speak, to think, to be political, to be proud of their tradition, to come out of their homes, to make noise about issues that are taking away their livelihood, their lifestyle and their songs. She was the one who mobilized the very first fishing communities with her husband. Once she took with her on stage two women so that they do not become nervous in front of a large audience. Tahira started asking them questions like a television anchor, making it easy for them to answer

and get the message across. She told them later that a speech is much like someone asking you a question and you answering them. It is no wonder that a large number of women at Tahira's funeral said, "She taught me how to speak." Tahira gets full credit for making Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum a truly representative body for all the fisher folk of the coastal areas of Sindh and Balochistan. Her heart was heavy though, she felt that female issues were sidelined due to politics within the organization.

She was saddened that women stood alongside men on the larger issues but the men were reluctant to support them when it came to women's issues. This realization came to her when a girl from a fishing community was kidnapped and raped, and their group held a series of protests. The women did not get the kind of support from the men like they provide on other occasions. Hence, she started a separate organization, Noori Development Foundation, to focus on women's issues, where she thought women to take a stand for themselves.

Despite the fact that she was the wife of the movement's head, Tahira started off from the lower ranks of the organization and eventually became the vice-president. When an issue was raised that two members of the same family cannot be part of the central committee, she readily stepped down and continued to work as a volunteer. That was my Tahira, a person who did not need a position to rule the hearts of people. Nothing was going to keep her away from taking the community forward.

Noori Development Foundation, which was overshadowed by PFF, was just beginning to come out as an independent organization. I hope Tahira's fans and supporters will complete her dream of making Noori Development Foundation a true voice of the women of the fishing communities.

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TAHIRA ALI SHAH: MARTYR FOR THE INDUS

Mustafa Gurgaze

I remember when I first met her, at my first official meeting after joining Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) in January 2010, at PFF's Secretariat, Ibrahim Hydri – the largest village of fishing community in Pakistan.

I noticed a simple yet graceful lady in her mid-40s, taking notes of the discussion, and humbly raising her hand when she wanted clarification on some points. She seemed to be very serious about the issues of fisher women, their education and health, their role at the unit (village), district and central governing body of PFF. One of the senior colleagues told me that she was elected senior vice chairperson of PFF. That was the first occasion where I observed the leader in her. Born in a middle class Syed family, it was hard for Tahira to even get an education. But even harder for her was to get married against social norms and her family's wishes to Muhammad Ali Shah, who belonged to a comparatively lower class of the fishing community.

Ultimately, Tahira took the bold, rebellious step to get married to him in court. She was confident that she knew what to do with her life. Together, the couple started working for the rights of the fishing community at a very local level, under the platform of their first, small organization, *Anjuman Samaji Behbood*.

Later, Tahira realized that the issues of women were not being addressed appropriately and neither did the women have any effective say in the decision-making of the organization. That's when she founded a separate organization only for women, named *Saheriyan Sath' (group of womenfolk)*. She visited women door-to-door, organized and mobilized them, made them understand the

roots of their problems and showed them a way to resolve their problems.

In 1998, the couple, along with other companions, founded a nationwide organization of the fishing community and named it Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF). Not only did she speak up, she made other women speak up too against the discrimination based on gender, caste and religion. This one time, PFF had organized a caravan journey under their 'Keep Rivers Free' movement. Of the hundreds of participants in this caravan, a few happened to belong to the Hindu scheduled castes. Tahira learned that some of the other women participants were discriminating against the Hindus. She intervened at once. She mingled with the women like they were old friends, shared meals with them, did away with all the discrimination and ensured that their feelings of inferiority were washed away. She was indeed a genuine leader.

A brave, tenacious woman

Tahira's real struggle started with the Pakistan Rangers – the paramilitary force occupied the lakes in the coastal areas of the Badin district. She pulled the fisher women out of their homes and onto the streets, organized demonstrations, observed hunger strikes and sit-ins in front of the Press Club. To lead a struggle against the illegal occupation by the Rangers like this required some bravery. When her husband Muhammad Ali Shah was in jail, Tahira fought on to strengthen the fishing community's cause and continued to face the hardships she had willingly chosen. Soon, everyone saw Tahira meet with success as the powerful Rangers bowed down to her even in a semi-martial law era. In Sanghar, the journalist community was suppressed under the influence of feudal landlords. Many of my friends say it was Tahira who gave voice to the Press Club of Sanghar district, after PFF launched a campaign against the illegal occupation of the landlords on the Chotiyarion Reservoir. Tahira worked her magic again and led thousands in protest on the streets of Sanghar city. She made fiery speeches in front of the Press Club and openly challenged the feudal lords. Soon, Sanghar's journalists were emboldened enough to cover her speeches and struggle.

Everybody's Jeeji

Tahira was a multi-dimensional personality. Where she led with

courage and organized with discipline, she also worked as hard as an ordinary worker of the organization. She could always be seen meticulously taking notes during discussions and preparing reports of community meetings. In the community events of the fishing communities, she sang folk songs and danced. In workshops and seminars, she was a great listener and always polite, though those who have heard her speeches in processions and rallies know very well that she was a great, fiery orator too. Most of all, she was a rock, an upright leader who would never leave her companions alone, no matter how dangerous the situation.

Tahira was generous enough to support a number of poor families. Every person she met has their own story with her. Everybody in the fishing community across Pakistan calls her Jeeji (mother). Jeeji was simple. She never wore jewelry or make up, even at ceremonies and festivals, where other women would insist that she put on some make up. But Tahira always preferred to wear her natural smile instead.

The martyr for the Indus

During the PFF's struggle for the protection of mangroves, two of our comrades had been martyred by notorious land grabbers. Tahira never hesitated to openly call out the names of the murderers every time she spoke at a forum. I considered that to be extremely risky. I approached her and requested, "Jeeji! Please avoid becoming overbold; it can be dangerous at this time." She replied, "I would never want to die a death of suppression. I would be proud to rather sacrifice my life for the truth and for this struggle." That was not the first time she did so. I recall a number of occasions when we asked her to take time out for some rest, or to visit the doctor when we she was unwell. Her reply was the same: "I want to die in the fight for the rights of my community, not on the bed in illness." Even the day before her demise, our senior colleague Dr. Aly Ercelan noticed that her blood pressure was high and suggested that she avoid continuous traveling. She responded the same way:

"I shall go in a glimpse, not in inches." And she did. She went in a blink and right in the center of the path of the struggle, for she was traveling to Badin with her husband to lead a rally there, celebrating the International Rivers Day. They had an accident and their car

plunged into a deep pond, proving fatal for Tahira. Considering her sacrifices and struggle for the restoration of environmental flow in the Indus River, she has been titled by the civil society as 'The Martyr of the Indus'. She may not be with us physically, but her vision, dedication and courage will always be. She lived as she wanted and she died as she wished.

Live long Jeeji Tahira, long live PFF.

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The Rebel Who Led PFF

Zeenia Shaukat

The death of Tahira Ali Shah, former Vice Chairperson Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) last week in a car accident is more than merely a loss for the fishing community. Her demise has dealt a blow to the efforts for mainstreaming the grassroots at a time when organized mobilization over issues remains extremely limited in the country.

Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum is one of the very few people's movements that have effectively organized the extremely marginalized local communities to become a powerful political force against elite-based policies and actions of the state. The most peculiar feature of this organized force is the heavy-duty presence of women.

Tahira Ali Shah was the founding member of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, an organization that works along the lines of a movement to protect the socio-economic and political rights of the indigenous fishing communities in Pakistan. In the last two decades, ever since it was launched, the organization has successfully mobilized the community through protests, peaceful demonstrations, meetings, seminars and engagement with a broad range of government and non-governmental actors to overturn their excluded status and be recognized as stakeholders by an arrogant state and its development allies.

Their successful efforts included abolition of the contract system (that brought them in a face-to-face confrontation with the all-too-powerful Pakistan Rangers in Badin) and illegal occupation of Chutyarion Lake in Sanghar; attention to the long-standing issue of detained fishermen of Pakistan and India, awareness of the

significance of the restoration of Indus Delta, protection of mangrove forests in the coastal belt of Sindh, restoration of Keenjhar and Manchar Lakes, mainstreaming the issue of the rights of peasant communities, highlighting of land grabbing of Karachi creeks and islands and most importantly the social and economic cost of the depletion of natural resources.

For her, women's presence was not just about adding to the numbers in the rallies. She firmly believed that women were equal partners in the trade and the shrinking of their access to livelihoods is because of the decline in the fisheries sector on the whole. At every relevant forum, she espoused the cause of employment, training, education and empowerment of fisher women. Her strategy was to turn women into a major stakeholder in the movement. For her, it was not only about providing space for women's voice, but also empowering women enough to take charge and represent their issues independently.

Tahira's major challenge was overcoming male domination both within the community and in the organization itself. Her competence lied in bridging the related gaps that barred women's involvement. She approached her work with an understanding that for women to be acknowledged as equal partners in the movement, they have to demonstrate comprehension of issues and brought on the same page as the leadership that was engaging high profile national and international forums to advocate the socio-economic rights of the community.

"She pursued this agenda in an organized manner. Tahira would dutifully make notes of the discussions and decisions at PFF's governing body meetings and take them back to the communities. She would personally interact with community members, especially women, and update them on the work of the organization while seeking their input on the subject," recalls colleague Saeed Baloch. "She was not highly educated but had a sharp observation, being fully aware of the complex political, economic and social issues both at the micro and macro level," says Karamat Ali of PILER.

Her public speeches might have been fiery but she would very meticulously articulate these issues before her constituency that paid the price of the state's exclusionary policies but lacked an

understanding of the structural causes of their plight. Additionally, Tahira also ensured that women's concerns were reflected in the overall agenda of the PFF. According to Saeed Baloch, the organization became so strong in terms of women's participation in activities that, during planning meetings, Tahira would directly challenge the organization's hierarchy to bring in enough number of men to match her women force.

Tahira's role as the wife of a movement leader had another important dimension. Colleague Ercelan Aly of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum reflects: "Mohammad Ali Shah and PFF have succeeded in mass mobilization both because of direct activism by Tahira but also because she undertook to look after home and family so that Mohammad Ali Shah could become as active as he has become. Her very modest demands include the fact that she sold her dowry jewellery, let alone ask for jewellery. In her personal life, she was a rebel when, to begin with, she married Mohammad Ali Shah from a lower middle class family in defiance of her family expectations."

Pakistan's civil society, despite its fine work on advocacy on socio-economic and political issues, struggles to engage the grassroots. Tahira's demise comes two months after Najma Sadequé's who was another powerful advocate of community rights.

Tragically, apart from the accident, the cause of Tahira's death was the lack of rescue efforts following the crashing of her car in a water pond near Sujawal. According to her husband, after the accident, the local community rushed to help but refused to resuscitate Tahira. "She is a woman and she is a Syed. How can we touch her?" shared a teary-eyed Mohammad Ali Shah, not saying how badly this tragedy highlights the importance of breaking down the conservative mental barriers against women.

Published in: The News On Sunday

Condolence Message:

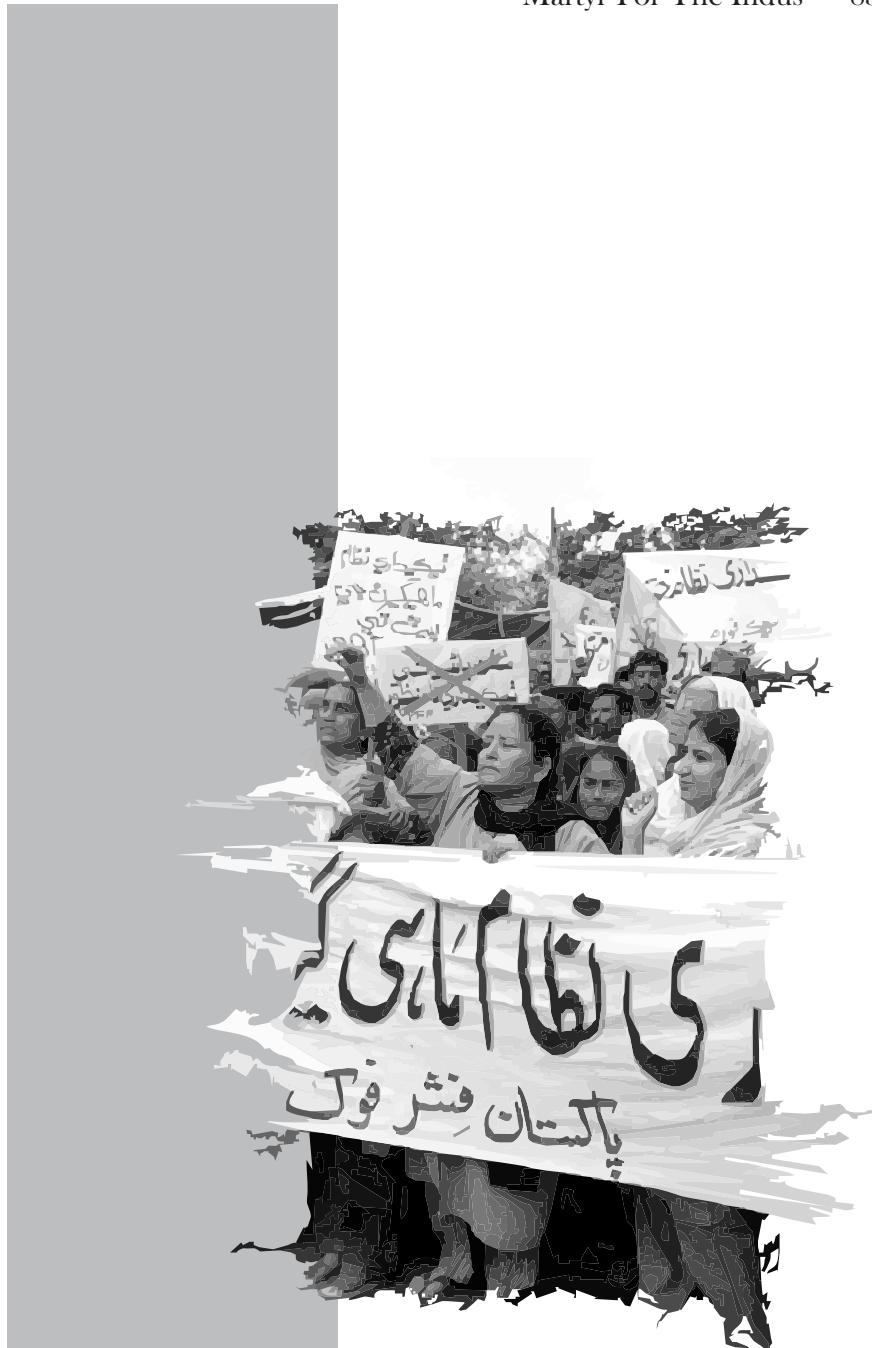
Dear Muhammed Ali Shah,

It is with utmost sadness that we learned about the tragic demise of your wife, Adi Tahira, and about your hospitalization. Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum has been a respected partner of International Rivers for many years, and you and your wife have been tremendous leaders for PFF and for the water justice movement in South Asia as a whole. We understand that the accident happened on a road trip that was part of your and Adi Tahira's tireless commitment to the good cause. I have fond memories of my visit to PFF in 2006, the impressive outreach trip that PFF's staff organized for me, and your generous personal hospitality. On behalf of International Rivers, I convey our warmest condolence for this tragic act of fate to you. We are thinking of you at this dark hour, and will always remember Adi Tahira with highest respect. I used a PFF image in honor of Adi Tahira in our blog post on the International Day of Action for Rivers.

Best wishes,

Peter Bosshard

International Rivers Network



Coastal Power

Zeenat Hisam

While trade unions in Pakistan are by and large led exclusively by men, women too have played an important role in labor struggles in the informal sector. Whether it was tenants rising up against landlords in the pre-partition era, brick kilns and agricultural workers struggling for freedom from bondage in contemporary Sindh and Punjab, the peasants' resistance against the military for land rights, or PFF's struggle for rights on natural resources, women have emerged as leaders. They have mobilized marginalized communities to tackle tough challenges.

On March 10, 2015, one of the largest informal sector workers' movements, Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, suffered a setback when its activist leader, Tahira Ali Shah, who was in her early 50s, met with an untimely death in a road accident near Sujawal in Sindh. She was on her way to lead a rally in Badin in connection with a 14-day campaign to celebrate the International Day of Action for Rivers.

Tahira was an unassuming, courageous woman who took to empowering women of the fishing communities settled along the coastline of Sindh and Balochistan. One of the founder-members of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, she began her career as a community activist in 1998 with the support of her husband and activist Mohammad Ali Shah. Tahira was able to carve out a place within the organization despite its male-dominant character. She persuaded fisher women to unite in a collective struggle for livelihood rights and civic entitlements. If it were not for her leadership qualities of empathy, humility and compassion, PFF would not have mustered the unflinching support and membership of thousands of women of the coastal communities.

Women in fishing communities have been facing many issues. Women in fishing communities have been facing myriad issues. Their role as economically productive members of fishing enterprises has gone through a sea change during the last four decades. Due to transformation of the fisheries sector caused by environmental degradation, demography, inadequate state policies, technological changes and globalization, the role of women in fisheries has diminished. Nylon nets have replaced home-made, cotton threaded nets that women used to weave; fishing crafts and gear have been modernized with technical know-how restricted to men; and peaceful communities held together through nurturing values of resource-sharing have been replaced with insecure, vulnerable groups of fishers and exploitative, powerful interest groups.

In this scenario, women have been shunted out of many fishing activities and herded in hazardous informal processing plants along the harbors or in domestic labor in the surrounding upper class neighborhoods in the city. Coastal communities face extreme poverty and deprivation of civic amenities. According to a study, 79 % of the population in these areas lives below the poverty line. The 2012-2013 Pakistan Labour Force Survey estimates that the average monthly income in the sector is only PKR 6, 221 compared to the national average monthly income of PKR 12, 118. Coastal settlements are not connected with roads; they are deprived of schools and primary healthcare units and have higher maternal and infant mortality rates.

Workers in the fishing sector have no access to social protection schemes offered by the state and are excluded from core labor rights. Pakistan has not as yet ratified the ILO C 188, Work in Fishing Convention 2007 and R 199, Work in Fishing Recommendations which sets standards for fish workers e.g. minimum age to start working in a fishing vessel, work agreements, occupational safety, health and social security.

It is through collective struggle and women's active participation that Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum has succeeded in highlighting key issues: coastal land erosion, sea intrusion, reduction in the Indus flow, drying up of the delta, destruction of mangroves, pollution through industrial effluents and poisonous wastes; unjust control of the elite and the military on natural resources and the construction

of mega development projects along coastal areas. Its successes include: the end of 27 years of Rangers' occupation of the fishing grounds; abolition of the contract system and introduction of a fisher-friendly license system for fresh water bodies through notification; abolition of leasing/contract system through the Sindh Fisheries Amendment Act 2011; and governmental endorsement of the draft sustainable fisheries policy developed by PFF. A relentless struggle and mass mobilization has been taken forward by the PFF's first tier of leadership during the last 17 years. It is hoped its second tier of leadership has emerged in the process, particularly among women, who would fill the gap created by the untimely death of Tahira.

Leaders such as Tahira help people understand that they have it within their power to bring about a change in their conditions for the better.

Published in: *The Dawn Newspaper*

Condolence Message:

All of us in ICSF are very distressed to receive this news about the death of Tahira Shah and the serious injuries of Muhammed Ali Shah in a car accident. Our thoughts are with the Shah family and with all of our friends in PFF. We sincerely hope and pray that Muhammed Ali Shah will make a good recovery.

Sincerely,

Brian O'riordan,

*Secretary, International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF)
Belgium office*

I got this shocking message from Ercelan this morning. Tahira Shah is wife of our coordinator (WFFP), Ali Shah and the leader of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum. Loss of Tahira is not only a great loss to fisherfolk of Pakistan, but also all of us in South Asia region.

Herman Kumara

*National Convener – Sri Lankan National Fisheries Solidarity Movement
(NAFSO)*



Putting Women First

TAHIRA ALI SHAH

Fouzia Saeed

"The day my husband was taken to jail for speaking out for the rights of indigenous fishing communities, I took off my burka and burned it. I donned a *chaddar (shawl)* and sat outside the press club. I knew my burka would not protect me: in this system, I had to come out and fight for my protection myself."—Tahira Ali

Tahira Ali, a woman brought up in the fishing community of Ibrahim Hydri on the outskirts of Karachi. A woman who married of her own choice and defied the stringent norms of her Syed family, a woman who taught herself to read and write when her youngest was two and a woman who first learned how to speak out and then taught thousands of other women to speak out for themselves. A woman who led not only other fisherwomen in a successful movement for over two decades, but also, at many critical junctures, led the entire movement of fishing community in pursuit of their fishing rights and a life of dignity.

This dignified leader, brave woman, and my dear friend passed away last week. I met Tahira in 2003 and have known her since in many ways. I was interested in the folk culture of the fishing communities and admired those who initiated social action. This attracted me to Tahira. After a trip to the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2003, where we became very close, spending several days together, she always spoke as if she had full rights over me. She told me that, since I trained young leaders from all over the country, it was my duty to train her children in turn. Her daughter, Yasmeen, had done a two-month leadership course at Mehergarh, the organization I was working with to develop youth leaders. Her son Mehran had also attended courses at Mehergarh. She wanted me to scold them both because she thought they were not as socially active as she

wanted them to be. "*The day my husband was taken to jail for speaking out for fishing communities, I took off my burka and burned it*"- Tahira Ali

A large part of her fight was against the 'contract system'. In Badin, where the Rangers set up contractors illegally, fisher folk are forced to sell their entire catch to them at far below the market price. Violence is quickly meted out to anyone who attempts to circumvent the system. Tahira had been involved in campaigns against such contracts for so long that, at times, she would lose her patience with politicians. Once, when talking to a provincial assembly member about the negative consequences of the contract system, he asked simply, "What is the contract system?" She responded angrily, saying, "What are you doing in the Assembly? Selling channay (pulses)?" Others had to pull her back from attacking the man any further

Although soft spoken, she could attack like a tigress when required. Her confrontations with the Rangers, special agencies, and the police were frequent. I remember one occasion when a policeman, who was drunk, slapped her daughter Yasmeen at a rally. Tahira grabbed him by the neck, threw him down, sat on him, and beat him. During her struggle against the Rangers in Badin in 2000 and 2004, she would motivate the women of the fishing communities to get over their fear of 'uniforms'. The women there were very tired of the Rangers taking away their catch and treating them like maidservants, giving them dirty laundry to wash and ordering them to cook. Tahira explained to them that 'uniforms' were meant to protect people. If some persons were taking liberties with this, they should be punished, rather than others assuming that uniforms were bad. In those days, both Tahira and her husband were often harassed by the security agencies and even declared 'state enemies'. A man she knew told Tahira that he had been shown her photograph and questioned about her. He warned her to be careful as they might kill her on some pretext. In a carefree manner, she said, "I have died so many times that once more would not make a difference. One has to go one day in any case."

Most people saw only her compassion. When Khattu Mallah, a poor fisherwoman, was kidnapped and gang-raped over three months, Tahira could not sleep. Tireless, she led the campaign to

have Khattu recovered and the criminals punished. Once Khattu returned, Tahira kept her in her own home for two years, afraid for the fisher woman's safety in the village; she also wanted to help Khattu pursue her case in court in Karachi. And yet, the other image that comes to mind when I close my eyes is that of Tahira dancing the Jamalo with a large group of women. The women of the fishing communities off the coasts of Sindh and Balochistan loved their leader and would dance together at every opportunity. That was the other thing she and I had in common: we both loved to dance the Jamalo together and sing from our hearts. We both also loved theatre. Tahira would develop plays on the issues facing the fishing community and produce them complete with music and choreography. Celebrations of World Fisheries Day were always marked by poetry recitations, plays, song, and dance. She called me just recently, thrilled to hear that I was moving back from Washington to Islamabad. She said, "Now the fishing community has a claim over Lok Virsa. We will visit it as though it were our own place." I made plans with her to record some of the resistance poetry and folk songs they had developed over the years as I was very interested in people's narratives articulated in their own folk ways. Tahira quickly promised that she would make plans and that I should come there with my team to record them. We made plans for 20 March.

On 10 March, I received the news of her accident: both husband and wife were thrown into a ditch full of water. Tahira was taken out first, but no one would touch a woman's body even in an attempt to get the water out of her lungs. However, they did everything they could for her husband, thumping his chest and turning him upside down to get the water out immediately. He survived and she died. For the past year, I have been working on a book about women's political agency in Pakistan – their ability to make decisions that can change their lives. During this research, I have documented several successful women's movements in the country over the last 15 years, among which the fishing community's movement is a key case. I had been spending a lot of time with Tahira: at her home, in various districts along the coast, and in small settlements around the lakes in Sindh. Although I knew her well, it was my good fortune to have spent so much time with her in the last year. I must have interviewed her at least six times and travelled with her extensively,

understanding the folk culture of fishing communities, their issues, her leadership, her strategies, and her plans.

I have yet to complete the story of this remarkable woman and the collective agency of the brave women of Pakistan's fishing communities. However, a strong lesson that she articulated is something we can all learn from. "After working for a joint social movement for over 20 years and standing up for all collective issues alongside men," she told me, "I was disappointed that the men did not stand with us in the same manner when it came to women's issues."

In order to address issues that were specific to women, she had recently initiated a separate platform, Noori Development Foundation, from which to create a space for women to raise their own issues. In her straightforward manner, typical of Tahira, she told me: "When it comes to police beatings, ladies first! When it comes to decision-making, men first!"

Published in: The Friday Times





**A LIFE OF
TRUTH AND STRUGGLE**

Being born in a middle class Syed family, it was hard for Tahira to get 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 SamajiBehood*'. 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 '*SaheriyanSath*'(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 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 fisher women on the issues they encountered in their daily lives. She sang cultural songs and also danced in the events of the fishing community. 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. AlyErcelan 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.

By: Mustafa Gurgaze

Condolence Message:

Muhammad Ali Shah reviving all the sweet and cherished memories of Api Tahira, a true hero and warrior for the oppressed of society, a champion of women empowerment and emancipation. The inspiring role of Api Tahira would guide us for our ongoing struggle for a just society free from all sort of oppression. My salute to Shaheed Api Tahira

Shafqat Aziz

Oxfam, Pakistan

In our part of world we often fail to recognize value of Social Movements, so the ones who build such movements, bring women in the fold of struggle for economic liberation, a feudal society would not give space to such voices, thus our appreciation of such people remains limited, we deprive ourselves of people who could have and should have inspired us so much, media pollutes our minds with fake faces, pseudo big-names, solid & genuine role models seem so distant to us. Yesterday in Ibrahim Haidri, Karachi's fishing village, I could see what Adi Tahira Ali Shah meant to these women.

Mushtaque Rajpar

US Embassy of Pakistan





TAHIRA ALI SHAH: A Martyr For Water Rights

International Rivers Network

Tahira Ali Shah, in her early 50s, was the wife of Muhammed Ali Shah, chairperson of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and co-chairperson of World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP). One of the founding members of the PFF, she also remained PFF's senior vice-chairperson. Afterwards, she became the founder of Noori Development Foundation, an organization working for fisher women's rights. She departed from the world on March 10, 2015.

The fisher community along the coastal belt of Sindh and Balochistan in Pakistan is well aware of the leading role she played in different movements, including one against Rangers in Badin, against illegal occupation of Chutyarion Lake in Sanghar, a long-standing issue of detained fishermen of Pakistan and India, struggling for restoration of the Indus Delta, protecting mangrove forests in the coastal belt of Sindh, restoration of Keenjhar and Manchar lakes, campaigning for the rights of peasant communities, campaigning for climate justice, struggling against land grabbing at Gizri Creek, Karachi, illegal sale of islands along the coast of Karachi, and others. She led the historic People's Caravan under the Campaign of "Keep Rivers Free" On March 14, 2012, in which PFF launched a year-long campaign for the restoration of the River Indus and the Indus Delta on the eve of International Day of Action for Rivers.

Tahira infused the spirit of struggle in fishing and peasant communities whose voices were muffled amidst the oppression they faced. Her daring oratory and slogans gave them words that they did not have, the thoughts that were only a wisp of their imagination. Tahira Shah gave them the political will that paved their struggle. She made them come out of their homes, raise their voices about issues

that cost them their bread and butter, their sons, and the melodies of a free life. Her struggle for the rights of fishing communities started in the year 2004 when para-military forces known as Rangers in Pakistan illegally occupied the freshwater bodies in the coastal district of Badin in the Indus Delta region. The deprived fishermen of Badin approached Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum to help them in ending the illegal occupation of their water bodies since their life was dependent on them.

When PFF leadership asked these fishermen to take their women on board for the struggle against the occupation, they denied, saying taking their women out of their homes was against their ancestral traditions. They said they were ready to sacrifice their own lives but taking their women out of homes was against their age-old traditions. Being a rights activist and mature leader, Tahira Ali Shah understood that they were confined in their mental jails when it came to women. She knew that until and unless she herself took to the streets to demonstrate, these fishermen would not let their woman be at the forefront. Tahira then took the initiative of mobilizing and persuading the stubborn men adamantly, and in no time she succeeded in making them believe that letting their women be shoulder to shoulder with them in their struggle against Rangers was the prime need of the hour. With the massive support of fisherwomen of the region, the illegal occupation of freshwater bodies ended and the Rangers finally retreated. Tahira Shah's struggle in empowering the suppressed fisherwomen became the torch that guided the less privileged in every dark corner they faced. Tahira became their leader, their love and their torch-bearer.

The place where she grew up was a male-dominant society where women are deemed to be nothing more than housewives. Moreover, she hailed from the SYED family, which is prominently known for strict 'parda' (veil) when it comes to the females. Women of this family background are stringently confined within the premises of their homes. Breaking all such societal and family taboos, Tahira Shah accompanied her husband Muhammed Ali Shah through thick and thin during the struggle for water rights. Upon her stepping out of the home for the cause of poor masses, she faced a lot of criticism from her family and relatives. But she remained consistent since she strongly believed that women, especially the ones whose voices are

suppressed, must be prodded into action. Her struggle for the rights of rural women, especially fisherwomen, is incomparable and will always be so.

Tahira Ali Shah had a sort of unconditional love for roses. Leading the massive crowds amidst her struggle for water rights, whenever she threw flowers in the flowing water of rivers and lakes, the surroundings would echo with slogans of the crowd around her. The rose petals that fell off her hands were a sight for the sore eyes of the poor fishing communities throughout the country. Her picture with a garland of roses around her neck, the smile and the fragrance of those roses shall always remain a reason behind the struggle for the rights of deprived fishing and peasant communities in every nook and corner where poor people live. The seeds of an untiring struggle for water rights that she has sown shall surely blossom as buds of bravery and as the flowers of freedom of Rivers. These flowers will then spread a fragrance around. Tahira Shah is a flower and a fragrance too. A flower can stop breathing but the fragrance shall always remain in the firmament. Human rights activists, her friends and fans believe that Tahira Ali Shah is a martyr for water rights. Her daring struggle for the rights of fishing and peasant communities of the world shall always reverberate in memory. Today, tomorrow and forever Tahira Ali Shah shall rule the hearts of the deprived communities.

Condolence Message:

My heart is broken with this terrible news. The loss of Babi is the loss of my mother in Pakistan. The loss of the loving mother of all women in fishing communities in Pakistan. May God be with Babi and you Ali Shah. Hope you will recover very soon

With all my love,
To all your family!

Alexis Fossi

Resource Person: World Forum of Fisher People

Tahira's passing away is a major loss for all fishers across the world; she was a rock in the struggle of equity and justice for small-scale fishing. She will be missed by all of us. Please convey our condolence at the funeral. We are one in this moment of sorrow. Please make sure to convey our condolence to Ali Shah's family.

Naseegh Jaffer

General Secretary, World Forum of Fisher People





TAHIRA ALI SHAH: LEADING WOMEN OF FISHING COMMUNITIES OF PAKISTAN

Alexis Fossi

I had the chance to meet Tahira Ali Shah in 2006, as I was working for six months period with the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum within a project focusing on rehabilitation of the Indus Delta Eco-region. Today it's difficult for me to express all the respect and the admiration I have for this great lady.

Tahira devoted all her life and engaged all her wonderful energy supporting women in the remotest fishing communities of the Indus Delta. Every morning she would prepare the advocacy meetings or the training sessions with her small but devoted and dynamic team. She gave the opportunity to many women to learn and to teach. Tahira really empowered women. Each time, many women from different communities of the delta would join her.

Once, I followed her team to Goth Mubarak, a small village North of Karachi, and I clearly remember all these motivated women listening and participating in the meeting. One must realize the courage needed to engage in such actions in a country like Pakistan, where women are so often confined at home. Tahira would involve women not only in meetings, but also in the forefront demonstrations. Women from fishing communities would always follow her, even in the streets of Karachi and other towns of Pakistan to defend their rights.

Never afraid of the Police, or of any kind of "authority", Tahira would lead demonstrations, as she deeply knew the cause was right. I remember that during her interview for the French visa, she answered quietly to an official of the French embassy asking her how she could manage once she is in France if she couldn't speak French: "Do you speak Urdu?" asked Tahira from him. "No", said the staff. "Yet

you work in Pakistan." retorted Tahira. She was always filled of generosity and kindness with all the villagers coming to the Head office of PFF in Ibrahim Hydri. They were always greeted with consideration and she would spare time to understand their grief and try finding solutions for them.

All this kindness, positive energy and courage were shared daily with her team and even more with her family. In 2006, she regularly followed various meetings of PFF for different campaigns. Thank you Tahira. You inspired all of us and will continue to do so for many more years!



TAHIRA ALI SHAH: THE SELFLESS LEADER

Shujauddin Qureshi

It was really a shock for me when I learned about sudden demise of Tahira Ali, the central leader of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) in a road accident near Sujawal on March 10, 2015. PFF Chairman Mohammad Ali Shah and another colleague and the driver of the car in which they were traveling from Thatta to Sujawal remained safe but injured in the accident, but Tahira could not survive in the fatal accident. Her death was unbelievable for many including me and whenever I attend a meeting of PFF I just expect she would come in front of me smilingly shaking hand with me. It was a big loss to the fishing communities of Sindh as they have lost a great leader who was the essence of their movement for rights. PFF is actively engaged in fishermen's rights in Pakistan. She was not only the leader of the fishing communities, but a leader of the peasants and other workers of Pakistan as well as in South Asia.

My association with Tahira Ali was quite older, which I can trace back when I was a journalist working for the news agency Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) and met her often for my writings on fishermen's issues. It was even before the formation of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) in 1998 as both Mohammad Ali Shah and Tahira were quite active in social activities in Ibrahim Hydri area. When PFF was founded, Tahira became active for the rights of fishermen. As a journalist I have been covering the fishermen's issues quite often so was in contact with the key persons like Mohammad Ali Shah and Tahira. When PFF was formed, focus of Tahira's work expanded from local fishermen of Ibrahim Hydri to other areas of Sindh including the inland fisheries in different districts of Sindh and Punjab.

PFF's landmark struggle against Rangers' occupation of the fisheries water bodies in Badin district was quite hard and difficult and Tahira's role in this struggle was marvelous and the leading one. The movement was novel in its nature as it was considered as a direct clash with the people in uniform. It was a military government of General Pervaiz Musharaf and Rangers are directly controlled by the Pakistan Army. The Ranger's fishing operation was also controlled by Badin Cantonment, so it was really a brave act of the PFF that it challenged the authority of military, which was illegal and violation of the Sindh Fisheries Act.

But before the start of anti-Rangers occupation movement in Badin district, my friend Zulfiqar Shah and I were working on a survey research study on Sindh's fishermen's issues and we visited Badin and other coastal areas of Thatta for research purpose. We conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews for the report in Badin as well. We personally witnessed the fear and terror like situation prevailed among the poor fishermen who were forced to sell their catch to the contractors appointed by Rangers at meager rates. It was really a great job of Tahira who led the fishermen movement by holding protest rallies, protest camps, sit-ins and press conferences against Rangers. I saw Tahira was at the forefront in this campaign and she was fearlessly in the field round the clock.

Under the Rangers occupation of water sources of Badin, I closely watched the plight and poor conditions of fishermen, who were treated like slaves. They were not allowed to catch fish on their own and after getting permission from the Rangers authorities, the fishermen were able to go to fishing, but they were not permitted to sell their catch in the open market. Outside the Rangers check posts the staff of the contractors used to snatch all the catch and pay them a very minimal rate, much less than the market price. The fishermen were not permitted to take some pieces of fish for his family. In such a difficult time, PFF took a lead to support the fishermen of Badin to demand end of Rangers' control over fishing. There was an atmosphere of harassment and fear among the poor fishermen and many fishermen faced arrests, tortures and persecutions at the hands of Rangers and their appointed people. Many fishermen were even reluctant to speak against the Rangers atrocities in public.

Then came the practical campaign in 2004, in which fishermen

refused to sell their catch to Rangers and staged peaceful protests, hunger strikes and demonstrations. It was a military government of General Pervaiz Musharaf and Rangers as para-military force were using every tactics to curb the fishermen's campaign against them. But it was the PFF leadership led by Mohammad Ali Shah and Tahira Ali, which kept the campaign alive. Then the campaign picked up momentum and fishermen support extended to major cities like Karachi, Hyderabad and Islamabad. Ultimately, the Military leadership had to decide to withdraw their occupation from the fishing, thus rights of fishermen were upheld.

The movement against Rangers did not end at this success, but it was converted into a much larger movement to end the contract system over fisheries in the entire water bodies in the province and one day the Sindh provincial government made amendment in the Fisheries law, which accepted the fishermen's right over fishing in Sindh.

The second major occasion during which I personally watched Tahira's leadership qualities in a close range when Mohammad Ali Shah, PFF Chairman Shah along with other colleagues was arrested in Hyderabad in 2005 after a protest sit-in against the contract system over inland fisheries. During those days, I was working with PFF as a full time employee and it was really a difficult time for the organization that its top leadership was kept behind the bars. But Tahira virtually took over the affairs of the organization in her hands and played a role of the leader not only for the organization but for the civil society of Sindh. She not only led the movement against the arrest of PFF leadership by leading protest demonstrations, meetings and press conferences, she also visited the jail in Hyderabad frequently to console her detained husband and other leaders. Over 20-day struggle resulted in release of PFF leaders.

Tahira always remained concerned about fishermen women's issues. She had been complaining that PFF as an organization was not seriously taking up the women's issues in its work. It was the main reason that she tried to form a separate movement for women's rights with a name "Noori Development Foundation", the legendary character of a fisherwoman of Keenjar Lake who entered into wedlock of a king and won his heart with her love and simplicity. Noted human rights and women's rights activist Fouzia Saeed also

joined Tahira in the formation of Noori Development Foundation along with other civil society activists like Dr. Aly Ercelan and Karamat Ali. I attended a meeting of NDF's board at PILER Centre Karachi, which was also attended by Dr. Fouzia Saeed. Tahira was worried that NDF was not picking up momentum due to structural faults and lack of resources. That meeting had made some key decision to organize and launch it.

Although Tahira Ali has left us physically, she is not separate from us. Her work for the down-trodden sections of the society especially women would be remembered forever.



ALWAYS MISSED

Shahid Shah

It was around 11 am on that unfortunate day when I received a message from my friend and mentor Jan Khaskheli telling me that Muhammad Ali Shah has been injured in a road accident while his wife Tahira Ali Shah is no more. I was hurt with the news and called on cell phone numbers of their family and friends. Kamal Shah, younger brother of Muhammed Ali Shah, was in touch and kept me informed. I soon heard that condition of Shah was stable but the news of death of Tahira Ali Shah was no less than a big bang for me. As a reporter working on women, children and fishing community I had remained in constant touch with Shah and Tahira Ali, but she was more than just a source for me. I was like her adopted son. My relationship with her was more than 15 years old.

In November 2000, I met her and her family at Karachi Press Club along with my dear friend Altaf Pirzado then we moved to Alpha Restaurant for hi-tea and had a friendly conversation with the family. Few days later, she had invited me at her home for dinner. Since then, I have lived with them as a family member. Tahira, whom I used to call Ami Jan like her children, never showed me any strange behavior on such name despite of the fact that there was not big difference in our age. How can one swallow news of death for one's Ami Jan?

Since I was her eldest child, sometimes she used to discuss matters at home and work with me too. I saw in her an obedient wife with lots of love for Muhammad Ali Shah (I also call Shah Baba Jani like his children), extreme love and care of her children despite of hectic job of a full time social worker. She also possessed guts of a journalist, which I witnessed during working with her on several stories.

I found her all six children very cooperative and caring. Though none of them happened to go in any top universities but their character and good attitude shows the level of training they received from Baba Jani and Ami Jan. Yasmeen, Asif, Erum, Kashif, Mustafa and Sadaam (my favorite); all are symbol of good attitude and they also love the poor fishing community like her parents. The family lived in a very small house (only two-room house before moving to Gulistan-e-Johar and then to new house in Hydri). Family with nice etiquettes is challenging. Sadaam, being the youngest in the family, was attached to me more than others. Muhammad Ali Shah, Sadaam and I used to visit Karachi beaches where Shah narrated me stories of the sea and the sea lords, the fishermen.

Since my parents lived in our village far away from Karachi, I enjoyed liberty of having delicious lunches and sometime dinners cooked by Ami Jan. I lived alone in Sachal Goth during those days and it took me at least two hours to reach Ibrahim Hydri on public transport. During those days, I used to work for a Sindhi daily newspaper, where I worked even on Sundays as well because of shortage of the staff. I still managed to meet with my newly adopted family once or twice a month. Ami Jan was an expert in cooking and I got relief from eating *naan* (*bread*) and half-cooked *tandori roti* that usually caused me stomachache.

Sometimes, I used to cook myself as well and my interest in cooking increased after taking tips and recipes from Ami Jan. Use of internet was not so common, which could provide tips and recipes where I could have learnt. I learnt my then favorite dish Biryani (no more favorite now) and other dishes from her. Despite of availability of seafood at her house I loved to eat vegetables, which have remained a major portion of my diet. Ami Jan and I also shared hobby of listening to music. She loved voice of Kishore Kumar, who remains common in our likings.

Baba Jani can write far better than me but what I saw in Ami Jan that she never complained about her husband. In fact, she cared Baba Jani a lot, when he faced hardships during the work; she was the person who solely supported him. Protests against illegal nets and deep-sea fishing trawlers were a routine and she never gave up her support. This side of her character was the strongest I could judge. Her regular visits from Mubarak village to Zero point Badin and to the

lakes of Sanghar. She was furious speaker when talked on issues of the poor fishing community. I had been part of such several protests; whether those were against Rangers' occupation of Badin's waters, Emmar's announcement of building cities over twin islands of Dingi and Bhundhar, contract system on inland waters, use of destructive nets, fishing by deep-sea fishing trawlers, detained fishermen and others. She was a great social mobilizer and used to conduct. Besides her role as a community mobilizer and social worker I found great guts of journalism in her. She was my great source on issues related to fishing communities till her departure. She had shared her few write ups with me in Urdu, which showed her having a great sense of news and stories.

In 2006, I was awarded with the prestigious Alfred Friendly and Daniel Pearl Fellowships that provided me chance to visit several US states along with training and work at The Wall Street Journal. I had sent several stories amid the contest of 88 journalists from 32 countries. The story that won me in final of the contest was done with the help of Ami Jan. It was a story regarding work of those women who run family affairs. Ami Jan was with me throughout my story. We had conducted several interviews of women in Ibrahim Hydri and Rehri Mian for that purpose. At some places where I stuck up amid questions and answers it was she who came up with solution; the better and related questions.

There were several other stories which I completed with her help. Last year I worked with her on last story she helped me. It was regarding female education in the coastal villages under the theme of gender inequality. She helped me interviewing several girls and social mobilizers. In the last of the interviews, I conducted Ami Jan's interview and I bet nobody would better talk about coastal women than her. This time she was their advocate; a new aspect of her personality I met with. She was not a fierce orator during the interview. She was a patient advocate showing grief for the uneducated youth, mostly girls.

Departure of my Ami Jan, Tahira Ali Shah, Jeeji for coastal women, is not only loss of Muhammad Ali Shah, who has not forgotten her for a second, her children, relatives and the community, in fact it is loss of the humanity.

Condolence Message:

I feel everything that is felt by the family of Muhammad Ali Shah. I wholeheartedly wish everything stays fine with the support and love of family and friends of PFF and WFFP following the loss of Tahira Ali Shah.

A big hug and my fond memories,

Natalia

Coordination Committee Member, World Forum of Fisher People

Shah Sahib, please accept my heartfelt condolence on the terrible tragedy of losing Madam Tahira. May Allah bless her soul and give strength to you and your family to bear this loss and may you and your driver recover from your injuries soon. Prayers for all of you

Afia Salam

Environmental Journalist





THE VOICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Ayoub Shan Khaskheli

We all struggle personally in our daily mundane routine of life. We carry out our societal, economic, physical, psychological and other struggles. How many of us fight their personal fights with intent to fight for a cause that entails respite to the under-privileged? Is fighting a personal fight of one's life, overcoming it and then carrying out a struggle for a community cause so common? This is undoubtedly so rare in its entirety. Tahira Ali Shah, the dynamic leader of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum is name of the above mentioned struggle.

I still remember when we started Shah Abdul Latif coaching classes and especially educational program for fisher women at Kadani Muhalla Ibrahim Hydri, Bhabi Tahira joined in to complete her secondary education and because of her love with education, she passed her matriculation with distinction. After her marriage with Shah Sb she started her social work activities in Ibrahim Hydri, Chashma, and Rehri village to mobilize, raise awareness about girls education and their livelihood rights from the platform of PFF.

The Journey of educational awareness and social work initiating from Anjuman Samaji Behbood, Saherian Sath continued till the foundation of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum on 5th may 1998. She played a vital role in advocacy for the sustainable livelihood of fisher community and that was the victory make people unite on one platform. Tahira Ali was a personality with multiple qualities and had great leadership skills and abilities. She wanted and achieved to eradicate injustice inequality, discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, religious, sect, color or unequal distribution of resources in society. She always advocated that the state and the government are responsible to provide the basic human rights, dignity and a good

living standard to every citizen of this country. She fought bravely when Rangers controlled who 22 water bodies at Badin District. She fought boldly with Rangers. She bluntly told that the Sea and all water bodies belonged to fisher community and they were their real owners.

Besides being an emotional and bold leader she successfully played the role of a great mother, sister, wife and a friend indeed. Her love, kindness and respect were for everybody she met with. She was also great at management for her household and all family. She always consulted Shah Sb about all the PFF and Family matters before any decision. Therefore Shah Sb also continued his work without any disturbance. Tahira Ali also wrote articles, case studies, poems for the for PFF magazines. She was also part of PFF's central Theater and Cultural Group. She even ignored her serous health issues while working hard and I used to tell her to take care of her health but she always said she was fit and fine but in reality she was not.

On 9th March 2015, we were all together at Dhoola Driya Khan near the bridge of Sujawal, where she led the rally along with Shah Sb, Yasmeen, Saeed Baloch and I. On the next day when she was on way to Badin along with Shah Sb and some other friends she met a fatal accident at Bhudo Talpur near, Dewan Sughar Mill Badin Road. Shah Sb, Zulekhan and driver Razak were finally safe but our beloved leader Bhabi Tahira left us forever. It was the vision and mission of Tahira Ali to develop the community politically, economically and socially. We believe that Tahira Ali is with us in every movement of life. We would never forget her shinning and smiling face and gentle behavior the colleagues and communities.



EMBRACED ETERNITY

Fida Soomro

An invaluable gift bestowed to human beings on earth is that of a mother. The existence of mother is indefinite, the most revered, full of divine love, emotions and caring that cannot be expressed in mere words. A mother is not just a parent but a bosom friend, supporter and torch-bearer at every walk of life. The lap of mother is the very first school of us where we are nurtured when we are simply a feeble being on earth. She teaches us to all the things which are deemed necessary for living and interacting with each other in dignified manner.

I have always been away from the affection and warmth of tenderness of nears and dears due to variety of indescribable reasons and that created a vacuum within me that made me thirsty to seek motherly affection which I sought in Tahira Ali Shah, while being a member of PFF family during one of its campaigns for rehabilitation of Indus delta eco-region.

I met with Tahira Ali Shah for the first time in the year 1999 during one of the programs hosted by Oxfam in Hyderabad Sindh. She had participated together with Mr. Mohammad Ali Shah and both of them were new names for me at that time. Mr. Aijaz Nizamani, the then program coordinator Oxfam Sindh, and Ms. Maryam Iqbal, the then project manager 'Sindh Cyclone Rehabilitation Project' Badin and Thatta introduced me with Tahira Ali Shah and Muhammed Ali Shah. Afterwards, that simple acquaintance resulted in a strong familial bond.

Good-temperedness, simplicity, politeness, coolness and calmness were some of the traits of her personality as observed by me. Being with majority of people, taking part in that event, she

seemed to be cogitating something different and wanted to do even more. Ms. Maryam Iqbal characterized her being not only a simple life partner of Mr. Mohammad Ali Shah but also as his strong companion. No doubt, it was an amazing introduction which compelled me to know more about her. I found her as a symbol of courage and always opinionated about others smilingly and this peculiarity of her personality brought me closer to her.

Once Abraham Lincoln had expressed his views rightly for mothers, 'man is not a poor man who has a godly mother with him'. PFF family was so fortunate in sense that they had such mother with them named Ami Tahira Ali Shah. Many times when she met me and realized that I was little bit distressed; she consoled and encouraged me. Once when there was a critical period of my life. She took me out of this imbroglio very gently in such a splendid way that it culminated not only reunion with better half of my life but also made me bound to lead a responsible life. She was grand-mother of my children paternally as well as maternally. Believing that accidents happen in life I would never forget the event that was marvelous incidence which presented me with a devoted and affectionate mother. But there was also an accident which deprived me of her. I do not dare to visit home and Sachal Hall at Ibrahim Hydri where she fed me and exchanged good laughter. She taught me way of practical life and how to lead in a dignified manner. To Ami Taira, I say, "Oh mother of millions I salute you as you have defeated death. Your will remain alive when the stories of unflinching endeavors for the achievement of rights and bringing about a change in the lives of marginalized and vulnerable segments in the society will be written. Name of Tahira Ali will always be exalted and written on top of the list with flying colors.

Dr. Stephan Poulter, a famous family therapist and clinical psychologist, explains five types of woman from psychological perspective. When I applied all these five parameters to each trait of Tahira Ali Shah I found more terrific and dynamic parameters in her persona. Ami Tahira Ali was god-gifted and already possessed more than these five characteristics and was a complete mother in true sense, a devoted wife and dedicated with her commitment.





International Collective in Support of Fisherworkers-ICSF

March 8, or International Women's Day, is an occasion for women across the world to gather in solidarity to mark women's ongoing struggles for equality, freedom, dignity and a violence-free life. For more than a hundred years, ever since the historic protests of New York's garment workers forced the commemoration of this important day, March 8 has also been an occasion for women on their long road to freedom to take collective stock of gains made and setbacks suffered, and to plan ahead. As examples from across the world in this issue of Yemaya illustrate, so it is in the case of women in fishing and coastal communities, whose lives are a daily testament to the spirit of struggle and resilience underlying International Women's Day.

On the occasion of March 8, it is fitting to honor women activists like Tahira Shah and Chandrika Sharma whose lives were spent ceaselessly championing the rights of small-scale fish workers, particularly women, across the world. The life of Tahira Shah, the militant leader of the Pakistan Fisher Forum, who passed away recently, was a testament to struggle—struggle that began with fighting the shackles of conservatism within her natal family, and continued throughout a life dedicated to improving the lives of Pakistan's small-scale fishers.

March 8 this year also marks a year since the disappearance of the flight MH370 with ICSF's Executive Secretary Chandrika Sharma on board. Ever committed to the principles of gender justice, Chandrika believed that "if our aim is to valorize the artisanal fisheries sector, by the same logic we will have to work to valorize the role of women in the sector and the vital contribution of nature and its services to the life and livelihood of fishing communities." Commemorating her

invaluable contributions to the drafting of the Voluntary Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), a recent workshop in Chennai on the SSF Guidelines urged that these be implemented with the same principles of “commitment, correctness, and consciousness of the great cycle of life” that Chandrika espoused.

Activists like Tahira and Chandrika were deeply conscious that the full consequences of the chronic official neglect of the small-scale fisheries are borne primarily by women. Women in the sector lead uncertain lives without secure livelihoods. They face regular harassment from the State, as the case of the fisherwomen of Kultali in the Sunderbans in India shows. Their livelihood sources are polluted and degraded by commercial interests, while the government turns a blind eye to the rule of law, as evident from the examples from Pakistan. In Chile, as in most countries, women in the fisheries, for the same jobs, earn less than men, while the official non-recognition of certain types of female labour disbars benefit claims. March 8 is an occasion for us to renew our pledge to end such realities and forge new paths of autonomy and hope.

The struggles for livelihood freedom tell only a part of the story. A vital struggle for women is for parity within their organizations, and also within their own homes, as articulated by the women leaders of CONAPACH in Chile. The struggles of women within homes, organizations, and with the outside world, all help weave a net of feminist consciousness that supports women and enables them to build powerful and effective organizations at every level to fight for their rights.



CONDOLENCE REFERENCE PROGRAMS

Reports

Reference: Tahira Ali remembered

ISLAMABAD: Rights activists and development experts paid tribute to Tahira Ali, an activist of fishing communities. The reference was organized by Mehergarh for Tahira Ali, who died in a road accident near Sujawal on March 10, said a press release. Tahira Ali was associated with the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) and had been working for the rights of fisher communities of Sindh. She also started a movement named "Noori Development Foundation" which works for the rights of women in fishing communities of Sindh. Lok Virsa Executive Director Dr Fouzia Saeed emphasized the need to carry forward the struggle Tahira Ali started for the rights of fisher communities. She said that leaders like Tahira Ali need to be recognized for the change they bring in the society. Tahira Ali's daughter Yasmeen Shah, who is also the secretary of Noori's board, talked about her mother's commitment towards the cause. Oxfam Pakistan Gender and Communications Specialist Mustafa Talpur said that mobilization of fisher women was a breakthrough Tahira Ali achieved.

Published in: The Express Tribune

Social activist Tahira Ali Shah remembered

IBRAHIM HYDRI- KARACHI: Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Ibrahim Hydri, hosted a memorial event to pay tribute to their leader Tahira Shah, whose soul departed from the world on March 10, 2015. A large number of women attended the event. Tahira Shah was one of the founding women activists and leaders of the world's largest social movement for fishing

community. Based in Karachi's backward fishing village of Ibrahim Hydri, she mobilized women from the fishing community to stand up for their rights and free themselves from the control of contractors so that fishermen could be economically empowered. In her 25 years long struggle for water rights, fishermen and defending the flow of the River Indus, along with her fellow activists, she was part of a long march that called for burying plans to build more dams on the river. The memorial event was attended by social activists, including the chairman of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Mohammad Ali Shah.

Condolence Reference by Civil Society of Karachi

KARACHI: This March started with a sad note. The news of Tahira Ali Shah's passing away shocked each one of us. Tahira Ali Shah former senior vice-chairperson and one of the founder members of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) passed away in a road accident during her struggle for the rights of marginalized community. She was also the president of Noori Development Foundation (NDF), an organization working on the rights of women fishers and peasants. To pay homage to the great soul, the martyr of Indus and the queen on fishing community, civil society of Sindh held a condolence reference on Monday April 6, 2015 at Sindh Boys Scout Auditorium, Karachi.

Coastal communities vow to continue the mission of Tahira Ali Shah

BADIN: A large number of fisher women hailing from different coastal villages of Sujawal, Thatta, Badin and Karachi flocked the event to remember the martyr of River Indus, Tahira Ali Shah on the occasion of a condolence reference held at Badin city. The women activists, especially from the coastal areas accredited Tahira Shah for mobilizing them for protecting their livelihoods, which was under threats in the shape of contract system at coastal lakes and fresh water bodies in the province. Tahira Ali Shah died in a road accident on March 10, 2015 near Sujawal while going to Badin to attend the rally for mobilizing the communities to celebrate the International Day of Action for Rivers. PFF Chairperson Muhammad Ali Shah, the husband of Tahira Shah, speaking on the occasion lauded the role of women in the struggle for the protection of livelihoods. He realized the fact that Tahira was behind the successful campaigns of PFF. "Tahira died during the struggle. In fact she is not here physically but

there are more women among us, who are eyewitness of her daring personality," said Shah. "Despite the barbarism and influence of feudal system, we can see the women are in the struggle with PFF," he claims, saying community women have played key role to achieve success. PFF that was formed in 1998, proved itself as social movement in the year 2000 with its historic struggle against the contract system in Badin. Shah lauded Tahira's role for the struggle, who led the communities while the leadership was out of the country. He said Tahira inspired him to come to lead the communities for protecting their sources of livelihoods.

Yasmeen Shah, the daughter of Tahira recited a poem to pay tribute to her mother. Bhagi Mallah and Bhagaan Mallah from the rural villages of Badin also spoke on the occasion and remembered the moments they spent with their leader (Tahira) during the struggle. Tahira Ali Shah being one of the founding members of the PFF also remained PFF's senior vice-chairperson. Afterwards, she became the founder of another organization Noori that started working for fisher women's rights in the country. Besides, coastal people, fisher women, representatives of civil society, human rights activists, political workers, journalists, teachers and students participated in the event. Prof Abdullah Mallah, Director of Laar Museum, Badin portrayed the fight between the influential people armed with weapons and empty-handed community people in Badin coastal areas, in which he said only a few daring people came for extending the support to communities. Tahira was among those daring people, he added.

Mallah said Tahira led the struggle of the people, who were ready to die for the cause, protecting the rights of their source of livelihoods. After that support for ending contract system, the communities heaved a sigh of relief to see their source of livelihoods freed and they lived with dignity. He said she was not the character of power politics, but she fought for the rights of oppressed people in the coastal areas. PFF senior vice chairperson Fatima Majeed, hailing from Karachi told how she got inspiration from Tahira Ali Shah and PFF. She recalled the moment when her father was caught by Indian coast guards and put in jails. PFF General Secretary Saeed Baloch said the tribute to Tahira is in continuing her mission. He talked about her daring role during the meetings of organization and dialogues with

government officials.

Senior journalist Mahesh Kumar said Tahira Ali mobilized women for the participation in the struggle of PFF. Daily Sindh Express Editor Farooq Soomro, Jamil Junejo, Gulab Shah, Noor Muhammad Taheemor, Abu Bakar Shaikh and others spoke on the occasion. The tribute to Tahira was mixed with mourning, weeping, song performance, poetry recitation and memorization her daring role.

Published in: Sindh Times. By Sawan Khaskheli

Human Chain and candlelight vigil to pay tribute to Tahira Ali Shah

JAMSHORO: A large number of fishermen and peasant community people and civil society members formed a human chain alongside the River Indus, showered rose petals in the stream to remember the struggle of Tahira Ali Shah on International Day of Action for Rivers on March 14, 2015 at Al-Manzer, Jamshoro.

Candlelight vigil to pay homage to the PFF co-founder, Tahira Ali Shah, who died in a road accident, was held on the occasion. The participants paid rich tribute to Tahira by lauding her role and said she lost her life during the struggle for restoration of the river. She had remained at the front line throughout PFF's 16-year long struggle of safeguarding the livelihood rights of the indigenous fisher people. Couple of weeks before her demise, PFF launched a 14-day campaign on March, 1, 2015 at Kharo Chhan, Thatta district, which attracted a large number of deltaic communities, fishermen, peasants, water activists and environmentalists. But after the incident they suspended the activities to mourn the death of their daring leader.

The participants of the human chain said that they cannot forget her as she sacrificed her life for the great cause of restoration of river and to save the Indus delta. Fishermen, peasants and all the riverine and marine communities with womenfolk will continue their struggle to save their source of livelihoods. Mustafa Meerani said they are in shock after the death of their leader and announced celebration of the International Rivers Day with simplicity to pay homage to Tahira Ali. Community people also announced to arrange references in each district of Sindh for remembering Tahira Ali Shah and send message to the world for strengthening unity to achieve the goal. The speakers urged the community activists to follow the

path of their leader, who sacrificed herself for the cause.

Shaheed Tahira Ali Shah organizational School

SANGHAR: On 10 July 2015, a circle aimed at learning and training for peasant communities was formed in Sanghar. The circle was named as "SHAHEED TAHIRA ALI SHAH ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOOL". This circle has been established with the sole aim of promoting Tahira Ali Shah's aim of training the marginalized and suppressed communities. Since Tahira Ali Shah belonged to the school of thought that majorly believed in training, planning and organizing no matter what the hindrances may be.

As part paying a rich tribute the historic struggle of Tahira on March 18, 2015 the fishing and peasant communities of Sanghar paid homage to the struggle of Tahira Ali Shah by sprinkling roses and with candle light at Udero Lal shrine. The participants from these poor communities vowed to continue the struggle that Tahira Ali Shah carried out for them. Remembering Tahira Ali Shah, hundreds people majorly including females from district Sanghar gathered in a procession on June 15, 2015. The females participants said it was the dare and courage of Tahira Ali Shah who made them come out of their homes and face the corrupt influentials and fight for their rights.

Reference Program

THATTA: With intent to celebrate the struggle and work of Tahira Ali Shah, a condolence reference program was held in Thatta on May 9, 2015. Tahira Ali Shah a catalyst behind the struggle of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum and a prominent leader of fisher women lost her life in a road accident near Sujawal on March 10, 2015 in which PFF's chairperson Muhammad Ali Shah was also injured. The accident took place near Dewan Sugar Mills on the Karachi-Badin road when Tahira Ali Shah was traveling along with Muhammed Ali Shah to Badin for PFF's event for water rights.

The speakers from PFF's Thatta district body, representatives from coastal communities, media and the civil society endorsed that Tahira always stood by the side of her husband, continuing her commitment to the fishermen's cause till her last breath. The speakers also highlighted that because of her untiring efforts she found Noori Development Foundation in 2010, an organization that

majorly started working for women's rights. She laid the cornerstone of PFF. The fishing community along the coastal belt of Sindh and Balochistan is well aware of the roles she played in different movements, including one against Rangers in Badin and another against the occupation of Chutyarion Lake. "Her struggle for the rights of rural women, especially fisher women, is incomparable," said a female from fishing communities of Thatta.

Reference Program:

SUJAWAL: A condolence reference program in memory of Tahira Ali Shah was organized in Jati Sujawal. PFF district body, PFF associates, civil society and the media participated in the event to endorse the commitment and sincerity of Tahira Ali Shah who lost her life in a fatal car crash while the 14-Day long campaign of PFF as part of its Keep Rivers Free Movement was on its peak and was also being led by Tahira Ali Shah.

The speakers, remembering her untiring efforts and activism reiterated that the souls like Tahira Ali are rare to be found who overcome their personal odds with an ultimate intent of fighting for the birth rights who were not even conscious of the rights. The speakers stressed the point that Tahira Ali Shah's life must be maintained as the guiding principle when creating ripples in the stagnant waters of corrupt powers who keep exploiting the poor people. Concluding the program, representatives from PFF's district body vowed to carry forward her struggle in the days to come.



LABOR OF LOVE: This is the drawing drawn by Tahira Ali Shah with comments and signature from Muhammed Ali Shah, the love of her life. With great care, she preserved the drawing for years majorly because it contained complementary comments from her beloved.



POETRY OF HOMAGE

Ami left us with the hopes

Roshan Bhatti

With eyes having glimmers of hope,
And heavy heart for the poor,
Ami left us alone at the shore.

With thoughts as free as a bird,
And a mind full of mighty plans,
Ami left us amidst the crowd.

With the dreams having Noori within,
Dreams in the day, dreams at night,
Ami left us with this light.

With a tone as louder as lioness,
With poise as firm as the statue of liberty,
And the slogans that still resound in memory,
Ami left a practice and a theory.

With the hands full of rose petals,
And when the hands sprinkled the petals,
The air around was perfumed,
Roses, that went with the flow,
Flow of the mighty Indus,
But Ami left us with those roses.

She is the martyr for our water,
The one and only on the globe,
And now our eyes are full of water,
Ami left us for the water,
Ami left us into the water.

But the day she left us,
Was the day when she was reborn amongst us,
Reborn as if never to die again,
Reborn to live an eternal life,
Reborn, with an elixir of life.

But the day she left us,
Was the day when she was reborn in our hearts,
Ami now, lives in our hearts,
Hearts that salute her soul,
Hearts that our heavy though,
Hearts that contain her,
Hearts that have high hopes,
Hopes of struggle,
Hopes of a historic victory.

All we need is your smile

When the blue sky looks bleak,
And oasis of earth turns into desert,
When in spite of the roaring waves,
The Arabian Sea seems silent,
Then all we need is your sublime smile.

When storms surround boats in the sea,
And the fish feel like out of water,
When the vultures hover over our head,
And faces of fisher folk turn pale,
Then all we need is your sublime smile.

When the time alone can't heal our pain,
And the people rub salt on our pang,
When the memories render us alone,
And life turns nothing but a hell,
Then all we need is your sublime smile.

When every breath demands your being,
And the words are clutched in the throat,
When the voice is deep and hope is lost,
And all around is but your absence,
Then all we need is your sublime smile!

Your memory is a Neem tree

The scorching sun rays,
The sizzling sand of the land,
Where I do not find any shade,
The saline waves of the sea,
That burn my flesh and blood.

When all this around sets me ablaze,
Your memory becomes a Neem tree,
Walking without you is a walk barefoot,
On the thorny hottest desert.

Struggle without you is a struggle without aim,
Soothing shade withered away with you,
And then out of the blue,
All around is your echo and shadow,
And your memory becomes a Neem tree.

We, the comrades...!

We are the comrades,
Prepared every day for being dead,
But not being afraid,
We accept death but we do not dread,
We do not dread infidelity, insincerity and duplicity,
We, the comrades are for our communities,
The ones that are compelled for unjust compromises.

We, the comrades raise the roaring voice,
Against the infidel and insincere,
Within our veins runs the boiling blood,
No matter what the age, the time and the place,
We, the comrades sprinkle roses on the thorns of life.

We, the comrades never die,
We ourselves are death,
Death for the dictators, for the tyrant,
We are sentenced and put behind bars,
But still we lead, we live, we strive, we struggle and then we win.

We, the comrades never say why,
We, the comrades never die.

An eternal love

Yasmeen Shah Kazmi

Missed you bitterly today,
No one helped when I trembled in pain,
But you shivered at a single sigh of mine,
Only you would shed a tear when I cried.

Those early morning phone calls from you,
And your slow voice having my concern,
And until you learned of my well-being,
Those excuses of yours for skipping meals,
Who would call now when I return to home?

I know the life is so busy,
But your memory is so noisy,
I never show the wounds of your separation,
The hardship of your separation,
Never thought of the day,
When I would cry without being in your hugs.

Memories of mother

Mehran Shah

Blessed is your name blessed is your face,
Blessed is your smile full of grace,
I never realized until it was too late,
Until your only home remained my heart,

You were the sun that brightened my day,
Now who will wipe my tears away?
If only I knew what I know today.

You light up my heart every day,
And in my dreams you remain by my side,
In an eye-blink you went away,
In an eye-blink you went with the wind.

The way you took me in arms,
The way you covered me with care,
And the way you guarded from grieves,
Was the only way out of all harms.

In heaven you smile

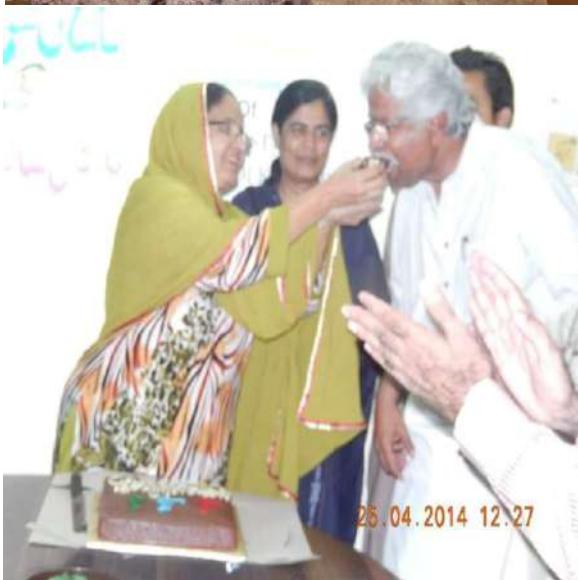
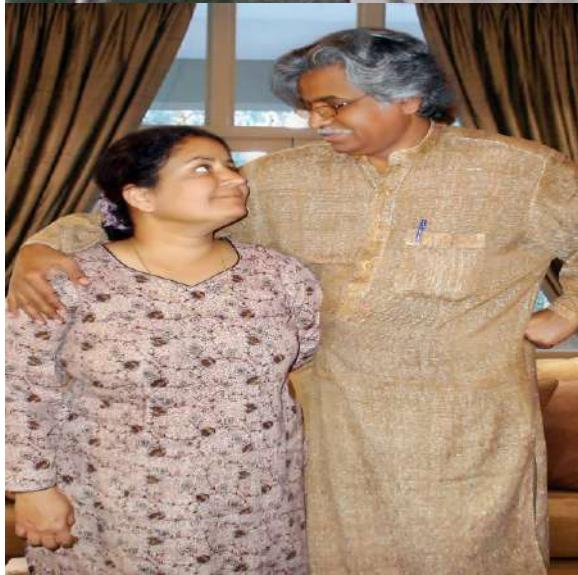
Natasha

The love of my life,
The reason of my smiles,
The one who makes me glad,
And the one who makes me laugh,
Is my sweet grandmother.

The person with tender hugs,
And fairy tales for me,
With worthy words,
Is my sweet grandmother.

To my grandmother I say,
I know you smile in heaven,
I know you see me from sky,
No matter where you are,
Today, tomorrow and forever,
You will keep smiling in my heart.

Her Family



Her Struggle



With Arundati Roy at Karachi



At World Social Forum, India



With Thomas Kochery



5th General Assembly World Forum of Fisher Peoples

Carrying PFF Voice Abroad



