

The Strange Tale of Pakistani Women's Meet

Zia-ul-haq, the military dictator of Pakistan, has good reason to be wary of Pakistani women. Not long ago, they caused great embarrassment to him and his government.

As one attempt to fabricate a semblance of public approval for his widely hated tyrannical rule, Zia's government masterminded a series of conferences in Islamabad, appearing to represent sections of the society such as the intelligentsia, the Ulema (theologians), and women. The first conference of the Ulema, though not exactly a success, since most of the prominent Ulema kept away, still fell in line to some extent. The second of the series, the women's conference, turned out to be quite a different affair. So different indeed, that it was never reported in the press, except for one lone, bitter editorial in a Karachi daily, ruefully captioned "Muslim women's conference or display of obscenity?"

The conference was planned months in advance, as a three-day grand affair including free air fare and five star hotel stay for participants. Government circulars called for thorough scrutiny of all papers to be read in the conference. Hundreds of women from different provinces were invited, but great care was taken in selection. Some women were from the bureaucracy, others from big landlord and capitalist houses who collaborate with Zia. It was to be a conference of reliable, docile and tamed participants.

Came the day of the conference. All the ladies, many of them employed women, gathered at the hall. They had no previous contact with each other, and had planned nothing in advance except their pre-censored speeches. The conference was going to be a

nice, colourful, scented affair. Yet the strangest of all things happened. In that hall, something transformed these harmless, genteel ladies into a mass of non-conformism and rebellion. How little do we realize what frustrations, longings and apprehensions are buried in the subconscious of an oppressed section, and at what crucial point they may suddenly emerge.

The significance of being called as representatives of women must have suddenly dawned on them, as they hastily engaged in a preconference exchange of ideas. Everyone talked. No, four marriages were out of the question! In this day and age! Where does it say in the Quran? It is a misinterpretation, a hoax! Maternity leave! The bureaucratic ladies suddenly remembered. Equal pay, equal rights. Yes, equality of rights was what they were there for!

At the opening of the conference, a government spokesman sweetly presented a motion for a vote of confidence in the Zia government. The participants thought it over only for a few seconds before they began to chatter. What confidence? That is not what we are here for. We have no confidence in the ordinances of a fake Islamic government. No confidence!

Thereafter they began to move and pass their own resolutions, and make their own demands. By the end of the day, they had jotted down a whole new manifesto of their rights. These included women's right to be head of state, changes in the educational system, and introduction of such tabooed subjects as dancing and singing. As this resolution was being formulated, a lady from the television script department nervously tried to restrain

the writer: "Add the word 'folk' to dancing and singing" she advised, "It may sound less outrageous." Her suggestion was waved aside by the majority, now glowing with enthusiasm: "Folk or no folk, we want plain and simple singing and dancing." A government proposal for a separate university for women was also rejected.

The following day, responsible bureaucrats and some women delegates were severely rebuked for the fiasco the conference had turned out to be. Emergency measures were needed to save the conference. These wayward women were most shamefully defying the military authorities—and at government expense!

On the final day, Mrs Ateefa Mamdot from a famous big landlord family of Punjab was briefed to control and channelize the proceedings. Attendance was thin as most of the participants, thinking enough had been said and done, had left for sightseeing around Islamabad. Ateefa Mamdot came up with a misworded proposal that as the previous demands related only to fashionable women, it was high time something was proposed on behalf of the simple poor women who abide by Islamic principles. The words "simple and poor" provoked a federal lady secretary to remark that it was hardly becoming to talk of the poor when one was wearing diamond studded bangles. Ateefa Mamdot flew into a rage, began to abuse and physically assault her. There was general commotion in the hall and proceedings were abruptly terminated.

—Fehmida Riyaz, *Patriot*

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*What shall I show you ?
What shall I teach you ?
When I take you in my arms
And hear the call of the times,
The cries of battle,
I hear again and again
That you are "Veerta"
Listen, my little life,
Do not fear the wolf!
Continue the fight,
Never despair,*

*May I be able to teach you heroism,
Make you a lioness,
Unafraid of fear itself.
Listen, my little one, my newborn,
You will not be alone,
Many helpers you mil have,
Friends and companions,
Hand in hand,
Step for step—
This is my one hope for you
(Translated from Urdu by Manushi)*