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Dispatch

On Being an Activist: Silence, Technology and Feminist Solidarity in South Asia

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A Letter to Irom Sharmila

The Indian poet-activist Irom Sharmila is globally renowned for her 16-year fast against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a brutal law which gives the Indian military shoot-at-sight powers as well as legal immunity, a law that has become a license for arbitrary military violence in several parts of northeastern India as well as in Indian-controlled Kashmir. In the Manipur election of March 2017, after “sacrificing a major part of her life” to the cause of undoing this law and engaging in the “world’s longest hunger strike,” this incredible activist suffered a shocking defeat as the people for whom she had starved herself for a decade and a half gave her only 90 votes (Irom Sharmila loses in Manipur, 2017; Samon & Parashar, 2017). Sharmila reportedly broke down, decided to quit politics, and registering her sorrow, said: “thanks for 90 votes” (Kant, 2017).

A few feminist activists, including myself, were reading about her defeat in Karachi and feeling her pain. Sharmila’s struggle against militarization and for regional rights seemed to mirror only too well the landscape of activist struggle in Pakistan, and her helplessness in the face of her defeat likewise resonated with our own sense of despair. Oddly, sadly, and yet perhaps beautifully, we could relate with her. We felt that a solidarity letter should be written to express our support, to say to her that her struggle speaks to us and inspires us irrespective of electoral results, that she continues to hold meaning for us and to people the world over. The letter was to be authored anonymously and published in an Indian newspaper. But when the draft was ready, our doubts started emerging. It was a strong letter in which our own military-state was sharply criticized. Is it really wise for us to publish such a letter in an Indian newspaper – at a time when Indo-Pak relations are already

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so heated, at a time when surveillance in Pakistan is already so severe, at a time when Pakistani activists are going missing? Will we really remain anonymous, given that we were passionately discussing the whole plan on Whatsapp instead of the safer Signal?¹ Is it really a risk worth taking? We tried to be courageous but the fears had set in, and a harmless solidarity letter was sounding like a death warrant. We could be traced and invite attention – *we should be careful as we need to do long-term work*. Many activists in Pakistan today find themselves in this conundrum, which leads us to suppress our activist instincts before our actions, to silence our own voices before they are silenced.

The eighteenth-century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah wrote:

*Chup kareke kareen guzaare nu*²

*Sach sunke lok na sehnde ne, sach aakhiye te gal painde ne
Phir sache paas na behnde ne, sach mitha aashiq pyaare nu
Chup kareke kareen guzaare nu*

*Chup aashiq to na hundi ai, jis aayi sach sugandhi ai
Jis maahl suhaag di gundi ai, chadd duniya kood pasaare nu
Chup kareke kareen guzaare nu*

--

Stay silent to survive

People cannot stand to hear the truth
They are at your throat if you speak it
They keep away from those who speak it
But truth is sweet to its lovers!

Those lovers cannot remain silent
Who have inhaled the fragrance of truth
Those who have plaited love into their lives,
Leave this world of falsehood
Stay silent to survive

My usual preference is for poems with an optimistic and progressive bent. I am surprised that at this moment in Pakistan, it is a poem like *Chup* – Silence – that resonates with my heart, perhaps because of the deep affliction it bears and enables us to bear. The poem captures well contemporary activist sentiment, and feels like an unusual anthem of resistance for today's Pakistan. Ironically, it is the mirror image of the famous anthem by the

¹ WhatsApp is a mobile communications system (see <https://www.whatsapp.com/>). Signal is an encrypted communications software (see <https://signal.org/>).

² "Stay Silent to Survive." The translation is by Sana Saleem; the detailed text and translation is available at <https://parchanve.wordpress.com/2015/05/30/chup-kareke-kareen-guzaare-nu/>

Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), *Bol ke lab azad hain tere* – Speak, for your lips are free – which for long has been a popular, progressive ballad in South Asia. Our lips are not free, and it is hard to pretend otherwise.

As part of my academic research, I study the poetic thought of South Asia and its significance in understanding history, society and emotionality in our part of the world. I want to write about this poetic history – about Sufi revolutionary thought, about music and madness, and about radical social love across Islamic, Hindu and Sikh devotional traditions. Instead, I find myself writing about matters that afflict my daily existence, matters that must be acknowledged and witnessed before academic writing can find its voice again.

On Technology and Fear

In the matter of Irom Sharmila's solidarity letter, our group of activists was not over-reacting, nor were we paranoid. We live in a state where the extreme nature of surveillance, intimidation, and extra-judicial killings has reached a new level in recent years. People have received intimidatory phone calls, emails, visits and threats for organizing dialogues in small bookstores, performing plays, writing academic articles, singing songs and organizing poetry festivals. Around the time of Irom Sharmila's electoral defeat, five Pakistani bloggers had gone missing for writing satire against the state on social media, pro-establishment media figures had launched a vicious campaign accusing the missing bloggers of blasphemy, and one blogger, after his release, had said that he was tortured "for pleasure." The blasphemy charges against the bloggers were supported by fabricated Facebook posts, making Pakistani activists acutely aware of new ways in which their victimization could happen in the digital realm, quite literally through *technologies of rule*.

In *3D Things: Devices, Technologies and Women's Organizing in Sri Lanka*, Shermal and Kumudini (2015) make an important contribution to feminist scholarship by highlighting activists' relationship with electronic devices and social media, and illuminating the ways in which women's organizing has changed with technology. An important new aspect of such technological orientations in Pakistan is a heightened fear, self-consciousness and self-regulation around devices, as a result of state surveillance and violence. Far from seeing them as empowering tools, we have come to be intimidated by our own devices. With increased trolling and state monitoring, it was not uncommon for me to hear, last year, a number of female activists say, "I think I should go off Facebook and Twitter for a while," in response to, and as a clear testament to, an atmosphere of anxiety and self-regulation. This atmosphere has worsened in the wake of laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2016, which severely curtails freedom of online speech and has already rendered activists vulnerable to being declared

“anti-state” and “against the ideology of Pakistan.”³ The demand for trainings in online security has seen a steep rise, involving the learning of new tools, understanding the surveillance potential of different platforms, and guidance on managing phones, computers, accounts, and online identities. I find it striking that when I reflect back on 2017, so much discussion in my activist circle has been on Riseup email accounts, PGP keys, safe browsers like Tor, VPNs, and safe messaging services such as Signal.⁴

Actual protests, too, now pose dilemmas of documentation – which also has the effect of curtailing our organizing capacities. If we are at a human rights meeting for organizing a protest, should we tweet about it to spread awareness or keep it secret to avoid elements that would foil the protest? If we tweet at the protest, will we ourselves come under the ire of the state? If we do not tweet, or there is no media, will anyone notice? Should any pictures or videos be released for real-time reporting and attention, or do we wait until all the images are post-processed and blurred to ensure anonymity? If there are videos and images of protests, from whose account should we release them to avoid state surveillance?

It is an absurd state of resistance when we are trying to make a visible difference by constantly trying to remain invisible. We must “remain apparently undetected and still do what is needful,” as Ather Zia (2016, p. 6) says of the performance of agency by Kashmiri half-widows. We try to unwrite our identities, authorship and traces, before we try to write new stories for our besieged nation. How will we stand up and be counted, if anonymity is deemed crucial? There can be no consistent approach, and ultimately, people act in the ways that make sense to them, given their perceptions of the situation.

Technological preparation can only go so far in addressing fear. Ultimately when we talk on the regular mobile phone, we are being careful, watching ourselves, censoring our conversations, and taming our authentic voices. We have not just come to fear our devices but also our own voices, so we tend to speak in *isharas* (signs) even when we are talking on Signal. It is enormously taxing to be constantly worrying about surveillance before uttering anything, to be focused more on safe technology than on the political or social issues at hand. Gratefully, fear often goes away as quickly as it comes, as life’s desire to live reasserts its power. The urge to use ultra-secure platforms goes up and down, and some like myself have descended back to Gmail and Whatsapp just because it is convenient and – even if foolishly – feels like an act of subversion in an imposed state of worry. But stories of unknown calls, tracked calls, calls that seem to know what is being discussed on Whatsapp, and disappearing SMSes keep us in a condition of consternation and disquiet. The self-surveillance continues and we are forever telling ourselves and

³ See <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/year-in-review-peca/>

⁴ These technologies are used to protect our identities and dignity online. Good overall guidelines to online security for women have been prepared by AWID. See www.awid.org/resources/diy-online-security-guide-every-woman.

others to be careful on Facebook and Twitter, and not be “too political.”

On Silence

The biggest closure is on the subject of militarized violence in Balochistan, a region of Pakistan devastated by state-sponsored disappearances and insurgencies. There has been a media blackout on the particular subject of “missing people” for many years now, but one could raise it on alternative platforms, and in universities and activist circles. Now, even this space is crushed, especially after the murder of activist Sabeen Mahmud who was shot dead on April 24, 2015, minutes after she hosted a dialogue on human rights abuses in Balochistan at her bookstore-café in Karachi, The Second Floor.⁵

While brave activists, social movements and resistance groups in the country courageously continue to engage with and fight back against multiple forms of state oppression, a culture of political censorship and silencing has overall deepened in Pakistan in the last three years. Amongst metropolitan journalists, activists and progressive academics, silence is being performed as part of a carefully expressed, bordered and contained sense of agency. *Chup* – silence – has in fact become a state of being and doing for many, as a strategy for survival in a state where arbitrary detention, torture and disappearances have become entirely commonplace. *Chup* is when you attend a protest in support of families protesting against state-led disappearances, but then make sure you are sitting in the back somewhere and not visible on any camera. *Chup* is when your students say to you that they are scared to even read your academic article on citizenship struggles in Gilgit-Baltistan, simply because it discusses citizenship rights. *Chup* is when your friends think you are too political, even when you are not speaking. It is customary that when someone dies, we observe a moment of silence. In a state of *chup* in Pakistan, we now observe moments of speech.

This moment in Pakistan – July 2018 – is a crucial one. People are tired of being *chup*, and many are choosing speech over silence, fighting for peace against violence. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in particular has inspired tens of thousands to take to the streets this year in all provinces, demanding an end to disappearances and arbitrary state rule. In this spirit, I now share the unfinished, feminist solidarity letter from last year. It is a small act, perhaps meaningless now. But it is better than silence.

⁵ For more on the issue of missing people and Sabeen Mahmud’s murder, see Ali (2015).

A Letter to Irom Sharmila

Beloved sister Irom,

We are Pakistani feminists watching your struggle from afar, and it has moved us to write this message. The brutality of military power and the apathy of militarized societies, we understand only too well. Do you know what the popular protest slogan in Pakistan is?

Yeh jo dehshatgardi hai, is ke peechay wardi hai
This terror you see, it is caused by the military

Similar story there, right? Arbitrary power, exploitation, and violence trample over the right to dignity and equality. But the people know, and future generations will also know. Your valor is bigger than the gloating chests of generals.

If we believed in awards, we would give you a *Nishan-e-Haider* or the *Param vir chakra*.⁶ But what good would they do? We would rather meld these awards with the fire of our being, and make beautiful earrings for you. We wish to celebrate you, because your moral victory is far more significant than your electoral defeat. Your struggle speaks to us deeply, thousands of miles of territory and borders of barbed wires cannot obstruct our connection. Look how hard they try. Look how miserably they fail. We continue to share your pain, and feel your agony as our own. We draw inspiration from your revolutionary struggle of 16 years, because when you stand up for the people and especially the women of the North-east, you stand up for us all in South Asia fighting the oppression of militarism. When we look at your single-minded devotion to the cause of anti-militarism, we feel stronger in our own resolve to continue. You give us strength and courage, for which we offer our deepest gratitude.

Please don't lose heart. Your local vote-bank may not be with you. But feminists, activists, all who oppose the government of the gun, stand with you globally.

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⁶ These are, respectively, Pakistan's and India's highest military awards.

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