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Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist

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Abstract

"No one is safe in this city. Those who think otherwise are living in a fool's paradise", says Perween's best friend and colleague Anwar Rashid as he navigates the chaotic roads of Karachi. An architect and urban planner, Perween Rahman dedicated her life for the poor of Pakistan. She was shot dead by armed assailants on her way home in March 2013. When she joined the Karachi based Orangi Pilot Project, founded by Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan, Orangi's lanes were full of filth and choking gutters. Back in the early 80s, the people of Orangi, most of them migrants from India and Bangladesh, were taking their own steps to improve sanitation. Dr. Khan assigned Perween the task of developing a low cost sanitation model for Orangi. Perween's pioneering work in Orangi led her on a collision course with the various mafias in the city. She surveyed the water supply to Karachi and pinpointed locations from where water is being stolen from the bulk supply lines. She mapped and documented Karachi's informal settlements to provide the poor security against land grabbers. Perween had an alternate vision for the development of Karachi. "Development doesn't come from concrete. Development is not five star hotels and mega road projects. What we need is human development."

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Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist

I ran into Perween Rahman at the Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) in 2013. She met me so warmly that afternoon that it is forever etched in my memory. We spoke briefly about the feature-length documentary I wanted to make with her about Karachi's sewage system. She was glowing, and since several people around her were vying for her attention, I told her I would visit her office in Orangi to discuss the documentary in detail.

It was the last time I saw her. On the evening of March 13, 2013, she was shot dead on her way home from work.

Perween was a much-loved architect and urban planner in Karachi. She was the director of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), a non-governmental organization based in Orangi Town, a low-income neighborhood of 2.4 million people in the north-western part of the city.

The OPP had led community-based improvement of sanitation in the area since the 1980s. These efforts were based on extensive mapping of the town's drainage channels under the leadership of Perween. The mapping team went on to document the entire sewage system of Karachi in the 1990s. They discovered that untreated sewage was flowing into the natural storm water drains all the way into the Arabian Sea. This led to an explosive situation with the city's municipal authorities whose claims of functioning sewage treatment plants were now laid to waste. The OPP sewage disposal plan for Karachi was later accepted by the authorities.

The inner workings of Karachi's haphazard sewage disposal and its effect on the urban environment have always held a strange fascination for me. This is what I wanted to make a documentary about. I wanted to film it like an adventure though, as a discovery of the city. And I wanted to film it with Perween. I had pitched the idea to her and she supported it. She said she would help with the fundraising efforts. Little did I know I would end up making a documentary about her life and work instead.

After Perween's tragic passing, I attended a memorial talk held at the Arts Council, Karachi in her honor. Sitting in the auditorium hearing her friends, family, and colleagues talk, I was moved by the stories of their interaction with her. She had clearly touched the hearts of so many, and that's something I wanted to share with the world. After the talk, I met Perween's sister, Aquila Ismail, and told her I wanted to make a documentary about Perween.

Over the next two-and-a-half years that it took to put the film together, I found myself wishing more and more that Perween was still around. I had only met her a few times and did not know her personally. But as I spoke to her family and friends, and collected archival footage, I felt a connection with her. She had a way of warming up to people, leaving a lasting impression even if she met them briefly. For me, those who had a chance to know and work with her are truly blessed.

Perween was very generous with her time. Back in 2009, I interviewed her for my documentary *City by the Sea: The Future of Karachi's Coastline*. Arif Hasan, architect, urban planner, and Perween's mentor, suggested I speak to her about coastal pollution and land reclamation.

I arrived at her office expecting just a few minutes from her very busy schedule but we ended up talking for an hour as she patiently explained the importance of wetlands, the hazardous effects of land reclamation around Mai Kolachi, the fish there being deprived of their natural passage to the sea and the intricacies of water supply to the city.

She spoke of the sea breeze, the colors of the Clifton beach and one of her favorite Karachi haunts where she often spent weekends with her family. She chuckled when she said how the sea breeze is therapy and how she often took friends who were feeling low to the beach to lift their spirits. And as I was about to turn off the camera, she pointed to some cute little green bee-eaters just outside her office window. "They are visitors from interior Sindh," she said with a smile.

Soon after Perween's death, most of the OPP staff shifted to an office in the heart of the city. With justice for Perween being sought in the courts, her friends and family are not safe either. "No one is safe in this city. Those who think otherwise are living in a fool's paradise," said Perween's best friend and colleague Anwar Rashid as I filmed him navigating the chaotic roads of Karachi.

A mobile van escorted his vehicle with four policemen pointing their guns at the traffic, nudging motorcyclists and donkey carts out of the way. With such security concerns facing the OPP staff, I wondered how to film the very communities that Perween loved so much.

As I began filming in Orangi, a few things were made clear by those close to Perween. I wasn't supposed to go to Orangi regularly. I had to keep a random schedule, alternate cars, not linger in any particular area for long and to always be

accompanied by the OPP staff. Most importantly, I was told not to go anywhere near a water hydrant and that they would give me the pictures instead.

When Perween joined the OPP in the '80s, the first thing she did was to map the neighborhood lanes. "She was not familiar with much of the city," Anwar Rashid shares on camera. "Areas such as New Karachi, Surjani Town, Numaish, Mazdooron Ki Basti (Workers' Colony), and Manzoor Colony were all yet to be discovered by her. She kept a pen and notebook handy at all times to keep track of where she was going and to get back as well." He chuckles as he recalls how she was known by the locals as "chhatri wali baji [the lady with the umbrella]." It was during all the months of filming that I realized what tough conditions Perween worked in, and I marveled at her dedication.

One morning, when the streets of Orangi were bathed in Karachi's golden winter sun, my cameraman, Sohail and I wanted to film a scene from a rooftop. So, I asked the driver to stop at a corner where there was a school to shoot from the top. As we stepped onto the main road, we spotted a brickmaking yard. We lingered there for some time filming the workers busy churning out the bricks that people use to make their homes and little shops. The road was still deserted early morning, and it was pretty quiet and peaceful all around.

On the school rooftop, the person accompanying Sohail and I was curious to know what it was exactly we were there to film. "Are you here to film the scene of the murder?" he asked us. Apparently, just the night before, a man was shot dead in the middle of the road near the exact spot where our car was parked. We only later noticed the bloodstains on the tarmac on the way back to the car. The blood was still wet, like a stain from a *paan* (beetle nut leaf and areca nut preparation, consumed in South Asia as a stimulant and mouth freshener) spat out by someone from a moving bus. We slowly learnt to move only in those areas that the Orangi Pilot Project staff were familiar with or had worked in, as one could not just enter into communities without being aware of the situation on the ground—especially not armed with a camera.

One day, my eye caught a colorful lane bustling with activity. Pushcart vendors calling out their produce; bright orange carrots, blood red beetroots, and huge green squashes; the fish vendors holding up fresh fish for all to see; it was the Sunday farmers' market and people were out and about stocking up for the week. We had been filming commercial activity on one of the main roads with Amir, a young staff member at Siraj's Technical Training Resource Center (TTRC), when I told him I wanted to go into

that side lane with the market. “It is not safe to go into that lane”, he replied immediately. I sighed, another interesting scene off-limits for capturing on camera. “We have not worked with the communities there, so best to avoid it for now,” he explained. So, we moved on.

Another time a police mobile pulled up next to our car. An armed policeman stuck his arm out and hastily motioned for us to stop. It was a dusty and deserted stretch of road heading out of Orangi towards Hub Dam reservoir on the border of Sindh and Baluchistan. “Where are you going?” the policeman asked our driver, an elderly white-haired gentleman, as he rolled down his window. “Hub Dam, sir”, the driver replied nervously. “We have been following you for several miles. Get out of the car,” the policemen ordered. I could tell from the hot and bothered expression on the policeman’s face that we were in for trouble. There were four policemen in the van. None of them stepped out of their vehicle. Siraj, a community architect and Perween’s protégé with us that day, tried to explain to them that we were on our way to film the Hub Dam reservoir, one of the sources of Karachi’s water supply that Perween so extensively documented.

The Hub River is an important source of drinking water for Orangi, SITE, and Baldia town, three large areas of Karachi. Perween Rahman, in her 2008 landmark water study of Karachi had identified at least six unofficial hydrants on the Manghopir road to Hub reservoir. “What does your NGO do?” the policeman started interrogating Siraj. “We map the lanes of Orangi and work with low income settlements to help them improve the basic infrastructure of their neighbourhoods.” said Siraj. “Oh, yes?” retorted the policeman. “Why don’t you come with us to our police station and map the station?”

He did not seem familiar with Orangi Pilot Project and no matter how much Siraj tried to calm him down, he just kept hitting a wall. The policeman was quite irked by now and insisted on taking us to the police station. On hearing this conversation getting nowhere, I finally got out the car and walked up to the police mobile. On seeing me, the policeman began telling Siraj how foolish we were for moving freely in an area infested with terrorists. “This is a hotspot for terrorists, this Hub Dam road”, he enlightened us. “Why don’t you provide us with protection?” I asked him. By now he probably had had enough of us, especially with the ‘ladies’ who had just emerged. He let us go with these instructions: “Be careful, and stick to the main roads.”

41 percent of water supplied to Karachi is siphoned off from the bulk distribution mains

and sold to the people at high rates. “Mega management is needed. Siphoning has to be stopped on war footing.” wrote Perween. “This would enable provision of water to all at an affordable and humane cost.” Perhaps it was these unofficial hydrants the policeman didn’t want us to go nosing around for. Everywhere we went, we heard the same words repeated. We wondered how Perween worked for decades in such a fearful environment, and if she herself ever felt scared or threatened.

One of our last shoots took us to a small hill overlooking the outskirts of Orangi. The sun was setting over the crowded rooftops, the sounds of children playing could be heard from a distance before their mothers called them back in. On the other side, a smouldering trash heap in the middle of vast open land, dotted with empty plots surrounded by broken boundary walls. It looked like a pretty dismal scene, so we decided to make a time-lapse shoot as a last bit of filming for the day. We left the driver with the car, who was hesitant to come to this area to begin with. Sohail, Amir, and I made our way up the hill to get a good vantage point from where to set up our camera. It was windy, and the grey clouds were moving fast across the horizon; perfect for a time-lapse. We were quite pleased, and settled in on the hill for the next half an hour looking forward to a hearty dinner in the city.

I was checking something on my phone, pretty much oblivious to my surroundings, enjoying the cool evening breeze, when all of a sudden I heard the voice of a young man. He stood just inches away from me, and was reporting our location and activity to someone on the other end of his phone. Three other young men had surrounded us, apparently waiting for instructions. We were like sitting ducks. I have never been more scared in my life than on that hill that moment. I got up and motioned towards Sohail and Amir to pack up. The men moved away some distance, still eyes on us. We walked down the hill, hearts in our mouths, and stuffed our equipment into the boot of the car. The driver, who had been observing us from a distance, said “I told you this was not a good idea.”

As we rounded the corner around the hill, the men appeared magically in front of us again, as if from some secret shortcut, still following our movement, still on the phone reporting our location to someone on the other end. I rolled up my window even higher, as if to maintain our little safe bubble. We made it out of that area, resolving never to venture out on our own again.

Neither Anwar Rashid nor Arif Hasan thought Perween would last long in Orangi. After all, she had a privileged upbringing and was not exposed to the harsh realities

of low-income settlements. Initially, she had a tough time being accepted by the local community who were reluctant to work with her. “Who is she and how can she possibly help us?” they said. But in time, as I found out from her colleagues, her gentle nature and sincere efforts to forge relationships with the residents eventually won their hearts over.

With each interaction with the locals, and hearing stories from the women about how Perween would sit with them on the floor, they told me how they expected a typical madam to walk in, but she blended in, listened to them and valued their opinions. She championed the underdog. And it became clear that she was able to do the work she did because of who she was and how she interacted with the community. She could not bear injustices towards the poor. Perhaps her dedication towards them stemmed from her childhood in Dhaka, Bangladesh when her family was suddenly evicted and faced great hardship during the war.

One day, after filming the mapping team at the OPP, it was time for me to be dropped home in one of the office cars. But none were available, except one car wrapped under dusty covers in a shady corner of the compound. The covers pulled off, I was told that it was the vehicle I would be dropped home in. Thinking nothing of it, I got into the car and soon the driver and I were well on our way. I wondered whose car it was, since it didn't seem to be in regular use.

I was filming the passing traffic on the Orangi lanes when the driver looked at me and said, “This is where she used to sit.” He was also the one who took her to the hospital that fateful evening. I didn't say a word, not wanting to bring up painful memories. It was a sobering experience. I was in that car just briefly, but it was Perween's car, the one in which she went to work every day.

People often wondered how she managed to go to Orangi continuously, to which she'd say, “It's easy. There's this one road ...” When told by her sister Aquila to be careful especially in times when polio workers were being targeted, Perween brushed aside all concerns, saying, “Nobody knows me.” “But everybody knew her. She was targeted,” says Aquila.

There was not a dry eye in the house at the film's first public screening for 400 community members at the Orangi Pilot Project. These were people who loved Perween and whose lives she touched. But the film often invokes a similar reaction in complete strangers as well. Perween had a way of connecting with people and I'm glad this comes across on screen. Perween Rahman left behind a lasting legacy and her tragic death is a great loss for Karachi.