

# **Liberating the caged bird**

**Jameela Nishat**

**Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association**

Jameela Nishat was born in 1955 to Syed Bin Mohammad, a portrait artist and Fatima Sayeed. Her father was an excellent painter. Though conservative Islam prohibited painting, a Nawab who spotted Syed's artistic skills sponsored his education in fine arts. Syed Bin Mohammad went on to become a professor of painting at the College of Fine Arts and Architecture in Hyderabad.

M F Husain, India's best known artist, was a close friend of Syed Bin Mohammad. Jameela has vivid childhood memories of Husain spreading out a canvas or a chart paper on the floor of her house and painting. With such inspirations around her and having inherited her father's creative genes, Jameela showed interest in painting at a young age. But her conservative family discouraged her from taking up painting even as a hobby.

## **Passion for poems**

With no recourse to painting, Jameela became interested in poetry. Poetry became Jameela's passion and she started writing poems right from the age of 12. Her poems were considered radical. The budding poet not only faced a lot of resistance from her family but also threats from the community. Unlike her sisters, Jameela could continue her studies up to graduation, but not any further.

Jameela's father observed that her views expressed through her poems did not concur with the traditional and conservative Islamic culture. He decided to get her married to M S Rehman, an atheist, believing he would complement Jameela's radical nature.

Rehman never stopped Jameela from expressing her views and doing things that conservative Muslims would object to. After marriage Rehman encouraged her to study further. She completed her master's in English from Osmania University in Hyderabad and then did a P G Diploma in theatre arts.

In 1982 when her father passed away, she wrote a poem in his memory. Her poem was given a religious angle and she was discouraged to publish her work. Critics like Mughni Tabassum and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi were highly critical of her work while reviewing

them, thus indirectly discouraging her from writing and publishing poetry. However, her husband encouraged her to follow her dreams. She continued with her creative work, writing plays and got into theatre in 1987.

### **Art to activism**

Her journey of transforming from an artist into a social activist is an interesting one. She had taught English in a school and headed a school for disabled children before getting a government job. After the 1992 riots in the aftermath of Babri Masjid demolition, her religious identity became a point of contention, triggering in her a desire to work for communal harmony.

Jameela quit her secure government job of 12 years. She joined ASMITA, a rights-based women's organisation in 1997 and worked there for five years. After joining ASMITA, Jameela revived her creative journey. She wrote poems that mirrored the place of women in Hyderabad. She realised that expressing herself through poems was not enough.

"I felt writing was not enough and that I needed to do something to change the scenario and also to create a public space for myself," she recalled. With a determination to make her words catalyse action, she registered her own organisation called Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association in 2002.

### **Genesis of Shaheen**

In Allama Iqbal's poetry, Shaheen is a bird that flies very high in the sky. She named her organisation after the bird, also a symbolic representation of the way a young girl depicted herself.

Sultan Shahi is a locality in the old city of Hyderabad, dominated by Muslim and Dalit population and known for the animosity between the two communities. Jameela's efforts in the early days to bring the communities together did not bring the desired result. However, after many attempts they were able to convince women from all the communities that there could be harmony among them.

To bring the women of Sultan Shahi together and to pique their interest, Jameela organised a drawing competition for the girls of the area. She asked the girls to draw pictures depicting themselves. "Shaheeda who was just 12 years old had drawn a bird without wings," Jameela reminisced. Jameela asked her if something was missing in the picture. Shaheeda came back with a cage over the bird and said, "This is me." "That is how the name

of the organisation cropped up; Shaheen – the bird which flies high above in the sky. Our objective is to release this caged bird,” explained Jameela.

### **A ray of hope**

Shaheen works in the Old City of Hyderabad and the adjoining areas from an office in Sultan Shahi. Shaheen has a centre each at Siddique Nagar, Aman Nagar, Valmiki Nagar and Hassan Nagar areas, the most vulnerable and prone to communal disharmony.

Shaheen works with women, for and on women’s rights. Jameela’s work includes an active involvement in maintaining communal harmony and gender justice. All the girls and women at Shaheen give Jameela the credit for making impossible situations turn into reality. However for Jameela it was not a single day’s work.

In a workshop, a woman quoted her husband, “Is it a crime to beat one’s wife? One who does not beat his wife is not a man.” The words still resonate in her mind, giving Jameela the zest to execute her ideas and transform her creativity into something more concrete. From 2003 onwards, the Shaheen team started visiting houses and mobilising the girls and women of the community.

Based on the demands of the community, Jameela started vocational courses and legal counselling at Shaheen. She learnt about the issues the women faced while interacting with them during house visits. She decided to work on each aspect and to arrive at solutions.

### **Domestic violence**

From 2002 till 2008, Shaheen’s main focus was dealing with domestic violence and child marriage. Shaheen specifically worked to rescue women from domestic abuse. Till the Domestic Violence Act 2005 came into effect there was no law under which the victim could seek justice. After the implementation of the act, things have become easier for Shaheen.

In the beginning Jameela came across a number of cases of domestic violence. She handled each according to the situation and the impact it would have on the victim. Speaking about Sultana, a domestic violence victim, she said that Sultana’s husband cut her nose off during a domestic tiff. Sultana was covered in blood as she lay unconscious in her house. Though the police arrested the man they did not take any action against him.

Shaheen came to Sultana’s rescue and admitted her in a hospital, bearing all the medical expenses. After that Shaheen worked with the police to bring the man to book. Shaheen coordinated with the police officers and Sultana. Jameela gave Sultana extensive counselling

and was with her throughout the process. This gave Sultana the courage to go against the society and her family and lodge a complaint against her husband. There has been no looking back since.

Sultana is now the key person in Shaheen who counsels women and informs them about their legal rights. Sultana had to undergo 17 plastic surgeries but that has not hampered her courage at all. She lives with her son. She revealed that she had no awareness about legal recourse before she joined Shaheen in 2005.

There is considerable awareness about Shaheen in the locality. A domestic violence victim either calls Shaheen or visits the office. Jameela first tries to understand the case in totality and the views of the victim, before counselling her. Sultana and the other staff who had been victims of domestic violence at some point in life huddle into a group and comfort the victim and give her confidence. This acts as an icebreaker for the victim and helps her to pour herself out.

After the initial counselling session, the victim is informed of the possible courses of action i.e. counsel the husband and parents-in-law or file a first information report (FIR). If she chooses the first option, the husband is called and reprimanded. Very often this works. If the victim chooses to lodge a police complaint, Shaheen provides the victim with necessary help till the case is taken to its logical end.

### **Sheikh marriages**

Child marriages are highly prevalent in the Old City. Young girls aged nine and above are married to sheikhs coming from the gulf countries. The entire process is organised in such a systematic way that no case has been registered so far.

Each area has a strongman who acts like a broker. He knows about each girl in a particular locality. The brokers arrange for meetings where a sheikh meets young girls and chooses a bride from among them. The marriage ceremony is conducted after getting the consent of the girl's parents. A qazi solemnises the marriage. The sheikh pays the agreed-upon money to the tout, who in turn pays the qazi and the girl's parents. The day the marriage takes place, the girl is made to sign the divorce papers.

In order to bring the dark realities to the public eye and to stop child marriages, Shaheen has undertaken many studies. In 2009-10, the organisation conducted a study in Baba Nagar in the Old City. The study concluded that 33% of the households in the area reported having one of their girls married to an Arab sheikh. In all the cases the families were paid money for the girls.

Jameela told us the horrifying story of a young girl who was married to different sheikhs 17 times before she committed suicide. There have been cases where the victims have been traumatised and scarred for life. The sheikhs not only exploited the girls but allowed others also to sexually abuse them. The experience leaves such a dark memory in the girls' lives that is difficult to get over.

Once a 14-year-old was married to a sheikh and he left her after one week of marriage. The girl could not accompany him due to a pending visa application. When the girl found out that she was pregnant, and informed her husband, he divorced her over the phone. Shaheen came to her rescue. They ensured she got proper medical support before and after her delivery. They have also given her skills training so that she can earn money to fend for herself. She is now a mother at the age of 15. She visits the Shaheen centre on a regular basis.

There are many cases that go unreported. The parents also do not take any action as they get paid by the broker. In some cases when the sheikhs take the girls abroad, they treat the girls like slaves. The girls tolerate it as they are able to send money to the family.

Jameela said that economic empowerment of the girls is the solution to the menace. If the girl is educated and earns, she could support herself and her family. But it is not as easy as it sounds. There have been umpteen number of cases where Shaheen tried to intervene on the girls' behalf but the girls' families stopped them. Shaheen's staff even face physical assault and life threats from local goons, generally with strong political support. This has not deterred them in any way. The efforts are still on and Shaheen has been planning different action strategies to bring into light the dark side of child marriage.

### **Sting operation**

One such effort to bring the practice to the knowledge of the public was sting operations. In a sting operation conducted by Shaheen, Fameela, Fathima, Sheeba and Junaida\* took part. Fameela was disguised as the mother of three children and in dire need of money. She approached a broker to fix a meeting with a sheikh. The broker told them to come to a particular place on a specific date. The girls went to the house and saw that there were many families who had come with very young girls. All the girls were wearing burqa.

The broker scolded the Shaheen girls for not dressing up, as the sheikh would not like it. The girls said that they were poor and did not have enough money to buy cosmetics. One by one, the girls were called inside a room where the sheikh was sitting. The first girl was rejected as she declared her age to be 12. Similarly two others were rejected for being minors.

Fameela and team realised that in order to get selected they had to declare their ages above 18. Therefore they said Fathima was 19 and Sheeba 22. The sheikh told them to remove their burqas so that he could have a good look at them. He also told them to turn around so that he could check them properly. They obliged and the sheikh selected the two for the next round. After being shortlisted, the girls were told to come after eight days to discuss other formalities. But the sheikh took ill and nothing could be done further.

### **Awareness and counselling**

To spread awareness about this problem, Shaheen released a comprehensive booklet in 2005 in Urdu on protection of women from domestic violence, including child marriages and distributed it among women of Sultan Shahi and Hassan Nagar areas. A fallout of the sheikh marriage is the increasing incidents of incest. When a woman marries a different sheikh after being divorced, incidence of incest and child abuse increases. There have been a number of cases of child abuse by the stepfather. In many cases, people do not reveal their situation for fear of insult.

In one such case, a man singed the hand of his 12-year-old stepdaughter with cigarette. Her sister, a seven-year-old girl was thrown from one corner of the room to the other and was seriously injured. When asked why they did not leave the house, the elder one optimistically said that they were waiting for the day when their father would stop drinking and would willingly live with them. Jameela and the staff at Shaheen continuously counsel them to bring them out of their traumatic experiences.

Every year Shaheen rescues a number of women from being trafficked for manual labour and sex to the Middle East. In the past several years, many women have come forward to talk about their bad experiences. The organisation records such stories and investigates the leads in the hope of busting the network of traffickers preying on women of poor economic status.

### **Poems as salve**

Jameela has handled a number of cases of domestic violence and sheikh marriages over a period of time. She tries to ensure that the victims get justice. Jameela is satisfied that Sultana got justice. But there have been many cases where the results were far from just.

“We are not able to ensure justice for every victim. A number of times, the perpetrators of violence escape the hands of the law. There was an incident where a girl was tied to the bed and set ablaze by her parents-in-law as she had not brought enough dowry,” said Jameela.

Shaheen came forward to help her but no case could be registered as the victim had already signed a paper saying that it was an accident.

Jameela said, "I get sleepless nights if I am not able to ensure justice for the victims. Those victims will remain with me throughout my life. I have given them a place in my life. They always remain alive in my poems." This again has repercussions. Jameela has had to face social boycott for the poems she writes and also for the kind of work Shaheen does. People find it difficult to accept a radical Muslim woman challenging their actions.

### **Legal awareness and counselling**

Shaheen is a rights-based organisation and believes in creating awareness about practical and legal issues concerning women. It regularly conducts legal awareness workshops about the rights of women. Shaheen also gives legal support to women who have been subjected to domestic violence. Shaheen provides counselling to women in distress on a regular basis. If the case warrants a legal intervention, Shaheen offers legal help.

Women in distress are identified during field visits. Also, there is considerable awareness about Shaheen and hence women approach Shaheen for counselling and legal help. The larger objective of the rights awareness is that women should take charge of their lives and not lead a subjugated life.

In 2008, it facilitated legal awareness to women of all ages in the community to be aware of their rights and about anti-trafficking issues. In 2012, Shaheen published a comprehensive booklet on girls' rights, right to education, right to information and sexual and reproductive health rights in Urdu and distributed among women. Shaheen also conducted awareness campaigns on safe and unsafe touch and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) for adolescent boys and girls.

### **Educating girls**

In the Old City, the maximum a girl can study is till tenth standard, after which they are either married or made to stay at home. Even if parents permit a girl to go to college there is no proper public transport she can avail. If the girls are subject to harassment or eve-teasing on the way and they file a complaint, the police, under pressure from local goons, drop the case. Taking all this into consideration most parents do not allow their daughters to pursue higher education.

Shaheen conducts workshops regularly to create awareness about the importance of education, to drive home the crucial link between education and empowerment. Majority of

the girls living in the Old City, irrespective of their caste and community, fail to complete formal education due to the adverse environment. Some of them clear their tenth grade (SSC) exams through the open school system.

Shaheen works actively with the state education department to facilitate open schooling. Shaheen provides tuitions to the girls who appear for their exams through the open school system. So far 22 girls have cleared their SSC exams thus.

Jameela observed that a number of girls was failing in Telugu or English language exams. Muslims girls who speak Urdu, found it difficult to pass the Telugu exam, compulsory in the state board. So Shaheen provides language tuitions so that the girls can clear their tenth board exams.

Shaheen helps students get admission in Ambedkar Open University if they wish to continue their studies. They even provide financial help to some students. Shaheen runs a children's education programme funded by Action Aid. Volunteers who visit them on regular basis ensure schooling of these children.

### **Health awareness**

Shaheen has been very active in organising health camps to spread awareness on health issues. They organise workshops on health and sexual rights, nutrition and personal hygiene. Workshops are conducted in which women are taught to maintain hygienic conditions during menstrual cycles. They are also taught to make sanitary napkins. Shaheen organises regular health camps for women. Due to Shaheen's advocacy, a government-run health centre has been opened in Lalitha Bagh to cater to the needs of residents of four slums.

Volunteers also spread awareness about various medical issues. The Shaheen office and resource centres also play the important role of a helpline centre where girls and women share their health concerns with each other and get their doubts clarified either over phone or in person.

A woman started using gutkha as a stress buster, became addicted and contracted tuberculosis. She wishes to give it up as she has a small daughter whom she wants to take care of. Shaheen takes care of her medical expenses, ensures that she follows the doctor's advice and keeps track of the her progress.

A staff member at Shaheen told us that her husband had extramarital affairs. It was after coming to Shaheen that she came to know about the causes and effects of AIDS. After she discussed it with her husband, he gave up his habit.

There are many such instances of positive change due to the awareness programmes conducted by Shaheen.

### **Empowering women**

“Bringing change in the lives of women through economic empowerment and independence might bring them the much needed community support,” said Jameela. From 2009 she started giving skill training to women in sewing, embroidery and tailoring, encouraging them to be self-reliant. The skill training has helped the women supplement the family income. Jameela opined, “If a woman is economically independent she does not tolerate the injustice done towards her.”

Shaheen started the resource centre at Hassan Nagar in the outskirts of Hyderabad in 2007. The centre was established after many complaints of rape, sexual harassment and physical abuse against women were brought to the notice of Shaheen, since the nearest police station is 10km away.

The other three resource centres were established in 2013.

The centre has been a silver lining for young girls. It represents the gamut of activities that a typical Shaheen centre does. Girls who had been barred from studying could continue with their studies and acquire any of the trainings offered by Shaheen.

When asked how Shaheen has helped them, one girl quickly replied, “Shaheen has given us freedom.” The freedom to move about freely, to stand up for their rights and to be independent has been the biggest achievement of Shaheen.

Rubina is the coordinator of the Hassan Nagar centre. Shehnaz gives computer training, while Rukhaiyya teaches tailoring. The centre’s coordinator told us that girls visited the centre as and when they got free from their household work. Rubina helps children who have dropped out of school but are keen to study further.

Shaheen also trains women in *mehndi* art, fabric painting, use of computers and bangle making. Neha, a 13-year-old girl loves to visit the centre even during holidays. Women from nearby areas visit the centres to learn something of their interest. After getting trained, most of them take direct orders from customers and make a fair income.

Nida learnt mehndi art at Shaheen’s main centre. As the number of participants increased, she started teaching the others. She feels proud that she earns money. Nida’s parents who were initially against Nida visiting Shaheen centre support her now.

In 2010, Shaheen started training women in self-defence to make them socially empowered. It was a new experience for the girls to learn martial arts, especially from a devout Muslim, whom Shaheen had hired. The training has made the girls confident.

The women at Shaheen also carry out a safe mobility audit in the Old City, to ensure working condition of street lights, accessibility to public transportation and the like. They update this every six months to see if any changes have been made. Similarly to raise awareness among women the girls participate in qawwali and street plays.

### **Communal harmony**

The Muslim, Dalit and Hindu communities in Sultan Shahi area would never see eye to eye with each other. Shaheen has continuously tried to break this barrier among the women who visit the office. The women and girls soon realised that caste and creed do not matter. The violence is perpetuated against them and they face the same set of issues irrespective of caste or religion.

The women now work hand in hand with each other rather than against each other. Shaheen staff along with members from different communities formed a human chain near Charminar to spread the message of communal harmony after the riots in Hyderabad in 2003. Also, Shaheen conducts different activities and workshops in such a way that they instil a sense of equality.

### **Organisational structure**

Shaheeda, Sultana, Archana and Zehra – the women who have been with Jameela since its inception – form the core staff of Shaheen. They were given a meagre amount of Rs 500 monthly to work in Shaheen. It was not the money but the vision that they worked for. There are two types of employees at Shaheen – staff / fieldworkers and teachers. The fieldworkers regularly visit the areas around the Old City. The teachers are either at the main office of Shaheen or any of the four centres. There are 24 staff members and ten teachers.

There are seven members in the governing board of Shaheen with Jameela Nishat as the general secretary. Rekha Abel, a woman activist and Dr Shilpa Anand, professor at Moulana Azad University are among the board members. “There is no hierarchy in Shaheen. Everyone is equal here. This is a democratic organisation. A democratic organisation cannot have a hierarchy,” said Jameela.

The staff at Shaheen have just the basic school education. They are either young women like Shaheda and Zehra who joined Jameela in her quest for doing something for the society or victims of domestic violence like Sultana and Archana. On being asked how she runs the organisation without professionals, Jameela answered, "I do feel the need for hiring professionals to run Shaheen. In fact I hired a girl who had done her master's in social work. She acted in a high handed manner with my girls who have been with me for long." This is also the possible reason for keeping the accounts department in a separate place since it is manned by professionals.

Jameela still thinks there is a need for professionally trained people to manage Shaheen but she is sceptical of hiring people from outside. Right now Sameena acts as an interface between funding organisations and Shaheen; Shaheeda who drew the caged bird is Jameela's trusted aide; Zehra's strength is in creating awareness; and Archana works on gender related issues. "The best thing about Shaheen is that it helps in finding ourselves when everyone feels otherwise," said Jameela.

### **Looking back**

When asked about Shaheen's importance in her life, with a smile, Jameela said, "I can't think of my life without Shaheen." The feeling resonated among other staff members as well. "We as an organisation have evolved over time. We have learnt from our mistakes and corrected the course of direction," she said.

In 2008, Shaheen started a campaign against wearing burqa. They soon realised that there was a resistance against the campaign even from women Shaheen was working with. Jameela soon dropped the campaign. "I decided to stay away from matters of faith as it created unnecessary resistance and opposition to our work."

Shaheen had taken a house on rent for running the centre in Hassan Nagar. Twice they had to shift the centre because of the hostility of the community or because the landlord disapproved of the work that Shaheen does. But the team works on despite challenges that crop up.

In 2013, Shaheeda received Naveena Award for the crucial role she played in a sting operation to identify a sheikh about to marry a young girl. This is one of numerous awards that Shaheen or its employees has won and on display at the office.

But even among so many awards, a painting stands out. It is of a man holding a weighing scale with girls on one side and money on the other. There was a huge red X marked against the painting. This painting perfectly sums up the work that Shaheen does to educate and empower women and to ensure gender parity.

## **On the personal front**

Jameela is a recognised poet. She writes in Deccani, an Urdu dialect, in which women poets and writers are not acknowledged well. She aspires to create a public space for the marginalised women Deccani writers in an effort to dismantle the patriarchal perspectives embedded in the language. Her master's degree exposed her to other literatures; she speaks highly of John Donne, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. Women poets such as Fehmida Riaz, Kishwar Nahid and Parveen Shakir inspire her.

She had to sacrifice a lot on the personal front in order to establish Shaheen as an organisation. Though she accepts that she could not give much time to her family, she has no regrets. For her Shaheen is also like a family, a fact that her family accepts and respects. Throughout the struggle of making Shaheen an established institution, her family stood by her. Jameela's husband, Rehman, who has retired from Jawaharlal Nehru Technical University (JNTU) as deputy registrar and her two sons, Suhail and Ubaid, have encouraged her all along in her work in territories that few would dare to enter. They recognise Jameela's grit and continue to respect her work.

*\*Names have been changed to protect privacy*

## **About Jameela Nishat**

- Jameela Nishat quit her government job to work for communal harmony
- Shaheen, the NGO she founded, counsels, provides legal assistance and rehabilitates women and girls affected by domestic violence and child marriages, in the Old City of Hyderabad
- Works towards stopping sheikh marriages, where young girls are married off to older men from Arabian countries, due to extreme poverty
- Through tuitions and financial aid, Shaheen facilitates girls to complete school education and go for higher studies
- Promotes communal harmony among Hindus, Muslims and Dalits by bringing the women together and breaking barriers

Jameela Nishat

Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association

House No. 23-3-540, Baqshi Bazar

Sultan Shahi, Old City, Hyderabad

Telangana

PIN: 500 265

Phone: +91-40-2438 6994

Email:jameelanishat@gmail.com

**Written by Meghna Mukherjee and Ateeque Sheikh**