

ASMA JAHANGIR

A GIANT IN THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT



**FRIEDRICH
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Pakistan Office

Asma Jahangir

1952-2018

"Everyone is entitled to a dignified life, and no society can advance unless the individuals within it are free from fear and can at least enjoy basic political rights" -Asma Jahangir

Asma Jahangir was a Supreme Court lawyer and human rights activist who dedicated her life to securing justice for the most vulnerable people in her country - women, children, religious minorities and the poor. Often putting her own life at risk she courageously took on the most sensitive cases, for which she faced threats to her family, public assault and an attack on her house. Together with three other women lawyers, she founded the first legal aid centre in Lahore, known as AGHS, and a shelter home for women. Both institutions continue to provide relief to thousands of women and their children from different walks of life. In 1986, Asma enlisted the support of eminent journalists, lawyers and civil society activists and founded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which remains one of the most respected and influential non-governmental organizations in the country and internationally.

Asma Jahangir was born in a politically active family of Lahore. Her father, a civil servant who became active in politics after retirement and served several terms in jail, had a great influence on her life. While still in her teens she petitioned the Supreme Court of Pakistan to challenge her father's detention. The case became known as the Asma Jilani versus Government of Punjab case and is recognized as a landmark in the legal and political history of the country.

As a fearless and sensitive human rights lawyer Asma was able to secure justice for hundreds of desperate women and men, ranging from battered housewives and abused children to exploited landless peasants and victims of religious persecution. She was elected as the first woman President of the Supreme Court Bar Association in 2010 and became widely known as the lawyer who helped women and disadvantaged people to attain justice. In addition to her outstanding achievements in the legal sphere, she was an intrepid and feisty activist who bravely spoke truth to power and fearlessly challenged dictators and violent extremists. As a consequence of her relentless struggle for the rule of law, human rights and democracy she inevitably invited the enmity of those she fought against; but also earned widespread love and respect within the country and in international circles. She was appointed UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion from 2004 to 2010 and served on a fact-finding mission to look into Israeli settlements in Occupied Palestine, amongst other assignments.

A legend in her lifetime, Asma Jahangir left this world while still in the midst of her battle against injustice, but her convictions live on: "The morality of a nation is not judged by the behaviour of an oppressed class but by the rules and laws made by the state, which either protect or exploit an already depressed section of society."

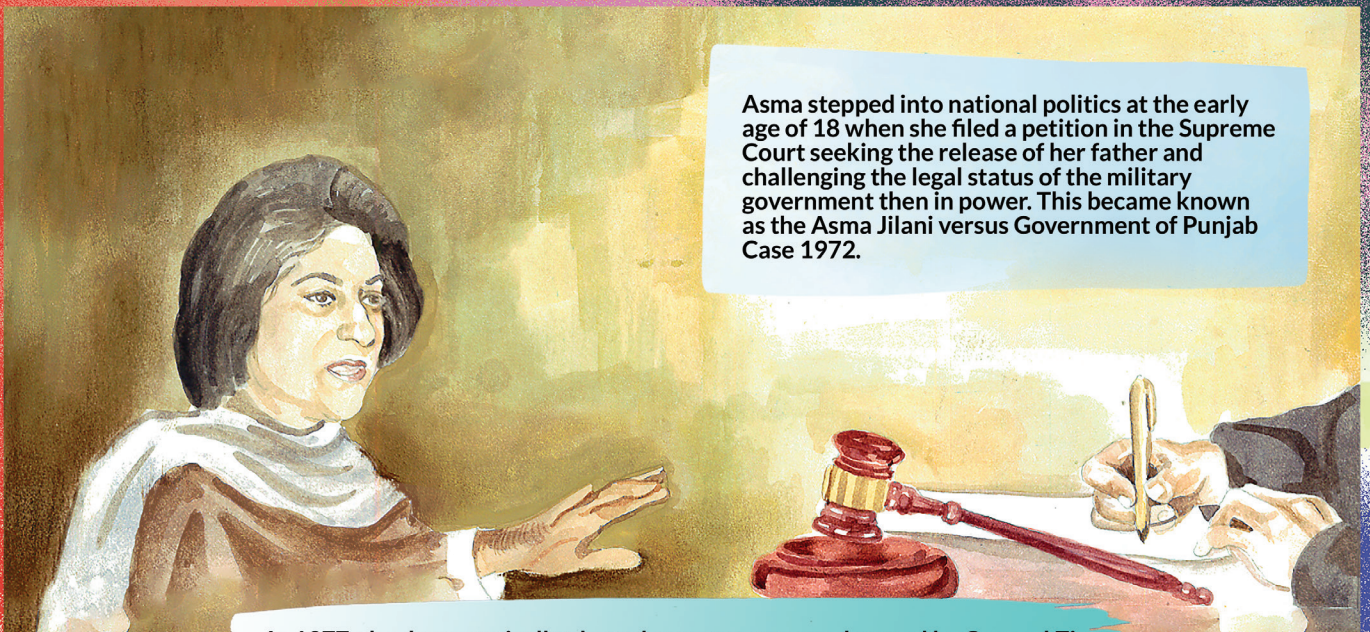
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Asma Jahangir was a leading human rights lawyer in Pakistan. She took on the most sensitive cases in order to obtain justice for the most vulnerable sections of society – women, children, religious minorities and the poor.



Asma stepped into national politics at the early age of 18 when she filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking the release of her father and challenging the legal status of the military government then in power. This became known as the Asma Jilani versus Government of Punjab Case 1972.



In 1977, the democratically elected government was deposed by General Zia ul Haq. The space for dissent was drastically curtailed, as political parties were banned

The Hudood Ordinance (1979) resulted in hundreds of women being imprisoned, accused of having relationships outside marriage.



Press censorship was imposed

Journalists were publicly flogged



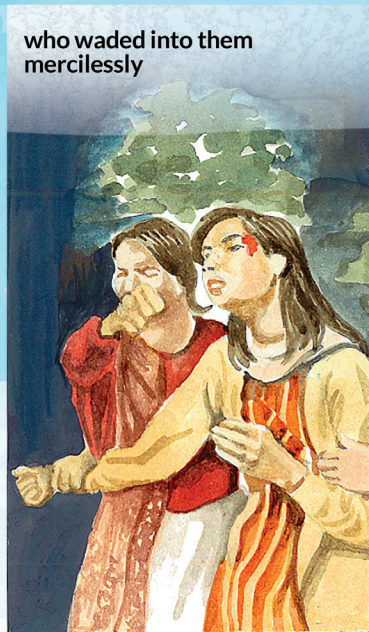
Asma and her sister, Hina Jilani along with other women protesters organized a demonstration in Lahore to voice their opposition to the Law of Evidence



As they came out in the street they were confronted by scores of heavily armed policemen



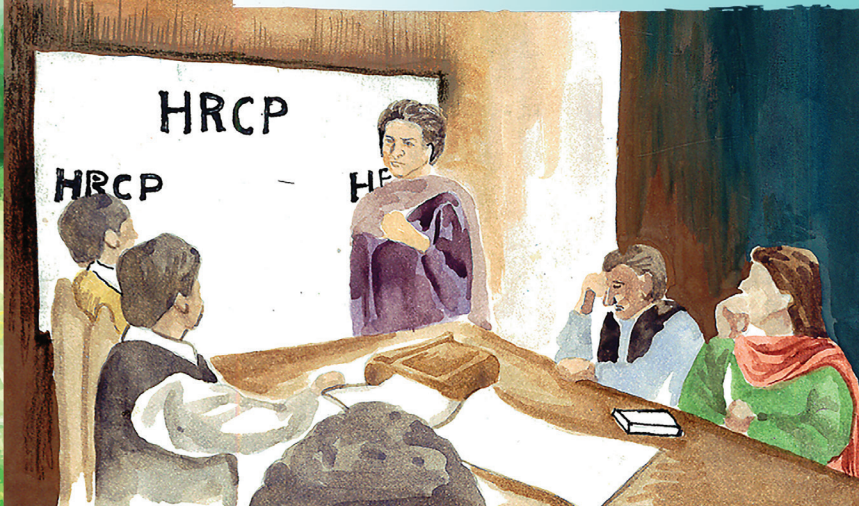
who waded into them mercilessly



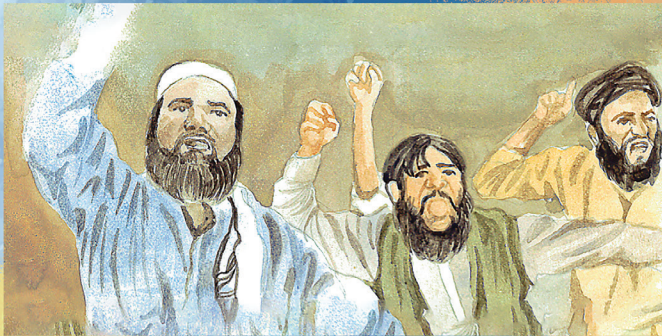
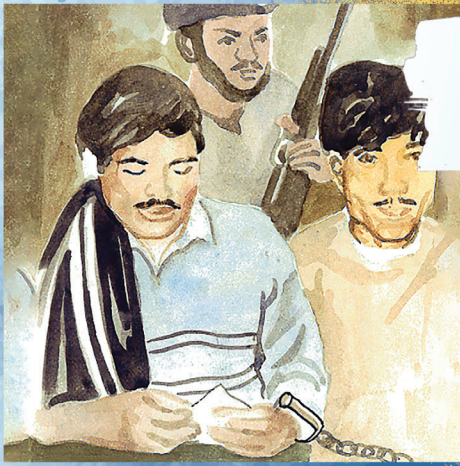
Several women, including Asma, were injured



Realizing that a more fundamental change was needed, Asma Jahangir, with the support of renowned journalists I.A. Rahman and Nisar Osmani, she cofounded the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).



Among the most sensitive and difficult cases that Asma courageously took on were blasphemy cases. For pleading the case of two Christians accused of blasphemy, 11-year-old Salamat Masih and his uncle Manzoor Masih, Asma had to contend with threats from violent religious extremists who crowded the courtroom in large numbers in an effort to intimidate her.



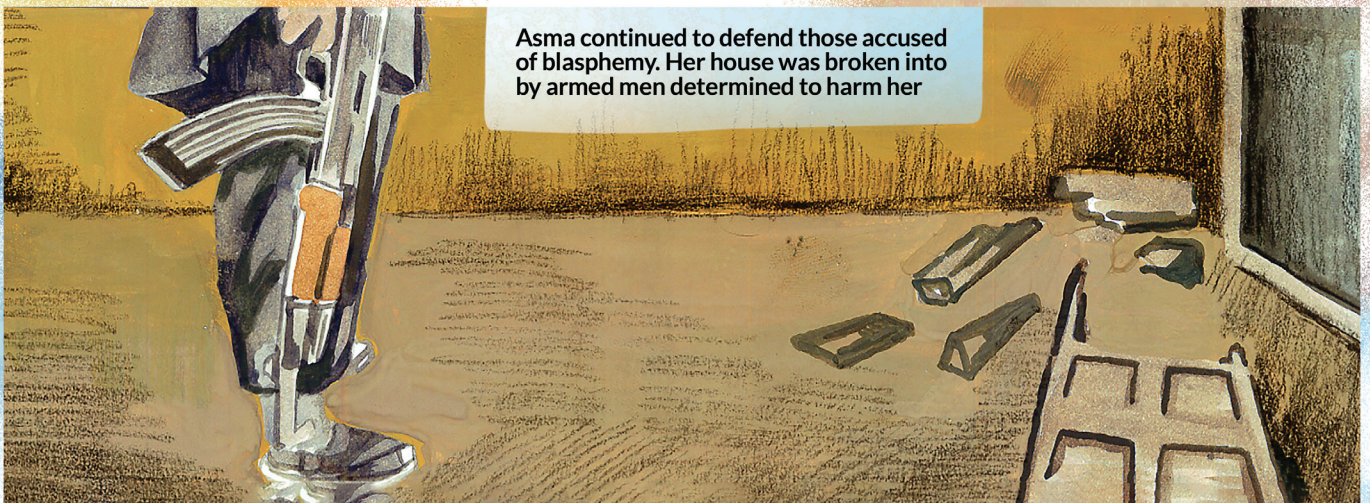
She won the case, but Manzoor Masih was killed outside the district court and the judge who exonerated the accused was later shot dead.



Her lifelong struggle for justice, the rule of law and democracy angered those she opposed. She was vilified and called a traitor.



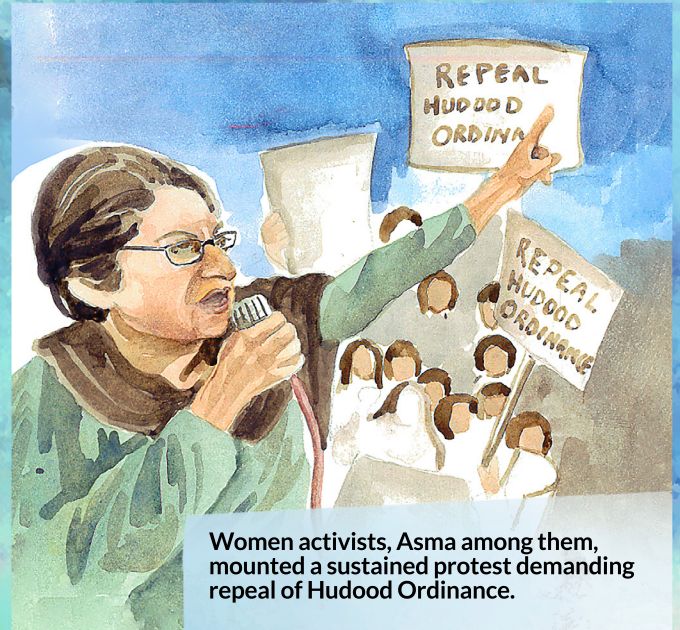
Asma continued to defend those accused of blasphemy. Her house was broken into by armed men determined to harm her



Asma also played a leading role in obtaining freedom for thousands of bonded brick kiln workers and peasants.



Women activists, Asma among them, mounted a sustained protest demanding repeal of Hudood Ordinance.



She won the love and respect of thousands of others who saw her as someone who could always be counted on to stand up for justice.



Apart from many international awards Asma Jahangir was awarded the Nishan-e-Imtiaz. (Nishan-e-Imtiaz, is an honour given by the Government of Pakistan to both civilians and military officers for their outstanding contributions to the country and its people)



Asma Jahangir passed away of cardiac arrest in February 2018, leaving many thousands to mourn her death.

