

Sri Lanka: Dr. Shafi, a symbol of systemic racism

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Dr. Seigu Shihabdeen Mohammad Shafi, a publicly slandered specialist gynaecologist at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital, who was arrested and sent on compulsory leave on false charges of performing sterilisation procedures on Sinhala women without their consent, has donated his salary arrears to the Ministry of Health in order to purchase medicines for patients in these troubled economic times. The Court of Appeal had previously ordered the Health Ministry to pay the arrears and allowances for the period Dr. Shafi was sent on compulsory leave since May 2019.

The Muslim doctor was detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in early 2019 when a Sinhalese newspaper published a lead story claiming a “Thowheed Jama’ath doctor in Kurunegala had illegally sterilised 4,000 ‘Sinhala’ mothers.” After his arrest, the Police recorded complaints from over 1,000 women who claimed that the doctor had performed a procedure that made them infertile. Prof. Channa Jayasumana, a professor of pharmacology and a current Member of Parliament of the Government, then attached to the University of Rajarata, offered his ‘expert’ medical opinion and confirmed that such an illegal procedure has been carried out by Dr. Shafi. The outrage that followed fuelled the flames of hatred towards the Muslim community, coming only weeks after the deadly Easter Sunday attacks. Buddhist clergy and politicians were quick to jump on this racist bandwagon which ruined Dr. Shafi’s career and brought about enormous pain and suffering to his young family.

Three years on the doctor is yet to be exonerated by the Courts. This is despite in June 2019 the Criminal Investigation Department, then led by SSP Shani Abeysekara informing the Kurunegala Magistrate’s Court that investigations carried out by the Police had not proven that Dr. Shafi had ‘blocked the fallopian tubes of mothers, amassed wealth in an illegal manner, or maintained links with a terrorist organisation’ as accused. The CID told the Court a number of women who had accused the doctor of carrying out a sterilisation procedure without their consent had been produced before an expert committee of medical professionals which found no evidence for such claims.

The perpetrators of this strategy which included prominent media houses used the fear among the majority community to elevate then candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a saviour of the Sinhala Buddhist people. Those who orchestrated this conspiracy against Dr. Shafi went on to reap the benefits of the hatred they spread and Gotabaya Rajapaksa by his own admission was elected by the Sinhala people. Channa Jayasumana went on to become a Member of Parliament riding the wave of popularity generated through the Shafi controversy and until recently held the portfolio of State Minister for Health. Dr. Shafi is not alone in facing systemic racism by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration. Ahnaf Jazeem was held under the PTA for 18 months in connection with some poetry he had written, former Governor of the Western Province Azath Salley was arrested and held in custody for over six months allegedly for making a controversial statement at a media briefing and prominent Attorney Hejaaz Hizbullah spent over 18 months in detention under the PTA over a flimsy

accusation of inciting communal strife.

The forced cremation of Muslim COVID victims, a practice not done in any other county in the world during the pandemic, the request from the Maldives to accept deceased Muslim citizens for burial, the desecration of a Sufi Muslim shrine at Kuragala, the appointment of race bating rabid monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara to a presidential task force to recommend legal reform that affects Muslim personal law, are few of the blatantly racist and discriminatory action taken by President Rajapaksa against the Muslim community. The fact that the whole state apparatus including the defence establishment, police and even the courts were enablers in these executive actions, demonstrates the deep rooted and systemic nature of racism that exists in our country.

As Dr. Shafi has magnanimously donated his salary arrears for the wellbeing of the public and the general hospital in which he was so mercilessly vilified. Whatever the courts may decide or however long those proceedings may take, he stands exonerated in a higher sphere. The whole nation owes him an apology and those who perpetrated this shameful crime should be held to account.

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