**Victim forgotten, rapist remembered**

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In madrassas, the use of cell phones is strictly prohibited. Yet for one brave seminary student at the Jamia Manzoor-ul-Islamia — a phone became the only way to gather evidence against Mufti Aziz-ur-Rehman. It was a sting operation of sorts. For the former JUI leader had been sexually molesting the student for years.

After reaching out to journalist Jameel Farooqui of BOL News, through a source, the student’s tearful exposé not only lifted the lid on an Islamic scholar popular amongst the madrassas of Lahore — it also brought the young man to the point of contemplating taking his own life. “It’s better if I commit suicide,” he said in a video message earlier this month.

The end of the video sees the student both pleading for justice and his own safety.

The uncensored footage has been shared all over social media and rewatched by many. However, the viewing public has paid scant attention to the emotional well-being of the student: the survivor.

The most crucial part of this case remains the fact that the student had to record himself getting assaulted before anyone would listen. Yet without this vital footage — the famous Mufti would have been free to do the same to future generations of children

Indeed, the silence about the victim’s physical safety and mental health rings louder than the roar of the video. This shows a lack of real concern for those who have been sexually assaulted. In this case, the student was violated in exchange for being able to sit an exam. Sadly, the focus on meting out the severest punishment to Mufti Rehman has seemingly overshadowed the importance of providing the victim with necessary mental health support. The talk of possible suicide should be recognised as a cry for help and the relevant organisations should take note. In addition, the government should extend all medical and financial assistance to the victim. As for the fate of the accused — this is a matter for the justice system to decide. Though, regardless of the outcome, no real justice will be delivered. For the survivor’s appeals to his family and other staff at this so-called top Islamic institute were ignored. Now, he is left with with immense trauma.

Often, the rapist becomes the sole focus of attention while the victim is forgotten. This is what happened here, largely due to Aziz-ur-Rehman’s influential Islamic background. Whereas the most crucial part of this case remains the fact that the student, who enrolled at the madrassa in 2013, had to record himself getting assaulted before anyone would listen. Yet without this vital footage — the famous Mufti would have been free to do the same to future generations of children. Indeed, Rehman’s two sons threatened the student once the video went viral, before they were taken into custody.

Male victims of rape in Pakistan are often told to keep quiet by their families for fear of humiliation and even disbelief. Thus, they fight alone and endure the bruises caused by confined anger; some end up perpetuating the cycle of abuse. The blind faith invested in muftis like Rehman, who adopt a paternal role, quashes any concerns raised by students either with the seminary or guardians.

Similarly, there is little help on offer to male rape victims.

WAR (War Against Rape) is a Karachi-based NGO and has been operating since 1989. It provides help on social, legal, medical and administrative issues while facilitating and improving human rights and conditions for survivors. However, its website only mentions women and children. Similarly, the NGO Sahil, which is headquartered in Islamabad, has been running since 1996 and specialises in child protection, particularly child sexual abuse. It would be good to know if either of these organisations reached out to the seminary student and translated their words into deeds. Most children who are placed in madrassas are from poor backgrounds and — regardless of age — they usually shy away from asking for assistance due to societal norms or else are unaware of existing avenues for help. Private volunteers, donations are all available to help individually: financially and medically. Yet the concerned organisations need to do more in this regard. In fact, it is their duty to ensure that the victim of Aziz-ur-Rehman’s assault receives the necessary help and care.

That the student showed no concern for his own identity when exposing the cleric is nothing short of heroic. He was his own whistleblower and has reignited the debate on sexual abuse in madrassas. Recognising the efforts of the victim and finding him the appropriate help will also empower other victims. It is the least an easily distracted audience can do.

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