

ME TOO: The Rogue Gallery Of Dirty Old Men Like Aziz Barney Of Rashtriya Sahara Magazine

Though I cannot forget the suffering I had endured that time, yet years later, I am not sure if it is ethical enough to take names of those who have harmed me as I hope, some “may be” leading a quiet life somewhere now. Quiet possible, they “may” have daughters of their own, and “may” understand the feelings his daughter would go through if put in that situation. I am only hoping. As reports have it, I see a lot of heads rolling in Hollywood and Bollywood and other places, while Christine-Kavanaugh saga was a total disaster.

By Dr Neelam Verma

Despite all the cacophony and 30 years of silent suffering, Chistine Blasey Ford’s courage to beat her demons and try to prove sexual assault at the hands of now Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh, during her school years, came to a naught. Kavanaugh was elevated to a position as the 114th Justice to serve on America’s highest court, leaving Christine vulnerable to death threats and possibly hiding in her cocoon once again.

I can see that the #MeToo movement would have given her the courage and strengthened her belief that she is not alone in her struggle to survive after the ordeal, further emboldened by her resolve not to let an alleged sexual assaulter, sit on the coveted chair of a Supreme Court Judge. While support for Ford poured in from all over the world who were ready to believe in her story, having gone through similar circumstances, yet the final result leaves me wondering if coming out of the closet, was really worth it. Like me, many women were disgusted by the turn of events and Kavanaugh going scot free – no admissible of guilt, no charges. Just like before the #MeToo movement when women, who tried to complain about sexual assault or molestation, were not readily believed as evidence was required to support their claims, so it is today. Ironically, even women in power like Melania Trump, who has the power to change the world, commented, “Assault survivors should provide really hard evidence.” Is she ignorant of the fact that such incidents cannot be accompanied with even soft evidence, and she wants hard evidence? Or Melania too is as powerless as any of us and living in a patriarchal society where she has to toe her husband’s train of thought.

The #MeToo movement had me recollecting my days working in different publications in India and interacting with mostly male colleagues and editors. My first assignment as a trainee reporter for my first job was “write about call girl racket in Delhi”. When I came out of the meeting with the editor, a male colleague wondered how I could be assigned such a story as my first assignment. He had warned me that it could be a dangerous assignment as I would be touching a lot of raw nerves. My editor, who would have been in his fifties then, had reassured me saying that I should be concentrating on the juicy details of the story, not going into the politics of it. He advised that I should be concentrating on “what happens after the deal”.

However, I landed up unearthing a racket where even police officers and renowned politicians were involved, skipping the luscious details against my editor's wishes!

Being naïve, I failed to totally comprehend the motives of the editor, who would take me around in his car, to his meetings and interviews on the pretext that he was training me. He expected me to join him for drinks at the elite Press Club of Delhi, where he took me almost daily for lunches, on the pretext of training me and meeting different people to make contacts. No contacts, no story, he would say. What is a journalist who does not have contacts, he said. He would introduce me to his friends as his colleague with his arm around my shoulders. It made me wonder how can a trainee reporter be a colleague to a fifty something editor. Though I felt weird, I had no words to describe my feelings. Words like sexual harassment at work or lewd behavior, were not introduced in my dictionary. The only words my generation, who started working in early nineties, had heard of was "eve-teasing" or staring, which was supposed to happen on the streets where people passed sexual comments, sang dirty songs or tried to touch you inappropriately. But all this was supposed to happen only on the streets and not in offices or homes. There was no term assigned to work place harassment then.

Moving jobs over the years, there were many occasions when the "weird" feeling surfaced when with male colleagues, politicians or at a press conference. However, the worst came when our editor at the Rashtriya Sahara magazine was replaced by the Urdu editor, Aziz Barney. As office politics would have it, an Urdu speaking editor, who could not speak or read a word of English, was supposed to assign and edit our stories! Just because he was close to the boss, Subroto Roy. We were told that he was just a replacement till a new senior editor was hired, as supposedly none of the senior correspondents or sub editors already working there, were incapable.

Before coming to the English department, he had a reputation of being a womanizer and therefore, all the female journalists working with me were very scared and apprehensive. He started making changes right away, starting with the seating arrangement of the staff. Being a small department, we had a corner of the big office where reporters could take any desk which was vacant whenever, we were in the office. After all, reporters had to be on the field to report and owning a desk was not important.

He asked all the women journalists to occupy the desks facing him and all male journalists could occupy the desks on the sides. So he would sit opposite all the women, ogling them while the latter could barely concentrate on their work. Instead of having staff meetings, he would have individual meetings in his office upstairs, which was in a corner of the first floor office. Every time he called me to his office, I feared I might pee in my pants. I dreaded those meetings, especially when he would ask me to close the door behind me when I stood contemplating whether I should or should not. And when I did not close the door, he would walk up to me, lightly pat me at the back asking me to take a seat, while he closed the door behind me.

I would sit there, almost on my toes, ready to jump at the slightest instinct. Barney would sit there, staring at me for hours, while there was nothing much to be discussed. Thankfully, I had the courage to turn down his story ideas as they did not match my idea of journalism. He would

come up with stories, for example, wife swapping among merchant navy officers. Or how did wives of merchant officers, live without their husbands for months together? Were they seeing other men? Where do these women hang out to get closer to other men? Me being the wife of merchant navy officer, felt disgusted and questioned him how did he even get the idea that wives of merchant navy officers were promiscuous enough to be written about. He wanted me to attend parties, to go out in the evenings and socialize with such women to get a clue. And he wanted me to get him invited to those parties!

As I loved my job, (before he was plopped upon us), I would sit there listening to his nonsense and at the end of the month would churn out stories I wanted to do and not what he had asked me to. My attitude certainly made him delirious and he would get back to me by making me sit in his office for hours, wanted to discuss similar stories.

Like most of my journalist colleagues who have now joined the #MeTooIndia movement, I along with a group of others quit as that is the only solution we had to get out of the miserable situation with our honour intact. Like me, many journalists love their professions and would never quit if given a choice. But when pushed to the wall, there is no choice and we compromise on our careers, thus hurting ourselves. A double whammy!

Though I cannot forget the suffering I had endured that time, yet years later, I am not sure if it is ethical enough to take names of those who have harmed me as I hope, some “may be” leading a quiet life somewhere now. Quiet possible, they “may” have daughters of their own, and “may” understand the feelings his daughter would go through if put in that situation. I am only hoping. As reports have it, I see a lot of heads rolling in Hollywood and Bollywood and other places, while Christine-Kavanaugh saga was a total disaster.

Since many of my colleagues went through the same agony with Aziz Barney and would easily vouch for me, I wonder how ethical would it be on my part to take names of other people when I don't know of any other victim besides me and there is no one to vouch for me? Aziz Barney, I am aware is still kicking around in the Urdu media circle. But some others who wronged me, I know, are dead and gone and cannot apologize or deny the allegations against them now. Would it be fair on my part to let their families be shamed in public? This is my own ethical dilemma, without prejudice and it continues. Don't let my dilemma change your heart and mind.