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There's hope for rural North India

Belonging to a society long infamous for its maltreatment of women, Natasha Narwal's father Mahavir Narwal disposed of many stereotypes



[Rahul Jayaram](#), JUN 20 2021, 00:33 IST | UPDATED: JUN 20 2021, 04:50 IST



Rahul Jayaram, the Jindal Global University academic believes we are living through the apocalypse @rajayaram

A little more than a month ago, an unassuming but exceptional man of our times succumbed to Covid. His imprisoned daughter (who got bail this week) had then been released temporarily so she could pay homage to him. In large part, he had brought her and her brother up as a single parent after losing his wife when the children were still young. The daughter, along with a couple of others, had been charged with inciting violence during the north-east Delhi riots in early 2020. Her photos, saluting her father during his last rites -- mask, gloves, face-shield and all -- circulated widely, and they will endure as stirring artifacts of recent memory. In my view, this daughter-father duo perhaps epitomise a small transition, a minute shift, in the way mainline India perceives gender norms in North India today.

Haryana and Haryanvi men have had a poor reputation on this count for eons. Belonging to a society long infamous for its maltreatment of women, Natasha Narwal's father Mahavir Narwal disposed of many stereotypes and cliches about his ethos through his life and actions. Narwal grew up in a rural environment that sent people to the Army (his father was an officer) and stressed on education. His extended family became one of the most educated in then semi-rural Hisar. For years, he worked and taught as an agricultural scientist, participated in the anti-Emergency movement, and was part of many social struggles in interior Haryana. He questioned and helped give a jolt to casteist attitudes in this region. Some readers may choose to part ways with him for his Left affiliation, but his words and demeanour, as captured in videos and interviews over the last year, will echo loud and long.

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In conversations conducted by the civil rights campaign organisation Karwan-E-Mohabbat and others, he showed a stoicism that had become his signature since his daughter's incarceration. In his measured tone, he spoke of how proud his daughter had made him and how she could not afford to lose hope in jail, for that would be a rather uncharacteristic thing for a child of his to do. His children were so strong, he said, that even the catastrophe of her mother's passing away had not caused Natasha to deviate from the path she was on as a child.

Given the skewed, unequal women-men power equation in India, Narwal emphasised how women were at the centre of our democracy, and how their dissent was key to it. When asked what he felt about what his daughter and others had created through Pinjra Tod, he took a dispassionate but committed view of his daughter's struggle, his quiet voice choking to still the pain, his eyes straining to halt the tears. His daughter had become who she is through her life experience, through being a committed student at Delhi University and later on at JNU, he said. It's academics that motivated her, but wherever there is injustice, she would confront it, it's her right, he asserted.

As I saw those videos, I often thought what his life as a widower in that society may have been like

and political courage. Mahavir Narwal is a role-model for contemporary Indians. That such an individual arose from the region he did heralds change and hope for rural North India.

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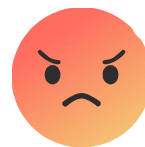
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