



A Step Backwards

By Hameeda Hossain

WHILE rallies of madrasah boys have raised the tenor of protest at the vandalism of Babri Masjid, a curtain of silence seems to hang over similar eruptions in Bangladesh. The organised manner in which temples were assaulted within hours of the news from Ayodhya would seem to suggest that it was not an act of fervent god fearing men. The continuing acts of violence since 6 December have represented a planned vindictiveness which are certainly not in keeping with the Islamic advice of "hukum din a kum."

following day on 50 households of poor labourers, carpenters, rickshawpullers, ironsmiths be equated with piety. How many of us can really believe that this reflected a spontaneous shock reaction to what happened at Babri? If it was so spontaneous, how is it that protection money is being extracted from Hindu families in some neighbourhoods, even 20 days after Babri? Is it more likely a deviously planned operation to spread terror and to assert the rule of lawlessness?

Women have to face and added threat of physical assault, of sexual attack, of kidnapping. Such fears have induced a very different reaction from women in the threatened community. Whereas at times of natural disasters, women are known to stay in their homes till the last moment in order to preserve what they can, during moments of such sectarian, man made disasters, the first rumblings send women to seek the shelter of anonymity.

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An anatomy of recent events reveals the special dangers faced by women and the overwhelming insecurity they have to live with, only because of their assumed religious affiliation. The demolition of fishermen's huts in Bholia, Mirasari, Mohekhali, or similar settlements of occupational castes have overnight made entire families homeless. Can such acts of vandalism be attributed to genuine religious sentiment?

How can honestly the victim of those who on 7 December attacked an old temple at Shomir Akhira, only a few miles away from Demra or their subsequent attacks the

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The dogmatic ambition which drives sectarian forces today threatens to take society back into medieval violence, to divide it along lines of dangerous religious intolerance. Babri Masjid has been a pretext in a

continuum of violence in the recent past. Only a few weeks ago, the burning of the Ahmadiya Mosque along with a copy of the Holy Quran was an earlier example. This catalogue of lawlessness starts from the universities of Chittagong and Rajshahi, the recent incident in Keraniganj, threats against freedom of speech.

We need to take serious note of this moment of crisis in South Asia, for as it threatens to engulf the very basis of a democratic, secular order, it will undermine the struggle for gender equity, for peace

and development. Women are in the vanguard of a progressive struggle for structural social change; this is only possible in a civil society. Therefore we can no longer be satisfied merely with defining a slice of the development cake. We have to recognise the dangers inherent in the portent of sectarian violence, in the ruthless assertion by organised street mobs. Because women represent the voice of reason and tolerance we must speak out against the divisiveness being created in our society. Indeed if women are to move forward, they cannot allow religious chauvinism to shackle their feet.

A Different Angle



Busily making 'Pithas', one of the delicacies of winter.

— Photograph by Salma Siddique

This column will give you a chance from time to time, to see photographs taken by young women photographers of the country.

To all the readers and contributors of this page — wish a happy New Year.
— The Editor
Women on the Move

From the Publishing House

Published by Narigrantha Prabartana

1. *Jader Rakte e Andolan* (Those at the cost of whose blood, this movement was possible) — Lutfa Haseen Rozee

2. *Mahila Muktiuddha* (Female freedom fighters) — Edited by Farida Akhtar

3. *Bangladeshe Hindu Narir Adhikar O Paribarik Atin* (Rights of the Hindu women in Bangladesh and family laws) — Nibedita Dash Purakayastha

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12. *Indigenous Abortion Practitioners in Rural Bangladesh* — Shamima Islam

13. *RU 486 Misconceptions* — Renate Klein
Myths and Morals — J G Raymond L J Dumble

14. *Women Heads of Household in Rural Bangladesh: Strategies for Survival* — Mahmuda Islam

deaf. Gone are the days when one risked his safety to protect a woman when the situation necessitated it. It is a dismal situation which has only one opening, i.e. these people must be accosted and not allowed to escape so that this kind of outrageous behaviour is not repeated.

Women must brace themselves and speak out against such licentiousness and audacious harassment — it is their inherent right!

— by Shafiq Fatima, a Student of English department University of Dhaka

If there is any particular problem that you face as a woman, we would like you to share it with us through this column. Mail it to — The Editor, 'Women on the Move', The Daily Star, House-11, Road-3, Dhanmondi-R/A, Dhaka.

Interview of Sarwari Rahman

'Equal Pay for Equal Labour'

By Rahat Fahmida and S. Bari

HE government will soon set-up a National Council for women, in order to deal with the present major problems", said Sarwari Rahman, the State Minister for Social Welfare and Women's Affairs Ministry. During an exclusive interview with 'The Daily Star', this 55 year old politician did not mince words or brush off the critical issues now facing Bangladeshi women. In her office at the Secretariat, she calmly discussed the problems and put their 'not-so-easy' solutions on a platter. Her appropriate choice of words, spoke of her convent education — both in India and Bangladesh. She said, "half of our population is women. And this half cannot be left out if we truly want development of the country. To put it more clearly 85 per cent of the women live in villages. So to educate and mobilise them is the prime concern. And we have to break the barrier of gender bias."

The state minister said, education and employment help

should not be undermined.

It came out during the interview, that the built-in mechanism in the socialisation process of girls is such that from early childhood they do not learn to decide for themselves. Decision making starting from choosing of food, clothing upto life partner is predominantly decided by par-

Thus, for example, 76 per cent of families, according to a study, would educate their sons but not their daughters, if the finances are limited. Another study showed that sons are more likely to be educated but that girls' chances of education increase if their parents are in a high socio-economic group.

ceptable 'feminine' occupations. Very few girls are encouraged to study science subjects with the aim of following technological and scientific careers; in fact, many girls are actively discouraged from doing so.

Recently programmes of various non-government organisations have offered opportunities for women's gainful work which required arduous physical labour like, digging earth or carrying big load. Traditionally, such heavy physical works have so long been regarded as the male job. But at present, the economic pressure compels the rural women to participate in such non-conventional physical work. Economic necessity also appears to have realised the redundancy of traditional social sanction against women's physical work in the field.

Yet the proportion of total women engaged in gainful work outside their homes is very small. The economic dependence of the majority of women population obviously affects their social status. Low rate of literacy, lack of skill and technical know-how, absence of opportunities for training and education limit their scope of gainful employment. In the changing social conditions, their traditional knowledge is not sufficient for better home-making as well.

"The government has taken serious note of the very low level of women's participation in economic activity," said Sarwari Rahman. A work on this issue initiated by making education free for girls till class eight. She stressed, women should be given both formal and non-formal education. More so, as formal education for adult women is difficult.

The State Minister concluded, "if all of us work together, I hope we will be able to achieve this, and demand — 'equal pay for equal labour' — as mentioned in our labour law."



Soon to launch a National Council for women

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

ALL mothers, especially working mothers were in a state of panic just about two weeks ago, and guess why? THE FINAL EXAMS WERE HERE! and who else, but mother, after a long hard day at the office had to come back home to teach her 9 year old the intricacies of the digestive system.

Talking about systems, what system the many little schools that have mushroomed lately are following is a mystery to me. One hears about KG2 kids studying two kinds of sciences, natural and physical. First Grade kids are suppose to know the 13 and 17 times tables! a second grader has to study social studies, geography and history. If you had gone to any party or had one at home, half the invited ladies probably did not turn up because their children, age ranging from 6 to 16 were having their exams.

One wonders whether the kids sit for the exams or their mothers. This of course has little effect on the social life of the father, who will tell you in all seriousness that his wife could not come because their daughter still some had some essay memorizing to do.

The father who has worked all day is certainly not expected to tutor the children and if by some fluke he did sit down with them you can count on hearing shouts, screams, tears and tantrums after fifteen minutes which means end of studies for the time being. (No offense meant to fathers). The mother, who also had a tiring day, at home or at work cannot afford such luxuries. She has to swallow her anger and her pride even when her 5 year old points to the alphabets and demands to know if these are letters or numbers! (This is a true story). The working

mother has to take leave from her office because God forbid if the child fails to get promoted it will all be her fault. Even if she has appointed several teachers the ultimate responsibility is hers to see that the children do well in school. She gets very little support at home and less support from the schools the children go to. Parents days, and other school activities are planned with no consideration for the fact that many mothers might be working outside the home. If she fails to attend any school activities than she is labelled as a mother who puts her career family responsibilities. If society is discriminates against working women, than the working mother is much more discriminated upon and this cuts across country, culture and societies. Even the United Nations which has passed many resolutions prohibiting

discrimination against women in any form is guilty of this. A close friend of mine did not get a promised contract renewed once the office found that she was pregnant. It was just assumed that once she had a baby she would not remain efficient.

But coming back to schools and exams, there should be some kind of standardized system which all schools should follow, both in the curriculum taught and the system in which they are taught only then such aberrations as two kinds of sciences for KGs and 17 times tables for first graders can be stopped. A close friend of mine who runs one of the schools herself said that because of very heavy competition they are compelled to raise there standers meaning that schools with difficult curriculum are perceived to be better and therefore attracts more students. In the process, children are burdened with extra work and have little time for extra curricular activities.

This is an important issue and I would appreciate if mothers would use this column to express their views on.

Towards Equality of the Sexes

At Home



Father and mother looking after their children together

— An Unesco publication

SPEAK OUT

elsewhere.

Nowadays, shopping seems to have lost its recreative value for most of the markets in Dhaka, including the popular New Market and Gausia Market are not only infested of pick pockets, but also of such elements who loiter about solely to engage in mischief with the female shoppers. They are those who enter a thick crowd in order to push or nudge a female passerby disregarding her age, just to get some perverted pleasure out of it. These obnoxious men and even teenage boys not only pass comments on the appear-

ance of the women but also indulge in physical harassment. They do not think for a moment that their mothers, wives, sisters or even daughters might go through similar experiences — such is the depth of their moral degradation. A girl/woman with a modern or different look is criticized and teased whereas in the case of a man/boy it goes unnoticed. When a woman is harassed in the crowded areas of a market, she is expected to shy away and not speak out for fear of disgrace and it is sad that the people around seem to be blind and

People visit shops for various purposes, some out of sheer necessity, some for a bit of spree and some just to watch women from close quarters — the latter being peculiar to Bangladesh only. The term "shopping" is commonly associated with women for they do have a passion for it — a passion shared by women throughout the world. Unfortunately in Bangladesh shopping seems to be the only source of recreation for women and thus in spite of the poor condition of the markets, women in their free time go for shopping just to indulge in some recreation. We often hear men complaining about their wives shopping unnecessarily, overlooking the fact that shopping is perhaps the only easy outing for women as having a stroll in a park or in a lonely street/place may prove dangerous, and, to many, unthinkable. They seem to forget that women here do not have the same extent of freedom of movement as enjoyed by them