

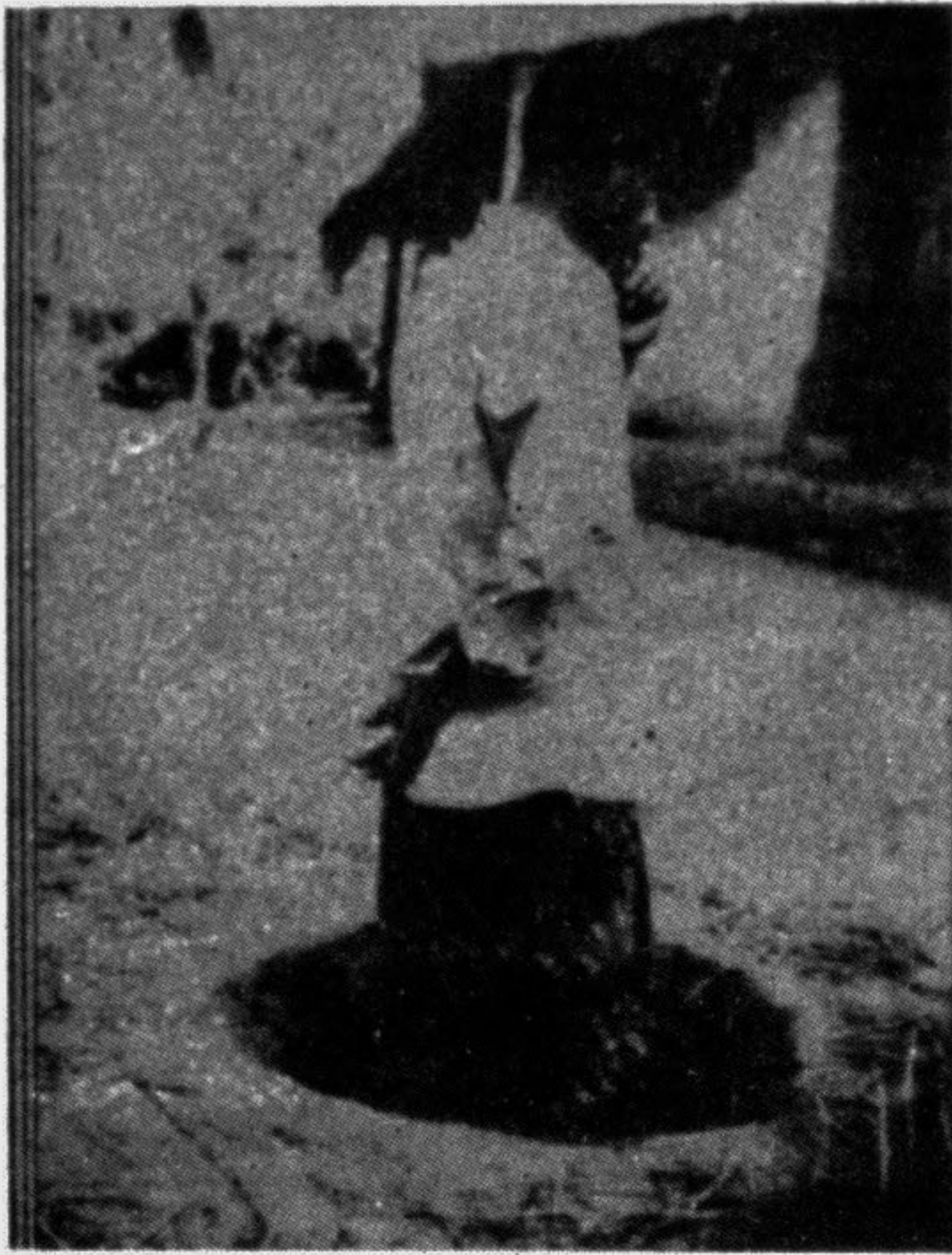
WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Noorjahan's Death Contravenes Rule of Law

by Rahat Fahmida

NOORJAHAN'S 'suicide' was reported in a few newspapers. Hardly anybody visited her village after the incident. Malika Begum, a woman activist and general secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, is one of the very few who did. She came back shattered, and shaken by the grave environment of the village.

In an interview with *The Daily Star*, Malika Begum gave a brief history of Noorjahan's life and a detailed account of the savage incident. The attitude of this society was once again proven. It was again evident from her conversation, the social role of women begins at birth and ends at death, characterised by subordination and oppression, determined by sex. As here in this case, violence is too often narrowly defined as an act of illegal, criminal force. In reality it can incorporate exploitation, discrimination, the upholding of unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of terror, situations of threat or reprisal, and many other forms of political control and coercion. And it was exactly same in the case of Noorjahan. While these concepts of violence are clearly interrelated, its specific nature in relation to the situation of women demands a closer and critical look at aspects of structural violence, namely acts of violence exercised on the part of the family and society. The state not only tends to



Malika Begum — demonstrating her wife's position.

overlook these forms of violence but perpetrates them in the name of RELIGION, cultural legitimacy and the maintenance of 'law and order'. Do they really know what is religiously legitimate?

Malika Begum said,

'What if Noorjahan agreed to marry the village Imam? Would the marriage be then illegal?'

We all know in black and white, that violence against women, like all other historical phenomena of violence, must be seen in a socio-economic and political context of power relations. It is produced within a class-caste, gendered society in which the male power dominates. For example, women like Noorjahan, from landless, agricultural wage labour families, are most vulnerable to violence. Mass offences committed are by men of the ruling-class for the repression of poor peasants and landless labourers. Violence against women in such cases is the result of an attempt to grind women down into submission, as a form of social and political control, ideologically supported in a variety of different ways by the state.

On that black day, inhuman Imam and panchayat leaders proved their pseudo-religious barbarism. They set up their own court of law, using 'religion' as their weapon. These barbarous men not only stoned Noorjahan, with 101 stones during which she continuously objected, but punished her elderly parents and husband, too.



They demand proper implementation of the existing laws.

'There is much more to it than crime statistics for these incident. These are the social malaise caused by the vested interest groups in the system. The atrocities committed

The episode lingered on. An emergency meeting of the village panchayat was held, just 15 days after the wedding. The whole issue of marriage was reviewed and according to religious sanction so-called the wedding was declared 'illegal'. They decided to take up the law in their own hands! Panchayat sat on 10th January '93, to deliver its verdict on the marriage. No one questioned, 'What if Noorjahan agreed to marry the village Imam? Would the marriage be then illegal?'

Noorjahan spent her 22 years' life in Chatakhara village, which is under Kamalganj thana, in Moulavibazar, district of Sylhet. Informally known as Lakshmi, Noorjahan was the name registered with department of forestry and Heed Bangladesh. She was a Samiti member of the latter's credit programme and an enlisted day labourer of the former. Young and pretty, Noorjahan's first marriage broke off, after which she was married for the second time. Rather, her first husband walked off on her and was missing for years together. But the trouble somewhat instigated during the time in between the two marriages. It was then that the Imam of the local village mosque and a few panchayat leaders proposed to marry Noorjahan — but her father decided Matlab to be the most suitable candidate for his daughter. Paranoid by the fact, that his daughter would be insecure without the shelter of a husband, Ashrafullah, Noorjahan's father, was in a hurry to marry off his daughter.

The local Imam, Abdul Mannan put obstacles in all possible ways to break off the wedding. Mannan's objection was, Noorjahan did not have a proper divorce. Thus, to remarry would be illegal. Ashrafullah then handed over the divorce paper to Mannan, who charged two hundred taka to testify the authenticity of the papers. The Imam, after the so called 'verification' gave his consent for the wedding. Noorjahan was then married off for the second time in October '92.

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Under the Social Guillotine

By Maleka Begum

THOSE WHO PROTESTED

IN 10 days from January 11 to 21, a number of organisations protested the death of Noorjahan. Among the protests, there were reports & editorials from journalists, demand of trial and exemplary punishment of the person responsible for the death by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad and Human Rights organisation. There was investigation by the Mahila Parishad, initiative to provide legal protection by Ganasahajya Songstha and the role of Kamalganj Chhatra Dal.

NOORJAHAN & OTHERS PROTESTED

Through interviews with a number of people while visiting Chhatakhara village with Bangladesh Mahila Parishad team on 18 January, we came to know, that on late January 9, a village trial court was organised by the local Imam and 'Panchayat' in which the Imam imposed a 'Fatwa' on Noorjahan.

On January 10, at 7 am, abiding by the 'Fatwa', Noorjahan, her husband and her parents were brought before the public to be punished.

At that moment, Noorjahan voiced her protest, that why would she be on trial for problems of her private life? And why an one-sided trial? Why did the Panchayat bar her from giving her statement? And why should the Panchayat and one man execute torture on her?

After protesting she tried to return home with her mother. But she was barred and dragged to a hole nearby, newly dug only for the purpose of torturing her. One local elderly also protested the action of the Panchayat as a result which the level of the torture was lessened.

It was decided that Noorjahan would be buried into waist deep soil and stoned with big rocks. It was decided, her father's hair will be shaved off and will be walked through the village, along with drum beats to attract the attention of the villagers. But these punishments were later excused by some local guardians.

These severe punishments had a serious mental and emotional effect on Noorjahan. And by committing suicide she slashed our conscious. The helpless cry of the oppressed is thus left unnoticed.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The weak and the helpless are constantly being victimized by the Panchayat, Imams and local influential men in any remote village or town. The law cannot be taken in one's own hand. If this is defied one should be severely punished. The country's law institution should now take necessary steps against these Panchayat and Imams, this is — now demanded of them.

The Sangsad should immediately pass bills cutting short the authority of the Panchayat and local Imams. And all these demands requires the support of conscious people.

— Translated by Sharier Khan and Raffai Binte Rashid



Protest of the downtrodden.

In a Different Angle



Their continuous labour goes unaccounted for.

— by Salma Siddique

Barbaric Incident

In the Eyes of the Law

'Yes Noorjahan was ignorant, and that is why, she was wrong in not going to the court for an official divorce. This is only because of illiteracy. But under legal judgement, no court would have sentenced her to death or life long imprisonment', said Sigma Huda while talking to *The Daily Star*. A renowned lawyer, her specialisation is family law. She is associated with Society for Human Rights, who have filed two cases associated with the cruel death of Noorjahan. One is a criminal case with the charges of murder, and the other a civil case demanding the compensation for Noorjahan's death.

This noted lawyer said, in this society, violence runs along the lines of power in the sex/gender system. The family, with its basic axis of the sexual division of labour, is its principal underlying institution. The violence of beating or torturing women to death in privacy or even, as in this case, publicly, has to be examined with regard to its sys-

temic relevance. 'They charged Noorjahan of violating the Muslim law. But here criminal law is based on civil law, and not Koranic law, as this Imam and panchayat leaders of Chatakhara so rightfully claimed,' said Sigma Huda. She even denied the leadership of these village panchayats, saying they ceased to exist after the British period. This noted lawyer added, 'Here the Imam and panchayat leaders are criminals. They do not have any right to take laws in their own hands, and adjust it according to their suitability.'

The death of Noorjahan has once again brought in view the desperate situation. Women here, are encumbered by a feudal patriarchy which institutionalises male authority over them at home and in the society. Thus, they are relegated to a second class status and their labour deemed peripheral to social production, their being is reduced to that of an object.

— by R. Fahmida



We will no longer see violence as another woman's issue.

We see violence as everyone's issue.

We will use our collective strength — to make changes in our communities and our countries.

Diary of a Working Mother

by Shaheen Anam

I was trying to think of all the things that I have to accomplish before coming to the office and almost got a superiority complex. Unfortunately for us working mothers, no one including our children, our husbands and our bosses seem to realize or appreciate this. Well, never mind, if nobody is going to praise us then we might as well do it ourselves.

First, waking up at the crack of dawn, come hail, storm or the biting cold is enough to spoil the day for anyone. Waking up the cook is another major feat and I will not go into details over the cook's reaction to being called so early, but after ten calls she manages to drag herself out of the bed, by this time my older daughter is screaming that she is already late for school and has no time for breakfast.

Guilty that I am for waking up so late, I run after her, give her something to eat and of course the younger one wants milk and will only do so while holding my ears. Everyone has of course conveniently forgotten that I have to go to office too.

I somehow manage to get dressed, never mind if the shoes, bag and saris does not match. The little one's tiffin has to be fixed, she has to get dressed, her school bag needs to be arranged not to mention her breakfast which she will only eat if mummy feeds her.

The cook meanwhile wants to know what should be the day's menu and gives me a list of all the food items that need to be bought without any further delay. I finally manage to get her ready, get myself organized while shouting instructions, go to the car and just as I am

congratulating myself for accomplishing all that and still going to office on time, the driver announces that he needs to buy petrol on the way.

Don't you think that we have less time to do our personal work at home and sometimes have to do it at the office? I never have time to eat breakfast at home (hope my boss is not reading this), or make an urgent phone call to a friend or even write a letter.

This does not mean that we neglect our work but the demands made on us at home are of such an urgent nature that most personal chores are set aside. For example if one of the children has to be taken to the doctor, the other needs to buy a gift to go to a birthday party not to speak of the endless things one needs to just to keep the household running. In all this buying and running around there is absolutely no scope to be negligent about

anything. Heaven forbid if we forget to get bread or milk the night before, the long lines at the breakfast table will make sure that we feel appropriately guilty for this lapse. (Hope other family members are taking this in the right spirit).

Weekends are also one big running around of cooking, cleaning, shopping and catching up with unfinished housework.

Isn't it time that all members of the family took some responsibilities for housework? It does not matter if the mother works or does not work outside the home, it should not be her job alone to see that everything in the house runs smoothly.

Admittedly she takes on the major share of the work because of the way our society or most societies are structured.

Perhaps we can expect things to change when society starts to give value to work which are traditionally considered to be 'women's work'. Housework has never been given the value and prestige it deserves because it is associated with women's work and people who do it do not get any financial benefit (except domestic). It is really amazing to think that such a ludicrous idea has been accepted and perpetuated for centuries and we are still victims of it in our homes. The house maker makes life easier for every member of the family so that they can go into the world and do what they want to. When housework is shared by every one, the family becomes a team, they share each other's joys and sorrows and all activities however mundane it may be — even remembering to buy bread for breakfast.

