

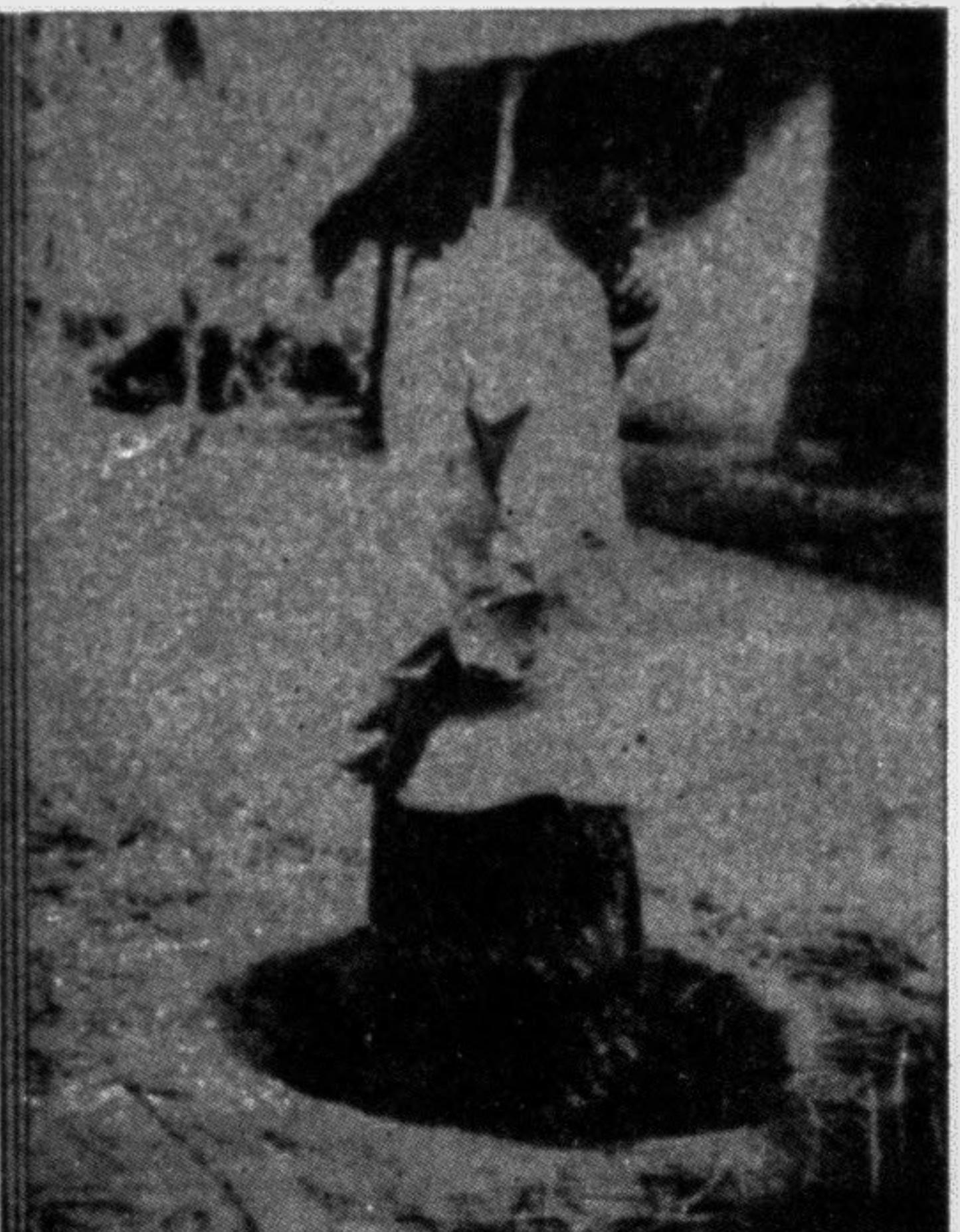
# WOMEN ON THE MOVE

## Noorjahan's Death Contravenes Rule of Law

by Rahat Fahmida

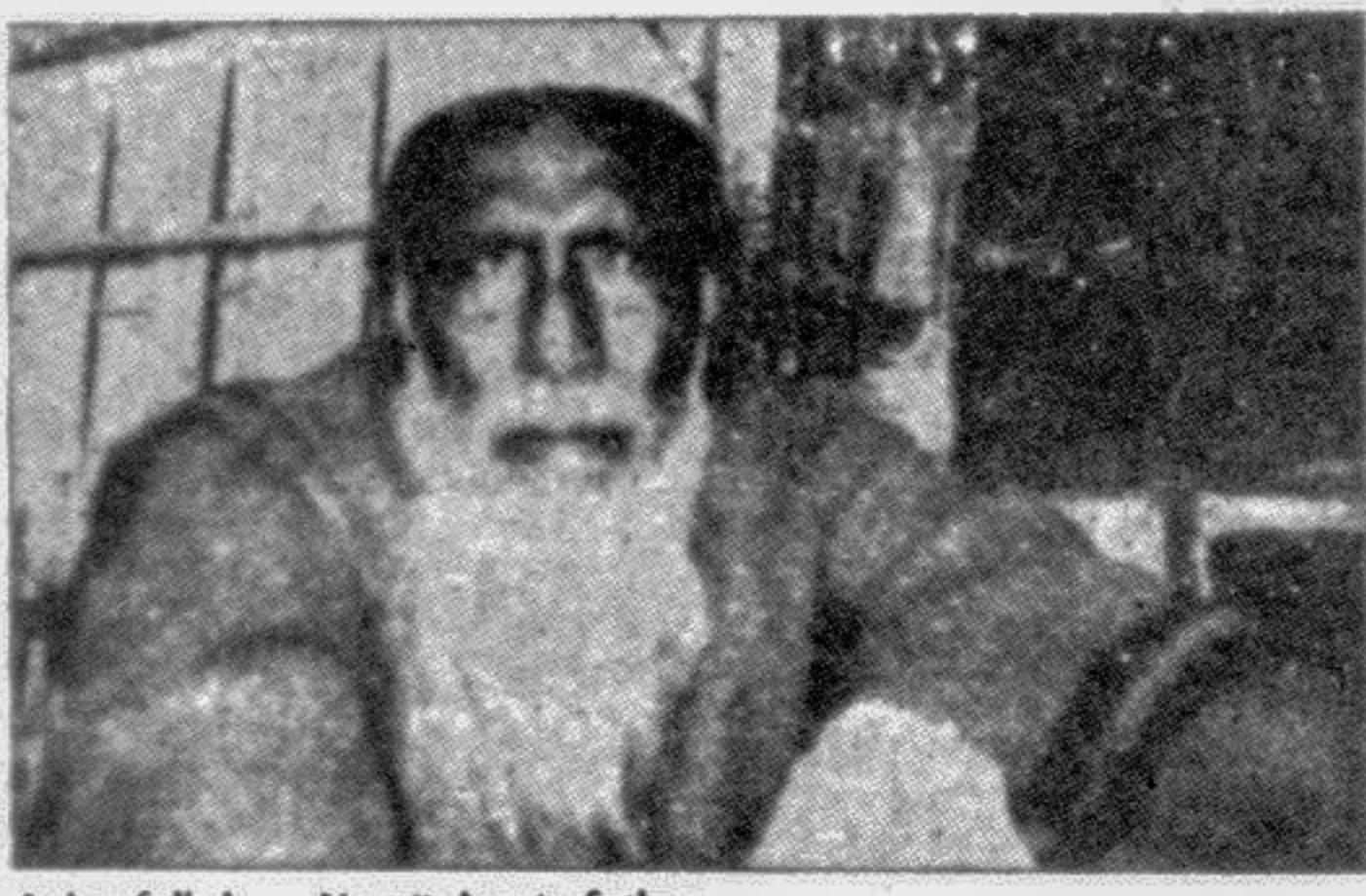
**N**OORJAHAN'S 'suicide' was reported in a few newspapers. Hardly anybody visited her village after the incident. Maleka Begum, a woman activist and general secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, is one of the very few who did. She came back shattered, and shaken by the grave environment of the village.

In an interview with *The Daily Star*, Maleka Begum gave a brief history of Noorjahan's life and a detailed account of the savagous 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



Matlab — demonstrating his 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?

Maleka Begum said,



Ashrafullah — Noorjahan's father.

### Under the Social Guillotine

By Maleka Begum

#### THOSE WHO PROTESTED

**I**N 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 Garasahajaya Songstha and the role of Kamalganj Chhatra Dal.

#### NOORJAHAN & OTHERS PROTESTED

Through interviews with a number of people while visiting Chhatakchara 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 'Panchayet' 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 Panchayet bar her from giving her statement? And why should the Panchayet 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 Panchayet 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 Panchayet, 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 Panchayet and Imams, this is —now demanded of them.

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

Translated by Sharier Khan and Raffat Binte Rashid

'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 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 of violence 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 panchayet 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 incidents. 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 panchayet 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! Panchayet 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 Chhatakchara village, which is under Kanalganj thana, in Moulavibazar, district of Sylhet. Informally known as Lakshmi, Noorjahan was the name registered with department of forestry and Head of 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 panchayet 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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### In a Different Angle



Their continuous labour goes unaccounted for.

— by Salma Siddique

against women within families have often been hidden from the public eye by a social attitude, comprising a mixture of apathy towards woman and an inexplicable sense of privacy.

We need to examine to what extent are current family institutions in Bangladesh responsible for creating and maintaining structures and ideologies of subordination-structures that inherently resist the participation of women in decision-making and ideologies created by a sex/gender system geared for maintaining existing power relations and forms of exploitation.



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

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

Perhaps we can expect things to change when society starts to give value to work which are traditionally considered to be "women's work". House work 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 domestics). 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 home maker makes life easier for every member of the family so that they can go into the world and do and be 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.



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

tennis 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 panchayet leaders of Chhatakchara so rightfully claimed," said Sigma Huda. She even denied the leadership of these village panchayets, saying they ceased to exist after the British period. This noted lawyer added, "Here the Imam and panchayet 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