



# WOMEN ON THE MOVE

## Life is Short, but Art is Long

by Zaheda Ahmad

Preetilata Waddedar, one of our most valiant freedom fighters, died in action on 14 September, 1932. She was leading an armed raid on a colonial establishment at Chittagong when finding herself being surrounded by the government police, took her own life rather than fall a prisoner into their hands. Today, in the article that follows, *The Daily Star* wishes to pay homage to her memory as well to those of the countless others who suffered for the same cause

times referred to as "that gang of female liberators" by their critics, played a remarkable role in this respect.

Though this movement was for women but was yet to become one run by women. In 1865, a small but sure beginning was made with the establishment of the 'Brahmika Samaj', the first women's organisation organised and managed by women themselves. Admittedly, an elite institution that represented a small minority of privileged women but nonetheless, the pioneer. It was among this class of women that education was making an inroad. Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu, who cleared their entrance examination in 1878, became the first female graduates four years later to be followed by an increasing number in the years to come. With the spread of education the horizons of women's world began to expand too. Many new "women only" societies sprang up; signs of change manifested in speech, manners, dress and of course in greater mobility on the part of women

who hitherto never even thought of enjoying such freedom. Not to be left behind in nationalist politics two distinguished ladies — Kadambini Ganguly and the then young poet Rabindranath's eldest sister Swarna Kumari Devi — represented Bengali women to the fifth annual session of the National Congress in 1889.

But it was the Swadeshi period which saw the participation of Bengali women in nationalist politics in large numbers. Both in revolutionary and constitutional movement our women were becoming quite active by taking to the streets, by picketing and by making house to house contact with parda women. Side by side these enlightened women engaged in creative activities such as music, painting, literature, teaching, cottage industry and the like.

Impressive progress, yes, but not without limitations. These women, small in number in comparison with vast multitude who did not belong to this charmed circle, all of them came from the privileged urban

classes. Till 1910, nearly all belonged to the Brahmo or Bengali Christian families of the

two great pioneers, Rammohan Roy and Vidya Sagar, none of them could educate his wife.

Moreover, these educated women themselves looked upon education as only a means of turning women into good wives and mothers. A suitable education, in their opinion, would improve their prospects in the marriage market. Writing in the 'Tattobodhini Patrika' this was how a prospective husband gave his ideas about what an accomplished wife should be, 'An upcoming educated young man desires that the wife should know the Bengali language well, can speak English well, and it would be excellent if she be well-versed in Shelley and Byron. Also she should know how to play the piano, should have some skill in painting and should be able to make some learned discourse on the Shastras.' Almost a veritable Bengali edition of the European 'Memsahab'! Educated but not independent economically — that was the role model. Economic freedom was yet to become one of the goals of female education even in the eyes of those few women who were themselves employed respectfully. Never conscious of

the need to challenge the established order they were happy to accept the comfortable lifestyle offered by the gilded cage that they came to live in and love. These specimen therefore, were far removed from modern day versions of the liberated womanhood. They were, at the same time for removed from the great masses of the lower class women who were languishing in a society characterised by widespread illiteracy, superstition, Purdah, early marriage, early motherhood, widowhood and the unspeakable oppression associated with the joint family system.

In such a society Preetilata grew up. Enlightenment of a sort at the top and the vast bottom section engulfed in total darkness. In the next two decades female participation in all walks of life became much more prominent. As noted earlier, political movement acted as the great catalytic agent to bring women onto the front stage of national life. Although most of the women political activists joined the non-violent nationalist movement led by



Preetilata Waddedar

Mahatma Gandhi a few like Preetilata chose the revolutionary path. Then as usual the students were on the forefront. They acted as messengers, as repositories of secret arms and were always ready to provide safe shelters to the male revolutionaries on the run. This was the norm in the initial stage. Write more experience women activists started forming their own organisations like the Dipali Shangha, Nari Karma Mandir, Mahila Rashtriya Shangha. In the political movements of the 30s and 40s the last named organisation played a significant role. Dipali Shangha used to emphasize the socio-economic improvement of women alongside their political participation. Surya Sen's Chittagong Revolutionary Group also placed similar emphasis on gender equality. The Bengal volunteers appealed to women to come forward to take part in all kinds of revolutionary activities without any reservation. These organisations played a pioneering role in changing and reshaping the world view of young Bengali women.

Pioneer like Preetilata had to face entrenched prejudices in a traditionally male dominated society. Against tremendous odds these brave women had to march forward and start the work of dismantling the barriers that separated them from freedom of the outside world. It was an uphill task. Their parents were ever fearful of social condemnation; of seeing their daughters remaining unmarried; of inviting police reprisals and brutalities; of state action leading to loss of jobs — in short, the fears that were such a part of life in a poor country under colonial rule.

So it took enormous courage on the part of a woman like Preetilata to reject the role model set by society and create a new one for herself. The ground was there in a way but then not everyone could make use of it. Therein lies her greatness.

The writer, who teaches history at the University of Dhaka, is the editor of 'Saptahik Samay'

## Option for A Girl Child

**S**AARC has taken up the cause of the girl child, to promote opportunities for her economic and social development. What options does a poor girl from an urban basti have? Runu, a young, attractive girl of 10/11 years is fatherless. Her mother remarried, but after the birth of a son, the step father deserted her. To survive Runu was told by her mother to collect flowers and sell them outside a hotel in the evening and studied in a neighbourhood school in the daytime.

Her mother complained that a local basti pimp used to harass her, and threatened to throw acid if she did not go with him. To avoid him, she was sent to live with her aunt in Mirpur. After some days she suddenly left her aunt's home and came back to her mother.

Last March she was supposed to have said that a foreigner in the hotel was going to adopt her. A few months later she was not to be seen outside the hotel. Her friends said that a foreign couple were planning to take her away. Was this

a mere suspicion? Could this be a case of trafficking or adoption?

There was absolutely no way of locating the girl and her mother, because they had moved from the basti. The persons who wanted to help Runu were in a dilemma. If they reported the matter to the police, the mother would be harassed perhaps unnecessarily. An investigating organisation contacted to find out about the couple's intentions but did not report back.

When Runu's mother was warned of the dan-

ger of trafficking or misuse of young girls, her cynical response was: "Can I assure a secured life of herself here? Will she not be raped in the basti, or even by someone who claims to defend her? If I die, who will protect her? At least if she is taken away she may get a full meal!"

Did everyone's helplessness reflect apathy, lack of support system, or the pervasive power of lawlessness in the city?

— AIN O SALISH KENDRA

## Poor but Not Powerless

by Shaheen Anam

**T**HERE was a workshop recently on the role of credit giving agencies in the field of self employment of women. It was participated by representatives from Government and Non-government organisations and also by private and public banks. What came out of the workshop was a unilateral call for changing the modes of bank financing, to support more agencies to give credit to women in order to encourage women to go into entrepreneurship.

In recent years various agencies have come up with schemes of giving credit to women. This concept was first encouraged by the Grameen Bank in a large scale to be now followed by other smaller agencies and government organizations. It has been ascertained that women are good borrowers and their rate of credit recovery is excellent. Most importantly they use credit to increase the standard of living of the whole family. In this way they contribute to the well being of the community and ultimately to the development of the country.

When asked how they use the credit, for almost borrowers reply that they use it for the family, especially their children. Either to send them to school, to feed them better or even to buy nice things for them. Some use the money to repair their huts or even to build a new house. These credit schemes have changed the lives of many rural women. It has been proven beyond doubt that given the right opportunities women can achieve the impossible. Instances and stories of their heroic struggle against the prevalent social norms of keeping women powerless are many. We now know the famous story of Manjira who went to collect the King Budoin award on behalf of the one million borrowers of Grameen Bank. There are many other not so famous stories, all of which give the same message.

Below is one such story. It is a simple touching story of a woman, her struggle and her tribulations. It is the story of her ultimate triumph in achieving some control over her destiny.

Hajera Bibi for a small village of Patuakhali was the wife of a landless farmer. The little land they had was her inheritance. She lived in a little house with their three sons and thanked God because they had enough to eat everyday. One day her husband announced that he had lost the land by leasing it out to a rich

farmer and now did not have enough money to get it back. The money that he earned by working on other people's land was no enough to feed his family anymore. This made him angry and frustrated. He gradually started staying away from home. He took out his anger on the only person most dependent on him. Hajera Bibi became the target of his wrath through no fault of hers. One day finally she paid the ultimate price of being poor and dependent. Her husband walked out on her and married the daughter of a rich farmer.

What could Hajera Bibi do? What option does an illiterate, poor dependent woman has when her husband walks out on her. Neither does she have access to any kind of resources, nor does she have the support of the community to help her survive. On the contrary she is blamed by society for not being,

his sons. A woman and a mother is unable to do that. Though there might be exceptions, few women abandon their children even in the most desperate situation. That is why when ever we see a woman begging she is invariably holding a baby in her arms. Coming back to Hajera Bibi, she begged her husband to stay, she even agreed to bear the humiliation of living in the same house with his second wife. "How can I live without a husband" she wailed.

Her two older sons like the father left home soon afterwards since she could not feed them. Her situation deteriorated and she was reduced to begging. One day she met a woman who introduced herself as a group organizer for a credit programme for landless farmers including women. She invited Hajera Bibi to come to one of the weekly meetings. She of course did not believe this. Who

true, she could get credit without giving any guarantee.

First she went through a process of learning what credit was all about, both its benefits and responsibilities and especially about this particular programme. She learned about savings, about opening a bank account and how she could manage her money efficiently. Everything was new to Hajera Bibi. She was entering a world that she never knew existed. It was inconceivable to her that a group of women could sit and decide and plan for their future. Much to her surprise, she discovered that she had many good ideas to propose to the group. Because of her enthusiasm and leadership skills she was elected the secretary of the group in a few months. Although this meant extra work and responsibilities, Hajera Bibi enjoyed it. For the first time in her life she was doing something to please herself.

Hajera Bibi got her first loan of Tk 2500 two years ago. She bought a second hand rickshaw. Now the problem was who would drive her rickshaw. Her youngest son, hardly 12 years old offered to help. It was very difficult in the beginning especially to pay back the weekly instalments and also to save Tk 5 every week which was mandatory. But once Hajera Bibi had tasted independence she vowed never to let go of it again. She worked in the fields, in peoples homes. Just to be able to repay her instalments on time she worked as a labourer to repair roads. What she did not do was allow her son to stop playing the rickshaw even for a single day.

\* Now something interesting started happening. Her two sons came back and announced that they wanted to live with her. What is more, her husband too wants to return home. He is begging her to take him back. He pleads with her and sometimes threatens her with "salish". The village elders will ostracize you if you don't let your legal husband return. But Hajera Bibi is adamant, she still carries the scar of humiliation he inflicted upon her when he left her two years ago.

Whether Hajera Bibi will ever take back her sons and husband or not we will perhaps never know. But she will never again be the powerless woman she once was who had begged her husband not to leave her. She has self esteem and the respect of her group members. She has options and some control over her life. She can at last decide for herself.



Women repaying loan instalment to Grameen Bank in Bangladesh: Credit for landless poor is one good way to spur economic participation and jobs. More than 23,000 villages have participated in Grameen Bank, boasting an average loan repayment rate of 95 per cent. But Grameen accounts for only 0.1 per cent of national credit in Bangladesh, suggesting there is room for much more credit to the poor, says UNDP's Development Report 1993.

able to keep her husband. Hajera Bibi also had three children to feed and take care of. When the going gets rough, the man or the father can walk away from it all. Poverty makes him forget his family and even

would give credit to her, what guarantee could she give and how would she ever repay it. As her situation grew worse she decided to give it a try. She attended a weekly group meeting and found that it was really

## WORKSHOP ON WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENT

### Polluting Less, Paying More

**A**S the earth becomes more and more unlivable at the hands of humans responsible for abusing, depleting and destroying its resources, the need to prevent this degradation could not be more immediate. In spite of this realization evils such as deforestation, toxic waste dumping, chemical pollution, water contamination and global warming continue with frigh-tening speed. Women, especially of developing countries, being closest to nature, have now the added responsibility of preserving and nurturing it for their progeny. In this context, a seminar titled 'Women and Environment' organised by NARI (National Association for Resource Improvement) was held on September 7th to discuss the role of the women in actively participating in environmental conservation and management — a vital component of article 24 of Agenda 21 presented at the Earth Summit of 1992. Here are some excerpts from the six papers presented at the seminar:

**Women and the Environment by Monowar Hossain, Managing Director, MARC**

Issues on women, in their turn, are essentially those of gender discrimination which is the expression of an age-old and unresolved conflict between man and woman. At the root of this conflict lies the biological process of reproduction which ensures the survival of the species. The biological difference between men and women and biological division of labour in the act of reproduction and nursing in the post-natal period, eventually led to socio-economic rights and divisions of labour which both the sexes have historically tried to impose on each other with varying degrees of success in different historical epochs. The victim of this eternal battle between the sexes is the non-attainment of the full human potential.

**The Impact to Environment on Women's Health Status by Salma Khan, Division Chief Planning Commission,**

Women are more vulnerable than men to environmental contaminations because of their reproductive roles. A United Nations study have linked reproductive defects to contaminations such as lead poisoning and presence of other chemicals in water. Some 1000 chemical products are today in the mar-

ket of Bangladesh — and there is no monitoring system to study the impact of those on women and children. The possible effects of exposure to chemicals range from infertility, miscarriage, neonatal death, malformation and growth retardation.

It is, therefore, important to minimize the adverse impact of environmental degradation on women on the one hand and incorporate women's perception on environment management and planning on the other, so that a lasting improvement towards sustainable development could be made.

**Women in Water — Sanitation Project: Bangladesh Experience by Bilqis A H, Aziz K M A and Hasan K Z**

Women in rural Mirzapur, Bangladesh, efficiently participated in planning and imple-

mentation of a water-sanitation project. They selected the sites of handpumps and latrines, supervised the installation of latrines and maintained pumps. Although most of them were housewives and illiterate, social characteristics were not barriers to their performance. This has sustainability as well as human resources development implications.

**Women, Media and Environment: From a Multi-dimensional Perspective by Tahmina Ahmad, Secretary Asia-Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists**

Women's role in environment protection through awareness creation activities has never been highlighted. Like in every other area of female activities women's role in awareness creation on environment through interpersonal communication

channels in the traditional past or media in the present has hardly been noticed.

The development planners, be it British or Pakistanis or even Bangladeshis forgot to ask the women how they felt about the new man-made interventions that was to be introduced. In fact the developers were all men as such development throughout has been from the male perspective.

**Medicinal Uses of Indigenous Herbs and Plants by Begum Jahanara Abdulla**

In Bangladesh, health care comes last to the women and if it is expensive many times never at all so herbal health care is women friendly for it can be used by women without a lot of fuss from the men folk. In fact many women folk practice herbal and local indigenous medicines very successfully. Their patients have been usually children and women. These women through practice and traditional knowledge have built up stores of knowledge which if spread to all could help Bangladeshis could be tremendously beneficial.

**Waterhyacinth: An Alternative for Water Pollution Control by Jamal Anwar**

Recent studies in different parts of world have shown that waterhyacinth can remove Nutrients, Heavy Metals from Wastewater, Pathogens and up-grades Industrial Effluents.

**Pollution: A Concern for Bangladesh by Ms Nazreen Azim**

Recommendations : 1. Research and collection of data related to pollution and continuous monitoring of pollutants.

2. NGOs, Government and International communities to support educational institutions to carry out active research into pollutants and its effect on environment and health.

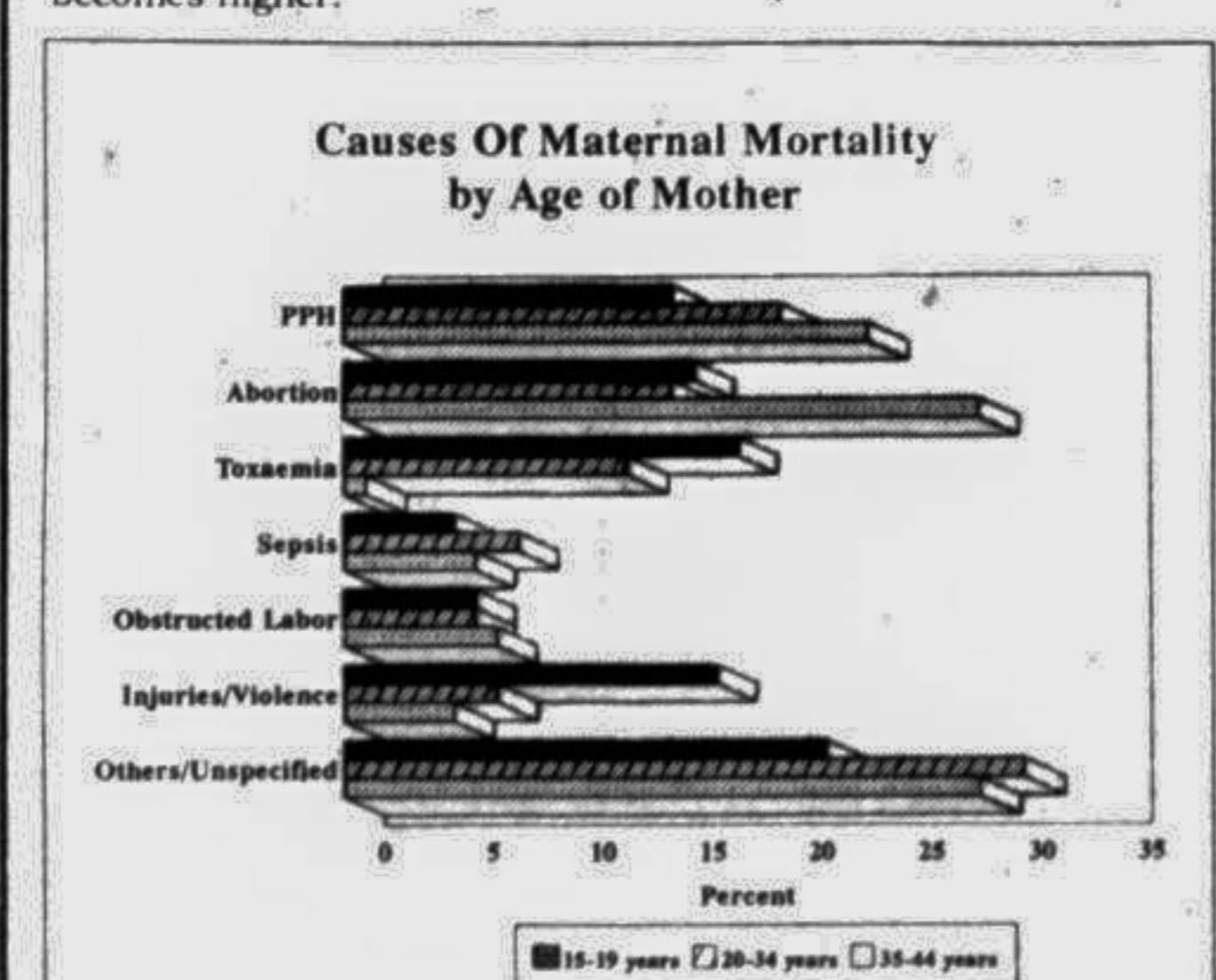
3. Immediately identify population at high risk from pollution hazards and mobilize action programme to clean the contaminated areas.

4. Actively initiate local community programmes on environmental education with emphasis on reducing domestic waste production and encourage use of bio-degradable products.

5. OOB should negotiate with the international financial institutions such as World Bank, IMF, ADB for long term soft financial loans which can be used for installation of anti-pollution measures.

## Too Little Food, Too Many Babies

**T**HE Bangladesh Fertility Survey (1989) found that women aged 20 to 24 have a median age at first pregnancy of 18 years. In other words, half of this age group have their first child by the time they are 18 years. Thirteen per cent of women under 20 have already two children. By the time a woman is over 35, she has had an average of five babies. With each successive pregnancy, her body, which is already underweight and anaemic, becomes further depleted and her risk of dying becomes higher.



## Maternal Mortality

**E**ARLY and closely-spaced pregnancies, a poor nutritional status and poor health care lead to Bangladesh having one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world, 600 per 100,000 live births.

Source : Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Bangladesh, UNICEF 1993.