



Phot by: A K M Mohsin

### The Unremitting Owe of a Potter's Wife

She is the potter's wife all right but the wheel is not for her. A division of labour based as cruelly on gender discrimination will be hard to find as it is there in the potter's family. The potter's wheel is one of the earliest and biggest innovations of civilisation and our homegrown potters have been at it for thousands of years without a break. But their women have always been denied of sharing in the benefit of this multimillennia old production gadget. As a result what the potter's women must do entails ever more drudgery than does the men's work. The bottom of the pitcher is not shaped by the wheel, it is only the top that is turned in by that. The potter's wife must hammer the sandy bottom into right shape, thickness and compaction before the two can be joined and fired to become a pitcher. And, seen in photo, she must also scrape all wheel made raw clay things to proper shape and surface plaining those to fantastic precision. And this she does the livelong day, for all the days in the year beside caring exclusively for the homestead and the children. Nursing an infant may only add some pleasure to the unremitting drudgery of it all.

## "Heaven is Under Your Husband's Feet"

by Shaheen Anam

"THIS is what we have been taught to believe since childhood" said Sabera Khatun, from a small village, Bandura, in Sylhet. For generations the belief that males and husbands are superior has dominated the lives of women in our country. Even today, the concept of equality in marriage is considered to be almost a blasphemy, women are severely criticised for any aspiration to independence or equality. Especially in rural Bangladesh, the picture of ideal womanhood is one where women stay behind the scene, giving crucial support to the family but never getting any appreciation, never demanding and never questioning.

Yet, inspite of it all there are changes going on in some places. These changes are subtle, and examples are so few in numbers that they are hardly visible. But there is no denying the fact that a quiet revolution is going on in some villages of Bangladesh. No, it is neither income generation, nor credit programmes for women. It is the emergence of self-confidence among many rural women. Women finally believe they are worth something and are demanding, very quietly though, that they be given the same rights, privileges and dignity due to any human being.

How has this been possible? The reasons are many, but the primary one is Basic Literacy. "I had eyes, yet I was blind, now suddenly I can see." The group of women I met in the village were all wives of small and landless farmers. Although poor, they exuded a strength and self-confidence that was simply exhilarating to witness. Every woman in the group, about 25 of them raised their hands to confirm that they could now read and write. This has been possible due to the relentless effort of an NGO, Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FVDB), the focal NGO working in Sylhet since the last 20 years. Their training material in Adult Literacy is now used by many other NGOs around the country. "Now that all of you can read and write, what do you use it for?" I had asked. Keeping account, reading out simple stories to children, sending messages were some of the answer. I wrote a letter to my husband from my father's house' admitted a

young women shyly. Their husbands and other male members were opposed to the idea of women learning to read and write. They had to be convinced through a lot of persuasion, arguments which had often turned bitter one woman told me. The religious leaders in the community had also condemned this new "un-Islamic activities by NGOs."

One of the main reason for opposition to women literacy programme was the fact they would then come out of their homes and be seen by other men. Education, they claimed would put all kinds of ideas in their heads. "How did you fight all this opposition?" I had asked in amazement. Sabera Khatun, the most vocal of them all said "One day I asked the Moulvi

Shaheb, look at the women carrying loads of brick and repairing roads, how come it is a sin for me to be seen by other men while she is exposed all day and you do not send her home. Isn't she a woman?" To their husbands they had to prove the benefits of education before they grudgingly gave their consent. Some women are even teaching their husbands rudimentary arithmetic.

It is not only basic literacy skills that these groups of women are learning in their classes. Their perception of life is undergoing a change and they are now questioning their roles as mothers, wives and women. They are slowly becoming conscious and aware as people who deserve to be treated better. "We were told it was a sin not to abide by all the rules set by the husband because he was only next to the prophet. Now we know this is not true. If God has made him, he has made me also and has given me some rights."

During the literacy classes, they talk about Human Development, Human Rights and Womens Rights. They also talk about health issues, sanitation, nutrition and family planning. Not one woman in the group had more than three children and some had only two. "What do you mean by Human Development? I had asked in curiosity. "Well, said one, it means improving our lives, to eat better, to be able to bring up our children properly and be happy in general". They have never heard of UNDP's Human Development Report, but their definition was as good as any.

Besides literacy, the NGO helps women to help themselves by giving credit. "Some kind of financial benefit is essential to keep up the confidence of our members", said one of FVDB's staff. Women have used credit in different ways mostly to increase the income and thereby the standard of living of the family. Some have gone into poultry farming while others are involved in trading. It was very encouraging to see how these women were using a small amount of money so profitably. Everyone of them pledged that the profit they earn would go primarily for better nutrition and education of their children. I asked them if they would also send their female children to school. All the women in one voice answered that they will send their daughters to school so that they may have better lives than their mothers did.

"So, do you still believe heaven is under your husband's feet?" I asked. "No, came the prompt response, "Heaven is not under anyone's feet, we now know that the Koran has said no such thing".



### 'Rule of law exists, says Mirza Golam Hafiz'

ARE we supposed to believe this headline which appeared in Daily Star on 26 October? Newspaper reports tell us a completely different story. Only a few days ago a report appeared in Bhorer Kagaj (19 October, 1993) about Shefali, a young thirteen year old girl, who had allegedly fallen from a second floor apartment. Her arms and legs broken she lay under treatment at the Pongu Hospital in Dhaka. It was alleged that her employer (a magistrate's wife), finding her earrings, amongst other things missing, was violent and as a result of her threats Shefali fell over the ledge. Our investigations showed that Shefali reportedly employed in a magistrate's house in Natore, was so badly injured that she had to be brought to Dhaka. Both the magistrate and Shefali came from Kishorganj, which is probably why she was unwilling to talk about the incident.

Shahida's murder another magistrate has been indicted (reported in Sangbad on 16 October). The press reports have printed the scandals, but have not pointed to the irony of violations by law officials themselves. Magistrates, as we know, are selected through the Public Service Commission. How do they remain unaware of the law and not subject to legal procedures themselves? Our scepticism is further reinforced by the revelations of the Supreme Court Judges inspection, appearing in Daily Star on 26 October. What is needed is commitment not a slogan for publicity. Rule of law will prevail not merely because we have codified our laws, but because they are enforced in reality. Bangladesh has signed the Child Rights Convention and has several laws relating to violence against women; in many cases the culprits are also known. But who will catch them if the law gives themselves remain above the law? — AIN O SALISH KENDRA

## Women still Encounter Barriers in the Media

ALTHOUGH women have made great strides in seizing career opportunities in the news media, they still encounter barriers, says Eleanor Clift, White House correspondent for Newsweek magazine. Using her White House beat as an example, Clift says that women still face stiff competition for jobs, assignments, pay scales, and promotions. Clift shared her experiences in a recent USA Worldnet TV dialogue with journalists in New Delhi, Madras and Dhaka. Clift, who joined Newsweek's White House staff in 1977 during the Carter administration, said that she was the first female reporter from a major

news magazine to cover the West Wing of the White House, which includes the President's Oval Office. Prior to 1977 women reporters "had always been assigned to the East Wing to cover the First Lady," she said. "Now if you go into the White House press room it is probably about one third women, and all the major news organizations have women covering the beat. If you look at the management structure of most media organizations, however, women would still be in a minority." But this, too, will change "with time," she predicted. Clift, who is also deputy Washington bureau chief for Newsweek, said that most

women are motivated to become journalists in order to "change things by writing about them." They would have much more power, she said, were they to "exercise editorial control." She admitted that she had turned down a management job. "I resisted being a manager because it struck me as a power game," she said. "(But) I have a feeling that is because of the era I came from. There are women coming into the field today who see editing and managing as a creative use of power." Today's women, Clift said, have their share of front page stories, and cover issues traditionally assigned to male reporters, such as defense and war. Women journalists are no

longer relegated to issues of domestic concerns. "Women today come in by the front door," she said. They have the credentials, and there are laws that forbid discrimination against women. Clift explained that in the past when reporters traveled on a political election campaign, they were known as "the boys on the bus .... Now they are known as the boys and girls on the bus," she said. "It is not yet fifty-fifty, but women are coming along." Interlocutors in India and Bangladesh told Clift that they too have an increasing number of women entering the field of journalism. They stressed, however, that although job oppor-

tunities for women are expanding, their participation in journalism is still subject to "social restraints." Questioned about balancing between the separate demands of marriage and career, Clift, who is married to an "understanding" fellow journalist, admitted that the priority issue for today's career women is "how to have a personal life and still follow a career one, loves." She said that a majority of American women reporters in their 30's are unmarried and "are beginning to wonder if they have given up something" to pursue their jobs. "There is no easy answer," Clift concluded. — USIS

## The Politics and Business of Reproductive Technologies

by Farida Akhter

EXECUTION of population control policies has brought several actors in close ties with each other, mainly the multinational corporations, population controllers, medical establishment and the repressive structures of the state. Enormous amount of money is spent for the depopulating strategy. This has created effective demand for the contraceptives, produced by pharmaceutical corporations many of which, have been proved unsafe for women, even fatal, such as Dalkon Shield an intra-uterine device. Governments of Third World countries are given "aid" to purchase pills, IUD's, condoms, hormonal injections, and implants and medical accessories to run sterilization clinics. These technologies are then distributed "free" to the women in the villages, in most cases forcibly, because of the goals of fertility reduction. Poor, disabled, immigrant, black and various ethnic groups living in the developed countries are also subjected to such contraceptive distribution policy. Women receive "contraceptives" such as pills, IUD's, Depo-provera and Norplant free of cost which are usually very expensive in their countries of origin. These products could never be "sold" to the women in the third world unless the state bought it for them taking loans from the developed countries. Interestingly, to measure the level of business of contracep-

tives, categories such as "contraceptive prevalence rate" (CPR) are in use. It is pretended that the increase in CPR automatically means reduction in fertility rate, but in reality high rate of CPR means high business of contraceptives. It could have been better to say Contraceptive Business Rate (CBR) instead of CPR. The predominance of the business interest manifests clearly by making these categories as the indicator of the success of a programme. What is happening at present in the two parts of the world is that while the poor women in the Third World (and also in the developed countries) are dumped with "free" contraceptive, the rich women, mainly those of the developed countries, are offered new reproductive technologies such as, invitro fertilization, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, egg or embryo transfer, embryo flushing and various other methods. These are mostly pro-natalist

technologies used to help the women to have babies even if they have problems. The anti-natalist policies are pursued with contraceptives for the poor while the pro-natalist technologies are offered to the rich. The process of human reproduction is being more and more demarcated by class and race lines. It has been increasingly commercialized and politicized at both ends. The introduction of the reproductive technologies, both for having children or not to take, have created an illusion among the women that they have control over their reproduction or over their "body". This illusion is the manifestation of "supermarket" psychology by which a consumer in the supermarket assumes that she is "freely" choosing a commodity. In fact, the extensive use of the technologies have over medicalised and commercialised the entire sphere of reproduction and have become a matter of decision making by external forces about who should have children and who should not. Women neither decide the nature of contraceptive research, nor they control the multinational companies. Jalna Hanmer provides an analysis of these technologies in the following words: "the

new reproductive technologies are used to uphold the traditional notions of motherhood and femininity via the selection of those who should and who should not be mothers. While contraception and abortion can be seen to play the same role, until the recent advent of fully-medically controlled contraceptives, many women in the west and north were largely in charge of their reproductive decisions. Women in the south and the east have been subjected to contraception, including sterilisation, for some years in conditions that cannot be described as free choice. As in the west, the social factors of class, race and ethnicity, and male domination determine differential treatment of women." The new reproductive technologies are also alleged to be an aspect of genetic engineering closely associated with new developments in biotechnology. This includes the attempt to map the entire gene pool, beginning with the Human Genome Project, to 'improve' human embryos through genetic testing and ultimately adding and subtracting genetic materials. Some of the new reproductive technologies such as embryo experimentation are new

forms of eugenics or selective or "perfect" breeding. Eugenics embody value judgments about which types of people and which characteristics are to be preserved and promoted, and which are to be eliminated. It is clear that in societies dominated by the rich and the elites, and in the world with such inequalities, we can imagine who are going to be selected and who are to be eliminated; they are the women, black people, the disabled, the poor, people with certain physical, mental, personal or social characteristics. So-called modern science strives to produce perfect genetic breeds for agriculture and thus produce monoculture. It is interesting to see its similarity with the production of "monoculture" of human species by means of reproductive technologies. Many ecologists who are against monocul-

ture, contradictorily, promote genetic engineering of human reproduction by the very emphasis on population control. Control of women's reproductive processes is the ultimate result of these technological developments. According to Jalna Hanmer, the extreme scenario that has been considered is to phase out women altogether or to keep just a few as "queen bees" for their eggs. Women will become redundant to the process of creating new life once immature eggs, for example foetal eggs, can be matured, and ectogenesis becomes a reality. Less extreme future visions retain women in more or less in their present numbers to caretake the results of the biological manufacture of human beings to exact specification. Science and technology are produced in the society having determinate social and power relations. Women must face the fact that given the power and interests of men and science, and society, those who decide on what is desirable in relation to human reproduction are unlikely to be those most affected, that is, the women. The central contradiction of these developments is that while the new reproductive technologies are making women unfree they are presented as tools to liberate women from the burden of body. Using chemicals to disrupt the biological environment of women's body is an ecological crisis by itself. Women's need for contraception must remain independent of the vested interest of the actors mentioned above, such as the multinational corporations, population controllers, medical establishment and the repressive structures of the state. It is a long way to go and a hard battle to win. Nevertheless the identification of the problem is already a strong step forward. The writer is Executive Director of the UBINIG, an NGO.

