



WOMEN ON THE MOVE



Out of Jatayu's Wingwrecks

by Azfar Hussain

THE man in the corner catches hold of a sandwich calling it 'the real': his bites, broken and bound, breathe signs on the street, on the pavement, on the moon caught in the sky.

But, she, more than a name, more than a celebrated symbol, tots up signs and symbols and silences, rolling them into a 'no', or into an 'yes': see, the land is breathing blood see, the land is breathing fire.

Does it mean that there is always a wound on the back of the night, in the voice of the poem? The flower then does not die in the move that you make, here and now.

Here are moments that chase death and darkness out of this orbit, while the syllable in your breath sparkles, lengthens across time now tossed in the noises they make in the messages one by one.

See, your children, your sons and daughters keep faring forward, as you, mother, keep coming back and coming back to the real: love and life and struggle keep animating a poem here yet to be written.

On June 25, Mrs Jahanara Imam, 'Chachi' to many, and mother to many more, lost her battle with cancer and died peacefully in a far off land. It was a cruel blow to a generation of men and women. We who knew her well are overwhelmed by the news. Her death gives us all a sense of being orphaned, a feeling of being torn away from a world gone forever, a memory, a way of life that held a generation together in a unique bond.

My memory of her goes back many many years. I watched her, from the verandah of my grandfather's flat in Azimpur Colony. I remember her as a woman of unusual grace and beauty and having a striking resemblance with the most famous Bangla film heroine of the day. I was too young to understand the implication of that resemblance but everyone in the house rushed to the verandah to get a glimpse of her when her richshaw would come by. Even my grandfather would suddenly ask for his spectacles to get better look.

But that was really a very long time ago. My next encounter with her was when her son Rumi, became a friend of mine at Dhaka University. Their's was a mother-son relationship based on total admiration. Rumi adulated his mother for her intellect, her wit, her charm and beauty. His face would just light up talking about her and he just loved to introduce his friends to her. On the other hand, he was the apple of her eyes, her dearest precious possession. It was a treat to visit Rumi because Chachi would shower affection on everyone close to him. She had a way of making us feel comfortable and her natural acceptance of his friends, both

JAHANARA IMAM Lighting the Torch of Courage for Us All

by Shaheen Anam

She spoke of the common man, the injustices of society, the emancipation of women and she spoke of freedom. She spoke of her beloved son whose martyrdom she carried like a badge. She once said to me "Whenever I see Rumi's face in my imagination I see the map of Bangladesh".

males and females made her a favorite among our friends and parents.

And then came the War. Our liberation war: the war that tore families and friends apart, that separated forever mothers and sons, husbands and wives, friends and families. Rumi and Jahanara Chachi were a part of that process. Rumi, our brave and noble friend gave his life for his motherland and Chachi lost forever her adored son. But in return she became the mother to an entire generation, of freedom fighters and all those who value liberty and freedom.

Rumi was captured on the night of 29th of August 1971. It was during that time that I really came to know her. Later, we heard of the dignity and pride with which she dealt with Rumi's captors. Though her heart broke, with valour she let him go. Yes, she tried to secure his release, but with the same dignity and courage that marked her indomitable personality. For me it was a human drama unfolding before my very eyes as I watched this beautiful dignified woman completely shattered and slowly withering away in the knowledge of her sons captivity. The knowledge of what Rumi was enduring at the hands of his captors was something we, his friends were finding hard to endure. For his



mother it was a living nightmare. Yet, during all those months, she did not break or bend. She passionately believed in her sons mission and made it her own.

lived in her sons mission and made it her own.

Her hope, her vigil ended on 17 December when all the others who were captured returned without Rumi. Historically we rushed to her house, with uncontrolled tears in our eyes. I do not remember very well who else went but Shahadat Chowdhury, Editor, Weekly Bichitra, and my friend Shireen Huq were with me. We went to find a composed and quiet 'Chachi' sitting in the living room. Yes she cried, the crying of someone finally admitting what she always knew in her heart. Yet, in that hour of grief she said something that will remain etched forever in my mind. "Don't cry, Rumi's friends don't cry for me. Cry for those people, they have captured and killed through deceit and falsehood. Go and see what they have done, the Al Badras, Al Shams and Razakars in their hour of defeat, see and make a vow never to forgive them".

In stunned silence we looked at her. Is this the mother who only a few weeks ago wanted to get her son back no matter what? Looking at her quiet determination, the fire in her eyes, the resolve in her voice, I knew that she would never forget and would never forgive. It was her advice that made me go and see for myself the gruesome picture at

Rayerbazar. Chachi was right, it is a sight that I will never forget as long as I live. The sight of the mutilated, tortured bodies of the most revered personalities of our society built up an anger and anguish within me and I too have never forgotten and have never forgiven.

From then onward, her story is known to all. The beautiful teacher, housewife and mother turned her grief into one of the finest examples of courage, fortitude and resilience. She single mindedly carried on the torch of freedom, the torch that her son and thousands like him had lit to seek justice. Her book 'Ekatturer Dingul' moved and touched the entire nation. She sincerely believed that those responsible for the killing, rape and mutilation of our people should be punished and brought to justice.

She exuded the same warmth and affection every-time we would meet in social gatherings, sometime joking, sometime reminiscing. One thing she would always say, "Shaheen, we are all bound by a common bond, let this bond never tear". Cancer had disfigured her beautiful face beyond recognition, yet she had the same resolve in her voice when she spoke. She spoke of the common man, the injustices of society, the emancipation of women and she spoke of freedom. She spoke of her beloved son whose martyrdom she carried like a badge. She once said to me "Whenever I see Rumi's face in my imagination I see the map of Bangladesh". We will always remember you. You carried the grief, the joy and the freedom of an entire generation, our generation, your son, Rumi's generation.

WOMEN entrepreneurship is not a new thing in Bangladesh.

although its scope has never been as wide as it is now. With banks and other institutions becoming more woman-friendly getting credit is much easier enabling many women to start their own business.

This was not the case say even a decade ago. Apart from being viewed with suspicion, the main obstacle to women entrepreneurship was finance. Without personal funds or support from one's husband, starting a business for a woman, was next to impossible. Banks too, were reluctant to give loans to women who did not have any assets to offer as collateral. It was therefore quite a challenge when Geetiara Chowdhury decided to create her own advertisement company in 1973. Twenty years later she is now the Managing Director of a thriving company ADCOM, that handles accounts with names as big as Lever Brothers, Duncan Tea and Organon.

The road to success, however, has been far from smooth. In 1973, Geetiara had

the brains, the drive and the creativity for her dream to come true, but no money. A 50,000 taka deposit was needed just to get accredited to the newspaper association, a requirement for any advertisement company. "I had to go from pillar to post, says Chowdhury passionately. "to get a bank guarantee". "Most people discouraged me, by saying 'you can't do it, you're a woman', its too much pressure," Geetiara, determined and undaunted ultimately got a loan for 50,000 taka from Uttara Bank without any collateral. She formed her company, which at that time consisted of a tiny room with no fan, six people and her experience from the ad agency she had worked for previously. Geetiara spent most of the time getting business, convincing people that her company was just as good or better than any other.

With a new agency and that too headed by a woman, Geetiara says she had to prove her

Making Waves in Business

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

"I had to go from pillar to post, says Chowdhury passionately, "to get a bank guarantee". "Most people discouraged me, by saying 'you can't do it, you're a woman', its too much pressure."



Geetiara Chowdhury

worth twice over. So what is it that attracts her in this business? Says the Managing Director of a firm that has bagged one-third of all television advertisements, "It's the variety of people I have to

deal with all the time". "Every day we talk of several different things and everyday we have to come up with new ideas," she adds with an excited gleam on her face. Apart from the prospect of

getting enough advertisements to keep the company going in an increasingly competitive industry, there are other challenges to be faced. One of the main drawbacks, she says, is that professionally advertising has not yet developed much compared to even neighbouring countries where technology is far advanced: "Everytime we want to film something we have to rush to Bombay." Getting experienced, professional people is also a problem which, says Geetiara, leaves no choice but to hire amateurs and train them. Limitations are also created by the fact that Bangladesh does not have the luxury of other countries of having private TV, electronic media being owned by the government. All this instead of being disincentives for Geetiara, act as catalysts, spurring her on to find new ways to break through the walls.

Being a woman entrepreneur has not been as difficult as one would expect in a profession so predominantly

male. "Of course I have to deal with the usual chauvinism, if I buy a car for example, it is immediately assumed that my husband paid for it. Also, as a woman I have to act with poise and dignity, a man can swear, a woman can't, she laughs.

As far as appearances go, Geetiara is all woman. Petite and pretty in her mauve sari she giggles like a school girl over her fetish for always matching her earrings with her clothes. Yet behind all the soft femininity is a person with the grit and strength of any man of this profession. Perhaps it is the fact that her parents have trained her always to be independent and confident in all circumstances. Perhaps it is her journalistic experience which includes writing for feminist She magazine in the 60s in Karachi and later bringing out the Annual East Pakistan Number exclusively devoted to Bengali women. Whatever the reason, Geetiara has not only survived in a profession ridden with risks and tacit chauvinism but scored high enough to be one of the most successful business women of this country.

MY grandfather was a man of considerable prestige, much sought after for his services and advice. The source of this prestige was not wealth; it was the fact that he had ten children, that all of them survived, and that eight of them were boys.

In that sense, little has changed in the decades which have seen so much change in other spheres. In Africa, as in many parts of the world, a woman who gives birth to three boys will consider herself fortunate, and be much admired, while her neighbour who has three daughters will be an object of pity. If the two meet, both are shy and embarrassed at the great contrast in their fortunes. If the same circumstance arose in those many parts of Asia in which the dowry system still prevails, then the consequences would be even more severe; a family with three girl children might well face financial ruin.

The challenge we face is the challenge of moving to the point at which these all-important differences are of no importance. It is an immensely long road to travel. The Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing in 1995, will be both a milestone and a signpost.

The Lever of Education
The challenge is essentially one of finding practical levers to bring about change in the years immediately ahead. And I think there can be little doubt that the most powerful of those levers is education. An educated woman almost always has more value and status in the eyes of her husband, her family and her community. She is likely to have more awareness, more opportunities,

Change for the Last and the Least

by Gertrude Mongella

more choice, and more confidence. Even if all else remains unchanged, and even if the educated woman still has no opportunities outside the home, her position is still likely to be transformed; she is more likely, for example, to share in family decisions about how many children to have, how to bring them up, how to spend money, how to organize domestic life, and how to care for her own and her family's health. Her husband will also treat her in a different, less dictatorial way, and she will be less susceptible to bullying and intimidation by her in-laws. All of this inevitably, if slowly, raises the woman's status, and makes it more likely that the gender conditioning of the next generation will be less severely discriminatory.

Family Planning
The second great force for transforming the lives of women in the developing world is the spread of family planning services. The number of children born to a woman has a fundamental impact on her health, on her time and energies, on her freedom and opportunities, and on the chances of her children growing up healthy and educated.

Women's Health
A third lever is direct action to improve the health of women and girls. Too often, females eat last and least; and if they want to be well thought of and well treated, then they are taught that they must, in all circumstances, consider the needs of others first. When it comes to health, they are expected to simply put up with



More attention to a woman's health needs can prevent the serious problems which undermine her position and capacity. — photo: The Progress of Nations, Unicef

problems which, in males, would be complained about and acted upon. A girl or a woman is expected to work even if she is quite seriously ill; a boy with a headache will be told to lie down. A woman is expected to bear pain and suffering with fortitude. She is told she will shame her parents if she cries in labour. And she knows that the more suffering she can bear the more she will be praised. Boys — and often men too — are fussed over and attended to when they are the slightest bit ill.

This neglect of the health needs of women leads to serious problems and to a further undermining of their position and their capacities. In the developing world, over 40% of women suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia. In some, the lack of attention to health and nutrition during childhood and puberty leads to great difficulty during the years of child-bearing and is a major cause of the low-birth-weight syndrome which does no much to perpetuate malnutrition and poor growth from one generation to the next. Worldwide, 500,000 women die every year from the complications that arise during pregnancy and labour — and many times that number are left with injuries, illnesses, and disabilities which can be embarrassing, painful, debilitating, lifelong — and which undermine their health and their strength and their opportunities.

Women's Technology
A fourth powerful lever is the kind of technology that lightens the burden on women in the developing world rather

than increasing it. These technologies are not usually expensive. Standpipes and hand-pumps, small ploughs and tools to help with the weeding and harvesting, powered grain-grinding mills, and cooking stoves that mean that only half as much firewood needs to be collected — these are the technologies that could save millions of women hours of drudgery every day, improving health and releasing time and energy for more productive purposes.

By and large, the technology already exists. But there is too big a gap between those who create it and those who need it, and there is too much bureaucracy in the attempt to make technology available to poor and often illiterate women. The result is a plethora of appropriate-technology exhibitions and demonstration centres in capital cities — while millions of women expend their time, their health, and their energies in fetching and carrying and pounding.

Synergisms
It is this powerful set of practical, affordable, and mutually reinforcing changes — in education, family planning, health, and women's technologies — that could do most to bring about the beginnings of a transformation for many millions of women in the developing world.

Gertrude Mongella is the Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995. After holding several ministerial posts in the Government of Tanzania, she served as her country's High Commissioner to India before taking up her present appointment.

Preview of a Fatwa!

A News and Feature Service report in Aajker Kagoj of 5 June claims that fatwas have directly and indirectly caused death and victimisation of over 50 women in remote villages in Bangladesh. Local protests were silenced by projecting fatwa as a customary practice. Since many of these incidents took place surreptitiously, there was little time for counter action. Nevertheless prosecution cases were initiated in most cases, and in the first matter relating to Nurjehan's death in Chattokchora village in Maulvi Bazar, Maulana Mannan, the fatwabaz and 8 others have been convicted by the additional district magistrate. The case against the accused in the murder by fatwa of Nurjehan of Madhukhali has been dismissed. A charge sheet has been issued against 11 accused in the death of Feroza instigated by fatwa.

salish chairman Azizul Haq have accused a young girl Shapnaha, who had earlier been raped, of zina and declared a public lashing on 12 July. Is this advance notice being given to allow everyone a grandstand view of the gruesome violations of human rights in Bangladesh? The Maulana and his accomplices appear to feel they are above the law of the country. Numerous other cases where mosque Imams or maulanas may have taken law into their own hands under the excuse of customary practice may by now have been interred into local history and will not surface into national news. The report on fatwa has appeared in the same paper twice before and has reappeared in other papers this week. Will this press information induce the law enforcement agency to preempt the perpetuation of such illegal acts? The Mahila Parishad and Ain O Salish Kendra met the Inspector General of Police who reassured them that the police would investigate the matter. Perhaps the local administration and law enforcing agencies will take serious note of the threat to the entire society by the continued violation of the law in the name of fatwa.

Despite this it seems that the fatwabaz feel sufficiently confident to announce the execution of their fatwa in advance. On 17 June, Bhorer Kagoj ran a report from its correspondent in village Dhansher in Kasba, Brahmanbaria, informing the readers of the advance notice of a fatwa to be executed on 12 July. According to this report, "Maulana Fazlul Haq and the

— Ain O Salish Kendra