

YES, for telling the truth a week ago, at least for once on this issue, without mincing a word of it. Truth that is hard, bare and beautiful. And what was the momentous statement that she made? Let us repeat it: "When I was a young girl, my parents never insisted on my wearing the traditional Islamic female dress, veil and all. Had they done so, I could never have become what I am now — the Prime Minister of Pakistan." This was how Benazir Bhutto, the world's first female Muslim Prime Minister, reacted, while on a recent visit to France, to the controversy caused by the demands of a number of orthodox Muslim families settled in France for their girl students to be allowed to wear head scarves in the schools. Such a practice, the families concerned claimed, has been enjoined by their religion. This issue of what these families choose to call proper Islamic dress for females, simmering for some months, came to a head recently when the French Government finally decided against the use of head scarves by Muslim girls in mixed secular public or private schools. Accordingly, 25 such students, a minute proportion of around 150,000 Muslim girl students in France, were expelled from their schools. Benazir Bhutto, while careful neither to queer the pitch for her French hosts nor to rouse the ire of her co-religionist Mullahs at home or abroad, was obviously distressed enough by the sorry spectacle to give an honest piece of her mind in such a heroic manner.

Yes indeed, heroic it was. Anyone with the slightest awareness of the Mullahs' stand on various women's issues, their place, position and rights in society and the limitless capacity of the Mullahs for mischief making around the world when aggrieved by or challenged on issues dear to their hearts, should know the perils of such a remark by the Pakistan Prime Minister. She, like her two other lady fellow-travellers, Turkey's Tansu Ciller and Bangladesh's Khaleda Zia, has more than a fair share of her own Mullahs to think about and take care of.

Religious bigotry of one hue or another has been an ever-present source of violence and strife in her country throughout its brief but chequered history. Shia-Sunni sectarian infighting has, of late, become particularly vicious claiming the lives of dozens of citizens almost every day. On top of it, hard on the heels of her return from France, she was faced with an armed insurrection in the northernmost province of Pakistan. It is a region, inhabited by Pushtu speaking warlike Afghan tribes, historically known for its turbulence and ultra-orthodox jingoism. "Not too surprisingly, the rebels, a bunch of marauding Muslim zealots, have demanded the immediate establishment of Islamic government that would enforce strict observance of Shariah laws. Reportedly, the local administration, faced with the imminent collapse of its authority, has promptly announced the introduction of such laws in the rebel held areas. But Benazir, once again, in another welcome but rare show of courage in the face of fundamentalist onslaught, has branded the insurgency as very unfortunate — a state of affairs the real solution to which, she made it clear, is in the successful creation of a really modern state in Pakistan."

There can be no denying the fact that she could reach the top in politics in such a



To cover or not to cover? — Photo: Newsweek

Benazir, We Salute Thee

by Zaheda Ahmad

state was due, among other things, to the very modern education that her parents were wealthy and enlightened enough to equip her with. She is a modern woman in, on her own admission, a yet to be fully modern state, receiving her



Trimming her suits. — Photo: Newsweek

education first at Oxford and then at Harvard. At the former university she once held the prestigious post of the president of the University Debating Union. As a student at both the institutions she did give quite a good account of herself, a record which later served her well when she assumed the mantle of the party and national leadership. But at the same time it is also true that had Pakistan been a state like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or other Middle Eastern nations, Benazir, even with all the distinctions of family, class, character and education could never have aspired to compete for, not to speak of securing, the top job. For it is well-known that although Islam, unlike other religions, has granted certain limited rights to its women, it has unambiguously excluded women from the position of political or religious leadership. That is why when she urged Pakistan's fundamentalist scholars to keep themselves confined to the religion and not meddle in politics, one of them replied, "Benazir should also do her duty as a woman, raise children in her home and leave politics to men."

Then again, the practice of *parda* or strict seclusion of women, the mandatory use of the veil — call it by any name, the Iranian *chador* or the South Asian *burkha*, it is all the same — severely restricts the

freedom and mobility of Muslim women. Not only that, centuries of brainwashing in favour of *parda* culture in a hideously patriarchal, malechauvinistic society, had given rise to a socio-cultural environment which inhibits the healthy development of the full potential of a Muslim woman. No banner of the Iranian system is so jarring to the eye and so pervasive as the black *chador*, no act so symbolic of Muslim fanaticism as the occasional murders of Algerian school girls for their offence of moving with their heads uncovered. These questions of what Muslim women should wear and how they should behave have been the burning issues for debate by Muslim men throughout the Muslim world ever since their encounter with the permissive, free mixing yet economically and technologically dominant West.

So, Benazir might have taken those 25 French Muslim girls to task for desiring to cover their heads in schools but they would never be in the running for any leadership position anytime anywhere in the world. They were only trying to be "good, obedient Muslim women" and nothing else. As for Benazir, she herself, in deference to the prevailing realities on the ground back home, had long ago taken to doing the same. She is, after all, a woman who has little in common with the people she has come to lead. So in her public life she observes the ground rules of her tradition-bound society, right down to the arranged marriage to her fellow wealthy landowner. Even the fact that she gave birth to her first child just two months before she won her first election in November 1988 was, if anything, considered a reassuring sign, by many Pakistanis, men and women alike, of her ready acceptance of traditional values.

She claims that she is not a feminist — "I have always believed that men and women are different." Nevertheless, she has a genuine commitment to women's rights as evidenced by her remarks on the French soil. "Women are discriminated against the most," she is on record to have said, "because they are weak." The tightrope walking that she has to do in order to balance the forces of obscurantism and progress has made her careful in speech and wary of risky social legislation. For example, although she had created a Ministry of Women's Development, which has organised support group for oppressed women, she could make no real move to repeal the repressive Hudood law enacted during the regime of the late military dictator Zia-ul-Haq. Under that law a woman can be imprisoned for adultery — or even for being raped. That law also places on the victim of a rape the burden of proving that she in no way has invited the assault. Thousands of women — many with their children, have suffered imprisonment for "crimes" against this medieval law.

Benazir's another Muslim fellow traveller, Turkey's Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, more western, both geographically and culturally, is luckier in the sense that for historical reasons she has inherited a secular polity and a much more developed economy. But compared to Benazir, she is a latecomer into politics, entering the arena only four years ago. A 48-year-old professional economist, who taught economics at Istanbul's Bosphorus University, she is wealthy, smart, supremely self-confident and highly educated too with an American Ph D degree to her credit. She cuts a striking figure on the Istanbul political, social and intellectual scene. In a society too westernised for any comfort to Muslim susceptibilities, women have made significant gains in most spheres of Turkish national life — except that of politics. She is a shining exception to that prevailing reality. Tough, outspoken and unapologetically western and modern in her lifestyle she had often spoken out forcefully against the Mullahs accusing them of seeking to overturn the secular foundation of the Turkish state established by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

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But once voted in power, she had to tone down her rhetoric in order not to antagonise the religious right too much. Her enemies include the 15 per cent Turks who as the staunch supporters of the conservative Welfare Party regularly vote for it. To soothe their ruffled feathers, she quite often professes her respect for their values. As a gesture to them, she decided, quite surprisingly, not to attend the World Population Conference at Cairo last September. These are the ways, small but not insignificant, in which a thoroughly modern and westernised Prime Minister of a Muslim country tries to do the balancing act. She better has to watch her steps since the obscurantist forces of darkness in Turkey, so long thought to have been dealt a mortal blow by the Ataturk reforms introduced in the 20s of this century, are demonstrably making a comeback.

Obviously these medieval forces, whether in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey or here in Bangladesh, find a congenial breeding ground in the utterly hopeless socio-political condition obtaining in these countries. In a situation where extreme poverty, exploitation, discrimination, ignorance and rampant corruption indulged in by the ruling classes the protagonists of these forces can and do easily hoodwink the ordinary people with their "messianic message" of socio-economic emancipation. Only by changing the existing intolerable order of things in favour of the people can these forces be faced and fought on the ground effectively.

The writer who teaches history at Dhaka University is the editor of 'Saptahik Samoy', a viewsweekly.

She Creates the Language of Needle and Thread

ANY octogenarian in this land and climes feels comfortable when both their physical and mental energies are not taxed. The question of engaging in fine-art work is almost outlandish. But Zindu Prava Devi is an exception to this rule.

An 83 year old she still takes pains in pursuit of creativity demanding great concentration of mind and eyes. Her needle works were on display at an embroidery exhibition, at the city's Jojon Contemporary Art Gallery recently.

"I was always fond of needle work, those precise and faultless stitches, so many different styles of them simply fascinate me," she reveals her first passion in life. Their love story — the needle and her, began at an early age of eleven. Initially she picked tips and clues from her mother, sisters, relatives and later from neighbours.

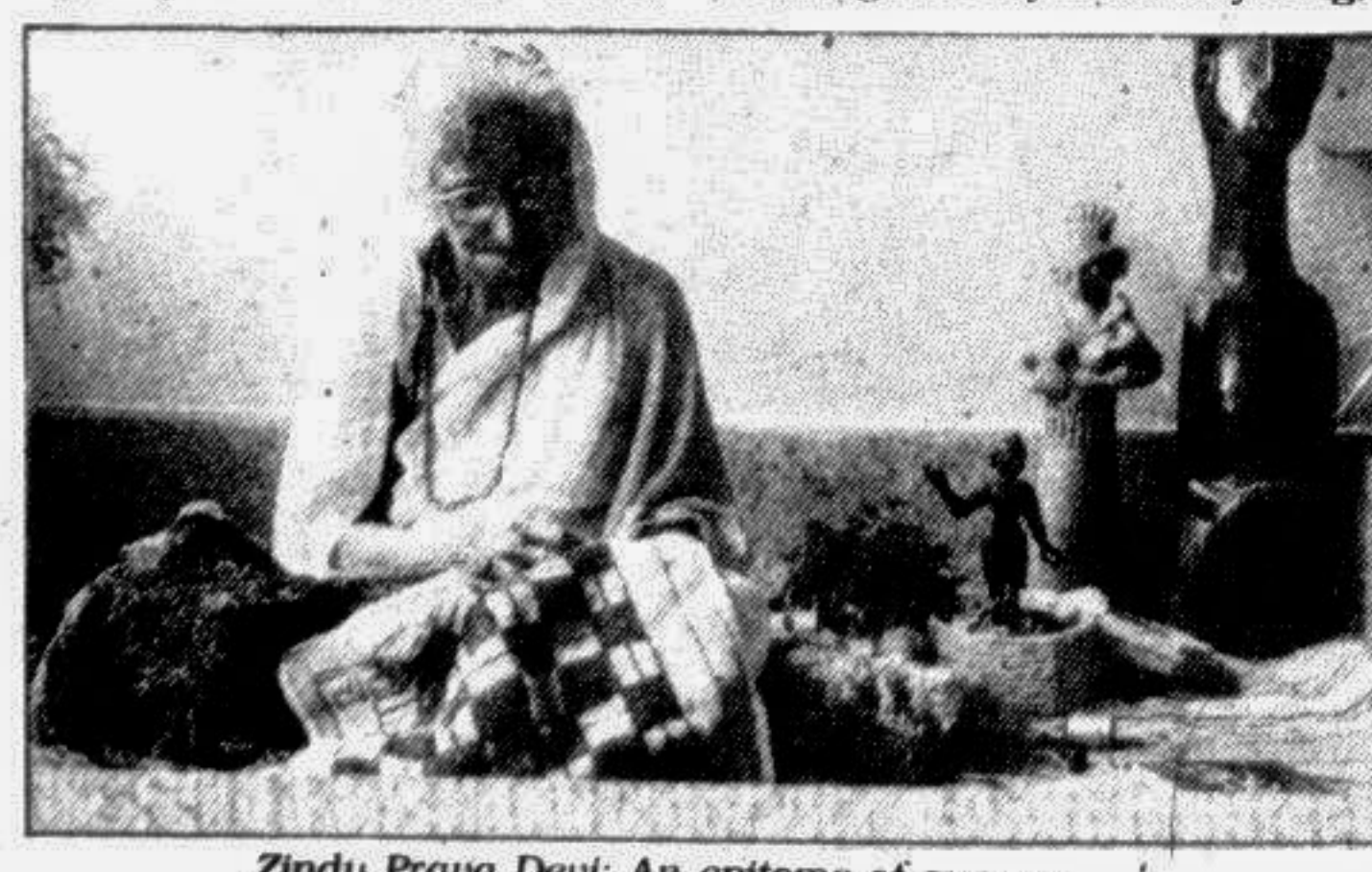
It was the British era then, and many Indian officers were posted in Chittagong as part of their services. Since we lived

in Chittagong where my father was an Ayurvedic doctor, we had many Indian neighbours. It was from their wives that I learnt these exclusive stitches of Lucknow, Shantipur, Bardhaman even Faridpur," she recalls.

Each place has its own individual stitch besides the already common ones that everybody knows. Zindu Devi, with her knowledge of general stitches and also of the special ones, combines her skill to make her work all the more special and spectacular. "It is like a second nature to me, like my daily chores this is also another everyday work that I must attend to. I do a little of stitching everyday since I learnt, even while my family was big and my kids all young,

she explains. Her themes are a combination, rather a mix and match of some of her own ideas and some shared ones. She collected and also made her own designs. She never stopped her embroidery works, because she did it solely to quench her own thirst to create. And never, till now, made her hobby or passion, as you may call it her profession. "I could never visualize earning money for what I do for myself. I easily gave away my works to friends and relatives but never sold one," she says.

Born in 1911, she is the sixth child of her parents. Zindu Devi earnestly believes that creativity or such imaginations that are not merely mechanical skills, cannot be replicated. So the question of mass production does not arise. She never took orders and was never interested in sales. "People will ask the same piece of work to be done in 15 pieces, I cannot do same designs repeatedly," she laughs about her impatience.



Zindu Prava Devi: An epitome of success

Search for Woman's Identity

What's in a Name?

by Anita Aparna Mueyed

SALEHA Begum was born in 1955 in Kishorgonj (in a small village located in the north of Dhaka) into a modest family of small farmers. Her parents Hasu Bepari and Bareker Ma, at first, were not willing to accept Saleha's first marriage proposal, but the *matabbors* of the village pressed them and managed to arrange and effect the marriage in a matter of three months. Not unlike most girls in Kishorgonj, Saleha got married at a very early age. She was fifteen when she was wedded to her thirty-five-year-old husband, Abdul Kader. Joined in matrimony to a wealthy man who already possessed a wife, known as *Joshna* Ma, and three children, (the eldest: *Joshna*, aged thirteen, and two others: *nine*, and *five* respectively), Saleha became his second, younger and thus more favorite wife.

When I asked her whether she had any objections to the union, she replied that girls were born to be married off; that only God was responsible for such couplings and that she, naturally, did not expect any one to seek her consent. Abdul Kader hence, wedded his fifteen-year-old wife with four saris, a gold necklace, two gold bracelets, and gold earrings. From that moment onwards Saleha became known as *Joshna* Ma. (In association with her husband's first child). Five years later, the younger *Joshna* Ma gave birth to a baby girl, *Roshon*. From here onwards she was denominated either *Roshon* Ma or *Joshna* Ma. Six years later, she gave birth to a son. Eight years later, Abdul Kader died leaving absolutely nothing behind for his two wives and their children. He left absolutely no money or shelter. With no other alternative, the two *shoteens* packed up their children and headed back to their patrilateral families... penniless.

In the meantime Hasu Bepari, *Roshon* Ma's father, had also passed away, and had left his sons in charge of the house and property. *Bareker* Ma, now widowed and dependent on her sons had been sheltered and taken care of, in rotation, by her three sons. Thus, helpless, with a daughter and a son, thirteen and eight respectively *Roshon* Ma appeared at *Barek*'s door. Her brothers, no doubt, wanted to marry her off as soon as she arrived. Yet, she adamantly refused and they remained unsuccessful in convincing her into another espousal. When I asked her for her reasons, she explained that the five candidates for marriage that her brothers had assembled, all disclaimed *Roshon*, perceived her as a burden, and insisted on leaving the girl behind. As a mother, she did not have the heart to leave the child on her own.

Meanwhile, *Joshna*, Abdul *Barek*'s eldest daughter had been married to *Shofor* Ali, but had recently left him in a state of fury, because he was unfaithful to her. He had married his mistress without her consent. Betrayed, young, spirited and impassioned *Joshna* sent out for the city

where she would rather face the uncertainties of urban life in the hopes of finding work, than to share a living with her husband and his second wife.

Stranded in a dead end and looking for a way out, both *Joshna* Ma and *Roshon* Ma were equally affected, as if enlightened and strengthened, by *Joshna*'s rebellion. She had provided them with a successful example; *Joshna*'s flight manifested itself as their alternative route. Thus *Roshon* Ma, led by her faithful *shoteen*, took *Roshon* and left the village in search for a job in the city. She left her boy with his uncles as a helping hand in exchange for a shelter. His other expenses, namely food and clothing, she promised to provide for. Today, *Roshon* Ma, approximately thirty-nine years of age works as a maid for a small family in Uttara. She works very hard and assiduously executes the household work assigned to her to save face and provide for her children as best as she can. Her daughter, who is now nineteen, recently married a young *darowan* of her choice, and *Roshon* Ma, herself funded the ceremony.



Roshon Ma: The way we name her

In Dhaka, *Joshna* worked as a maid, and managed to save a large portion of her earnings. Her husband hearing of her success, supplicated and begged her to return to him. His persevering cajoling along with outside pressures, her own dream to lead a family life and the wish to become socially worthy encouraged her to return. Today, *Joshna* hasn't got a penny left of her savings. Her husband managed to spend it all on himself and his favorite younger wife, *Joshna* has once again become dependent on her husband. She is presently pregnant and prays that God grants her a son.

This is the story of Saleha Begum and her relatives. Through her story we behold the evolution of three generations of Bengali village women, and discern a glimpse of village culture. A recurring aspect throughout Saleha's story is the denomination of woman by "mother of her child's first name" like *Barek* Ma, or *Joshna* Ma. Most of us never think twice about its significance and overlook its meaning. We seldom question why or how it, originated. In actuality, it stems from woman's social dispensability and thus, lack of personal identity. In a patriar-

chal society woman is either daughter-to-be-married, wife or mother.

Before marriage she is dependent socially and economically on her father. Young Saleha's identity is created and weighted by her "marriageability" which is mainly determined by her father's presence and who he symbolizes. Young, fatherless *Roshon*, has no social worth, she becomes a burden to every one and is virtually socially invisible. Her mother cannot remarry unless she abandons her, and her uncles refuse to shelter and provide for her.

After marriage, women's husband replaces the father's protective role. After Saleha's marriage, she literally loses her name, and along with it renounces her childhood and essentially puts aside the ties with her father's family. She emerges as the wife of Abdul Malek. Interestingly enough, Saleha becomes not only the wife of Abdul Malek, but complacently proffers herself as *Joshna* Ma. By doing so, she and Abdul Malek's first wife implicitly become clones. Both of them acquire the same title,



Roshon Ma: The way we name her

because their relation to their husband is identical. This example clearly depicts the centripetal importance of the male defining woman's identity. *Roshon*'s social worth is increased as she marries and begets herself an identity, the wife of Mohammad Rafiq. Unlike her mother, when *Joshna*'s husband remarries, she revolts and leaves him, putting in jeopardy her social standing and worth. One who leaves her husband seldom has a bright future. Not only is she considered a social disgrace, she is branded with all sorts of unpleasant stigmas, and inevitably comes across many obstacles.

In order for the male lineage to continue and families to survive, the bearing of children is of prime importance. Woman must give birth to male children; *banja* (barren), she is socially valueless. Thus, children perform a cardinal role in the establishment of women's identity. Only when Saleha begets her first child, she can be differentiated from her *shoteen*, as *Roshon* Ma. Since a woman is not perceived as a social adult, or an independent individual, a woman must produce a male child, for he will be responsible for her sustenance in her later

existence. A male offspring is a woman's asset. *Barek* Ma, the elder widow, is sustained by her sons. Without them she would be socially valueless, for she would have no one to turn to in her old age. This in turn would transform her life into one of struggle and misery. When asked how she plans to spend her retiring days, *Roshon* Ma says her son will take care of her, and she prays in gratitude to God for having given her a heavenly gift, her son, *Joshna*, who had left her husband and decided to make a living on her own, failed to do so and returned to her husband. Having a husband invariably makes a woman's life socially more important and acceptable, and most importantly, is the means of acquiring a son, the security net of woman's old age. Thus, since woman is perpetually dependent, women's personal identity is trivial. When I asked *Roshon* Ma if she knew her mother's name, she admitted that she did not. She explained that everyone called her *Barek* Ma and she thought that she was nameless never even occurred to her. Perhaps the fact that she, herself, has become nameless, has never occurred to her either.

Today, with the widespread acceptance of the education of women (in the urban middle class), and their entrance into the labor force, women are contributing economically and thus have become social adults. Yet, villagers are still reluctant to educate women, (notice that none of *Roshon* Ma's women relatives are educated). Also, villagers do not eagerly send their women to seek work in the city. Yet, where there was once no alternative, they now accept working as a way out of misery. Working women have earned and learned to stand on their own. *Roshon* Ma and *Joshna* Ma not only provide for themselves, but also for their children. They are independent, the bread-earners of their families. Nevertheless, *Roshon* Ma doesn't think much of her economic contribution to society or her social worth. She claims that she is "only a widow", and is thankful to have a son. She doesn't want to live with her daughter in old age (even if she is economically independent), and God forbid she does not want to live alone. According to the patriarchal values deeply ingrained in her, she must still remain bolstered and defined by the male figure. She must live with her son in order to secure her patriarchal social identity. Once she has enough money saved up, she plans to build a small house in the village where she (in old age) and her son will live with his family. The irony, here, is that although she, herself, is creating a situation in which her son is provided for, she still cannot identify herself as a social adult. To her, a woman is still either daughter-to-be-married, wife or mother, with prescribed obligations founded on dependency. Deviation from these responsibilities results in social disgrace. Paradoxically, most working women, although no longer dependent on their male counterparts, still think very much like *Roshon* Ma.

Bankim are my favourites. When I read their classics, a magnetic urge pulls me to the past. It's all so nostalgic," she says. She has written many verses just for her own pleasure as well.

A mother of eleven children, she was married in 1930. Zindu Devi is an epitome of success in every sense of the word. All her children are well placed and famous in their own line of work. Modest as she is, Zindu Devi's zest for life is a lesson to all her younger generations.

Even an Imam could not Escape a Fatwa

A fatwa issued by a senior superintendent of Bausmanir Madrasah has stopped Mirza Erfan Ali, an Imam, who is also a local school teacher, from leading prayers at the Shahabazar Jame Masjid and Idgha maidan in Bhurungamari union, Boladia thana, Kurigram. It has been recently reported that the fatwa declared the Imam's prayers to be "na jayez" because he had made himself impotent by undergoing vasectomy after having fathered 6 children.

That such fatwas are being

rejected by the public was demonstrated by a memorandum addressed to the DC, Chairman and Family Planning Department by a large number of the local residents. Imam Mirza Erfan Ali has himself registered a diary with the police.

This protest demonstrates that the public has rejected the attempt to impose irrational, arbitrary and unjust fatwas in the name of religion. The report seems to suggest that the ulterior motive behind the fatwa was related to mone-

tary benefits gained from controlling the mosque and the Idgha. The Imam has been harassed by the followers of the powerful Madrasah superintendent. Where the public has affirmed its faith in the rule of law, are the law enforcing agencies and administration likely to cave in to arbitrary impositions by the religious and locally powerful individuals?

Will they be willing to respect legal procedures and guarantee justice? — Ain O Salish Kendra