



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

The Sculptor called Novera

by Lala Rukh Selim

"Here is a spirit entirely and unqualifiably devoted to her art. It is an obsession, a fever, a consuming passion... She lives alone, in, and for her art."

— Abdus Salam, former Editor, Pakistan Observer

NOVERA Ahmed was unique in her time, as much for her creations as for the courageous, uncompromising way in which she chose to live her life. The first sculptor of East Pakistan, she gave Dhaka its first outdoor sculpture and the first frieze on a public monument. These facts alone certify that Novera Ahmed has a place — and a very prominent place — in the young and uneven history of our art.

Yet hers is a nebulous name in the Bangladeshi art world, rarely heard, and shrouded in mystery. All who met her were troubled and fascinated by her intensity and passion. Her abrupt appearance and equally

Dhaka society in our own day might treat a young woman in her thirties, living alone without a protective parent or brother in the background. What would people have said thirty years ago?

Novera was born in the 1930s in a family attuned to matters of culture. They lived in Calcutta where her father worked. There she learned to sing and dance as a child. Novera's mother indulged in the unusual hobby of clay mod-

During these student years, she had occasion to travel to Italy and work in Florence and Vienna. She could have stayed permanently back in London, but decided instead to return

materials locally available — such as cement, plaster, and wood — and to simplify her forms accordingly. Even with these new materials she received little by ways of technical help. Except for her commissioned pieces she could hardly have afforded to employ technical assistants to smooth her way. There was, in any case, the pressure of local opinion to the effect that an artist ought to create with her own hands, and that the employment of any intermediary would only destroy the originality of the creator's touch. (We were rather more ignorant in those days of the enormous technical force needed to successfully produce any large piece of sculpture.) These factors, among others, influenced the route that Novera's work would eventually follow.

Novera's sculptural conceptions were understandably flexible and impressionable. It is unlikely that she had much exposure to the contemporary sculptural trends of either India or the West prior to travelling for the first time to Europe. Her academic studies completed, fresh with the experience of experimenting with new ideas and new materials, she turned for inspiration to the work of Henry Moore and simultaneously to the folk sculptures of the sub-continent, familiar to her from childhood. In retrospect, this welding of two disparate traditions is not difficult to comprehend. Moore, after all, was already an overwhelming influence in the art world of London in the 1950s when she was studying there. Upon her return to the sub-continent, imbued with western contemporary ideas, she consciously devoted herself to the creation

of forms that incorporated her new theoretical knowledge with traditional forms and indigenous subject matter drawn directly from her own experience. Thus in 1958, on the lawn of the residence of an industrialist situated in Tejgaon, Novera gave East Pakistan its first modern outdoor sculpture. The work was entitled, *Cow and Two Figures*. The forms are closely related to Moore's outdoor figures, using flowing outlines and hollows to allow the inter play of light and space. The individuality of the work springs basically from the very different material she used. Constructed from cement upon an armature, the forms follow the armature's basic framework, lending them an angular and linear quality. Moore's work, in contrast, is voluminous and sensuous, having been either carved or cast and thus free of the same technical limitations.

Her struggle to help forge an identity through art was not confined, however, to a nostalgic recovery of a rural past. The violence of the language movement forced artists and intellectuals such as herself to take up the cause of imagining an as yet unknown future. Novera thus played a role in creating the only historical monument of importance to the Bengali nationalist movement, the Shaheed Minar. As an intimate friend of Hamidur Rahman, the man credited with its design, she had ambitious plans to decorate the minar with fountains and sculptures, plans that were never realized.

It was, perhaps, only a small part of a larger dream — a dream to decorate the city with the work of sculptors like

herself, and thereby deepen the experience of its inhabitants. "We, the sculptors," she once said, "should play a part in the planning of cities, in the building of hospitals, houses and factories, in fact in decorating every available space where people live and work... We must let people grow up with works of art playing a direct and positive part in everyday life. We must return to the concept of city planning which had inspired the growth of great cities of the world, giving it a new interpretation. We must ignite among our people the spark of curiosity about the inner visions, meanings and truths of life, which can only come by bringing art within the horizon of our city life."

In her friezes on the walls of the Dhaka University Library, forms are again taken from the figures of traditional folk sculpture in Bengal: the elephant, the horse, the cow and, of course, the people. She found in these forms a way to bring distinction and identity to her work, just as the Bengal School artists had sought to establish a link with their tradition by going back to classical forms and subjects. Her borrowings were not simplistic and imitative. She remoulded the traditional forms into essential, dramatic shapes and created compositions that are complex, decorative and individualized.

In the piece entitled *The Long Wait*, we see a totally different quality. There is no artificial intellectualization and conscious striving evident in the planning of the outdoor sculptures. The form is voluminous and rounded. The material of the work is not clear. If it was done in wood, the natural shape may have dictated the finished form. The female figure, as primitive as a fertility goddess of ancient times, is simplified to basics. The expression is one of stubborn determination. The round head with its slanted set of staring eyes and firm mouth expresses power and anger mixed with pain. It is almost a grimace. The arms joined in front enhance the expression of violence held in check. The procreative fecundity of the female being is shown in the full and clearly delineated breasts. The title, *The Long Wait* could either be a personal statement or, as Mervyn Marshall has put it an expression of "the longing, the despair, the resignation of a whole people waiting for deliverance."

In what we presume to be Novera's wood carving we see a

turned to Paris where she ultimately was to vanish from the company of her friends forever. It is not known if she still worked, but she refused to let people she knew into her life. Although she made occasional visits to the High Commission of Bangladesh after liberation, she remained completely unreachable, never leaving her own address behind so that others might trace her.

Novera's search for truth and her personal declaration of independence made her life a constant struggle. She cut all ties with her family, and eventually with her friends in order to preserve her autonomy and personal integrity. Yet the contradiction between her will to create independently and her rejection of those who might have provided her with the means to do so, was not one that she could sustain. To Novera, sculpture was a path, a way to find her own truth. She would not compromise the search for that truth by selling herself. She was ultimately unworried — unable to sell her work or otherwise dilute the purity of her ideals by putting her need to survive first. Her eccentricities and her Bohemian glamour were not a coat she wore. They were what she was. In our present world where artists innovate, emulate and cultivate eccentricities to disguise the pallid tastelessness of the creations, Novera's genuineness is like a breath of life. The tragedy is that the name of the first sculptor of the country has been effaced from our cultural life. What we are left with is an image of Novera that is almost as distant as a character from a romance, mythical and unreal. So little is known about her, and so little of her work seen or preserved, that it will take an act of commitment to retrieve her memory from the margins and place her at the centre of our history, where her life and her work properly stand.

— Courtesy ART, a quarterly journal.



sudden disappearance from the scene, her self-imposed and nearly absolute exile from her peers — not to mention her black attire, distinctive make up, and striking beauty — all contributed to this exotic and alluring aura. Ultimately, she was compelled to sever her ties with her family in order to jealously guard her independence. She survived only because she refused to be social — save for a tight-knit, waterproof circle of close friends. These allies offered her support, but more importantly, the strove to understand what society refused to accept about the way of life she chose.

In retrospect, it seems clear enough why Novera had all the quirks and eccentricities associated with the Bohemian artist. Imagine how

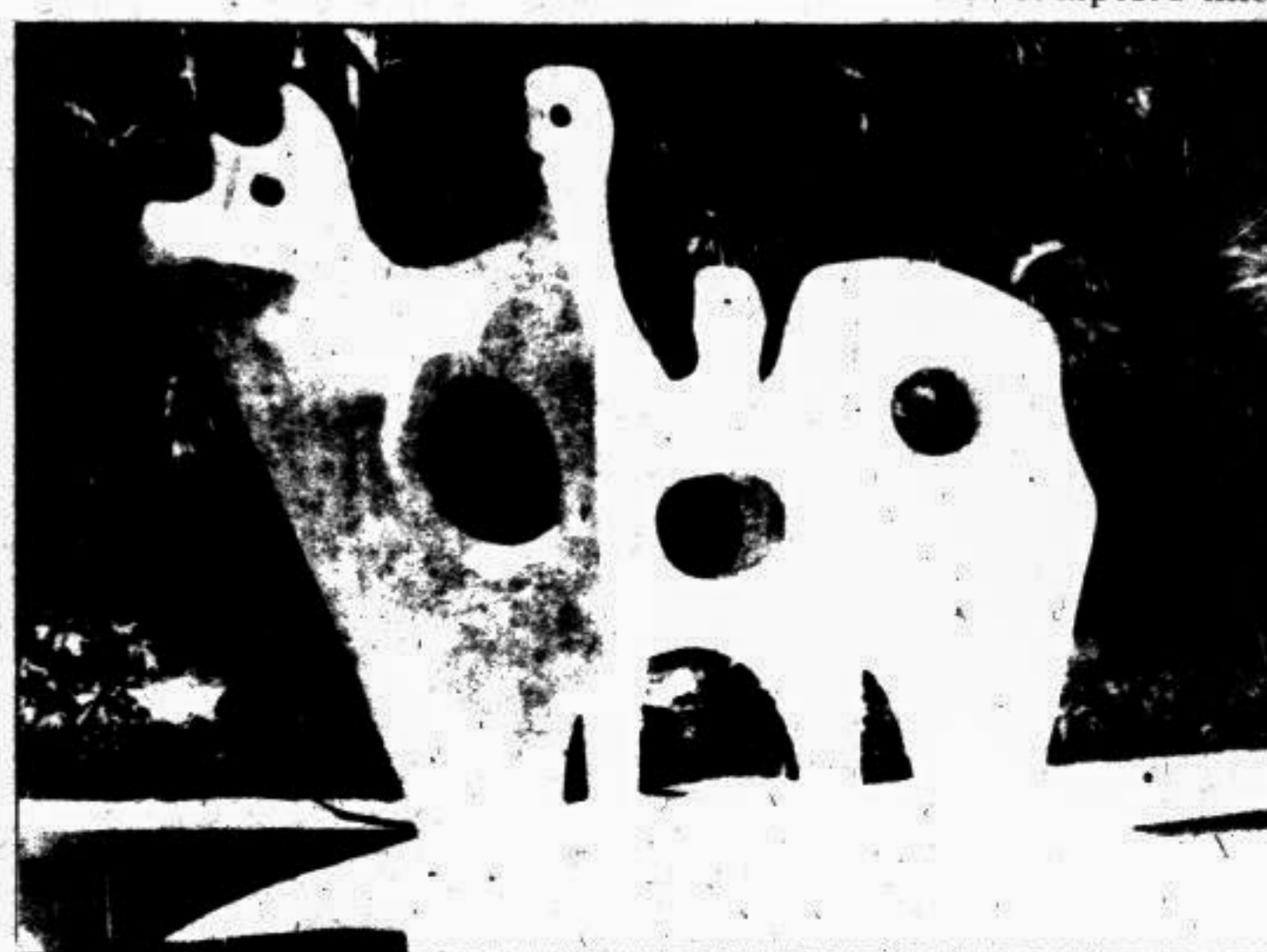
elling, an activity that must have suggested the calling that Novera would eventually chose. With the partition of Bengal, Novera's family moved to Chittagong, where sometime in the late 1950s, she was married to an appropriate suitor. The marriage was not to Novera's liking and, true to her rebellious spirit, she ran away to London where her sister was then living. There she was admitted to the Camberwell School of Arts to study sculpture — a decidedly "unfeminine" occupation, in the view of many.

At Camberwell she was the student of Sir Jacob Epstein. We do not know how well she pleased her academy with her exercises but we do know that she completed her courses there and obtained the national diploma in Sculpture.

to her homeland, with her friend, the painter Hamidur Rahman. Once home, she was to face a formidable set of challenges. There was neither money for the arts in East Pakistan, nor a society amenable to people who chose to tread their own path. Then, as now, sculpture was strongly frowned upon as an un-Islamic art form.

The challenges were also of a technical nature. At Camberwell, Novera had been protected, having had the luxury to make academic studies from live models using clay, and casting in metal. The situation was drastically different in East Pakistan. There were no casting facilities accessible to her and she encountered enormous difficulties in obtaining models for her work.

In the end, she had to accommodate herself to those



Cow and Two Figures
An open air sculpture on the lawn of a private residence in Dhaka. — Photo Md Khasru



The editors would like to express their grateful thanks to ART, a quarterly journal, for allowing us to reprint this special piece on Novera Ahmed.

Hard Days are over, I don't Go to the Money-lender Any More

Momena (32) of Ghior, Manikgonj, narrates her case of overcoming the odds.

EIGHTEEN years ago, at the age of 14, I got married to one Khoer Uddin, a mason, according to my parents' wish.

After the wedding, I came to Tangail at my in-laws house as a new bride. They accepted

me heartily, but only for a few days. As I was the youngest child of my parents I could not cook very well. Mother-in-law blamed me: "She cannot do anything for the family's betterment" i.e. I could not help prepare bamboo goods, their

family trade. Yet I had not enough time for finishing the huge household works.

One day she said to Khoer, "Listen Khoka, beauty is not everything. It is essential to have some qualities also. This bride is not fit for us and you should take second wife. I myself would choose the bride. And she pressed Khoer for several times.

My husband did not agree. He along with me silently bore all the insults. By that time my first daughter Shila took birth. When she was six months old, conflicting over the same issue my husband decided to leave the house. From that day we have been at Ghior. My mother-in-law comes every now and then but we never go to the mother-in-law's house.

At Ghior my husband was the only bread-winner. Moreover, he did not find work everyday. He had to be without work at least for four months in a year. So our days passed in misery and hardship often he could scarcely manage the daily meal and sometimes we had to starve, in the meantime two more children were born to us.

Observing our poverty-stricken status my mother helped me to learn making bamboo handicraft items such as *mora* (a bamboo made seat), mats, etc. But without any capital I could do nothing. In that miserable condition Anu Apa suggested me to join the ASA (Association for Social Advancement) group. She said, "If you abide by all rules and regulations, the samity will provide you a credit". This information inspired me. Discussing with my husband, I enrolled my name in the group on 25th March '86. I started attending the meeting with savings regularly. After the flood of 1989 the group gave us four maunds of paddy and some pulses. I

started paddy husking business with that. The days were passing with our joint income but the reality was another.

All my children were regular students. Shila was in class five. Her father arranged her marriage and spent all the savings in the ceremony. Some days later he fell sick himself. At first he was under the treatment of a *Kabiraj* (village doctor). But day after day he looked anaemic and was transferred to the hospital. After one and half months he passed away.

I became moneyless. His departure threw the family into the dark. Finding no other way we stayed about four months in my sister's and brother's houses. From my sister I took some paddy (40 kg.), rice (ten kg) and one hundred taka. The bamboo handicraft work was restarted with that. As it was, too negligible an amount to carry on a business, I brought Tk 1,000/- from a money lender at 10% interest (monthly) the interest we had little income left. Good food was out of question. Getting a meal was always a battle and starvation became our regular practice.

At such a time of crisis Anu Apa (the ASA worker) came again with the promise of hope. She said "The samity will provide you a loan." It was totally unbelievable to me, but I attended the ASA office on the prescribed day and I got Tk. 1,000/-. My feeling was simply inexpressible.

Next day I bought some bamboo and started to make 'kula, dala, mora', etc. Shima always assisted me. We became habituated with that craft and the days were passing by. We repaid the money lender's money and gradually big buyers began to come to my house for those things. We could make at

least four 'mora' and three 'kula' two days and could earn Tk. 55/- which indicates our weekly income at Tk 165/- = (Tk. 55x3).

The whole family expenditure and also the payment of instalments were carried on with that. When all instalments were complete, I had a capital of six hundred taka. After that, the samity gave me Tk. 2,000/- as second term credit. After repaying the total instalments I could save almost the whole capital and received Tk. 4,000/- as a third term loan. By this time all the instalments were repaid except only three.

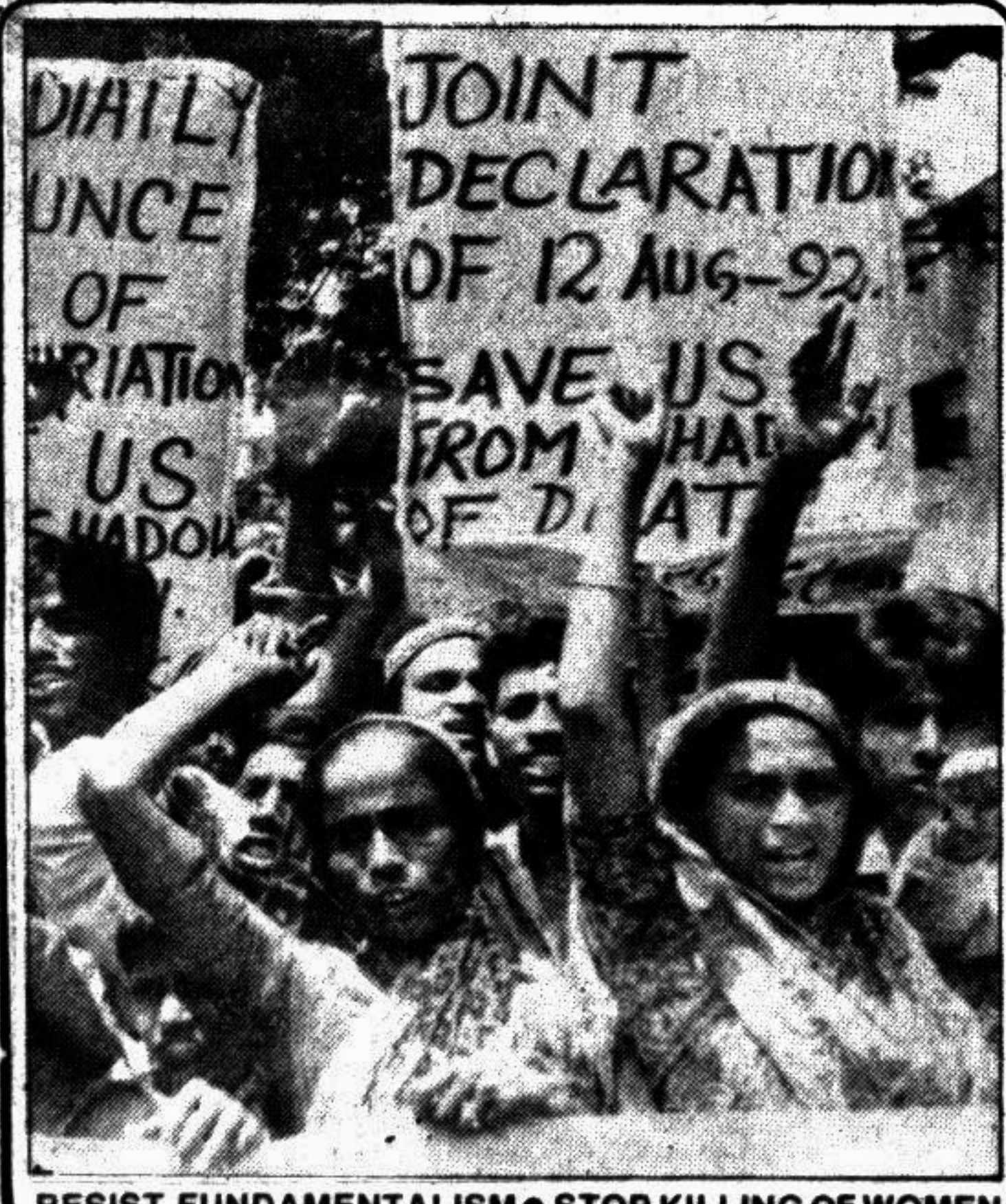
With the generations of income the status of the family has been upgraded to a considerable extent. I have learnt to sign my name from the samity and I possess a desire to educate my children. It is my greatest regret that I had to stop Shima's study. The only

pleasure to me is that my son continues his study. We became much benefited being involved in the group. I became aware about health, environment and women's rights. Also I learnt simple sums and established myself as a sort of business woman. I have also purchased a cot and my *sarwhut* has turned into a tin-shed house. I have savings for Shima's marriage. Our days of hunger and starvation have come to an end.

Normally the business is dull in the rainy season and my personal savings remain not so large. But in time these would increase substantially which one day will help me to set up a big business. I hope to build a water sealed latrine erect a big house, sink a tube-well for the family. Of course to improve the condition, hard work, self confidence and determination are needed. — ASA case study



Beginning to learn the bamboo craft



RESIST FUNDAMENTALISM • STOP KILLING OF WOMEN