



Batiaghata: Women Rise Against Feudal Oppression

by Hasnat Kabir Kallol

An old woman aged 80 was severely beaten, the sari of a young girl was torn and a woman kicked out of the river Rupsha.

BATIAGHATA is not such a famous or well-known place that one would hear its name and recognize it immediately. But it is definitely a part of Bangladesh. Batiaghata is a thana under Khulna district. But some unexpected incidents and facts have brought it to public attention, mainly through continual press coverage. The prevailing situation in this thana raises some basic questions in the mind of the inhabitants of Batiaghata — is this region a part of Bangladesh? If so, then why is everything hostile here? The local civil and police administration are still playing a role contrary to the public policy and justice. Where they are subjected to maintain neutrality, they are doing everything in favour of a section of people who are the owners of various shrimp fields (owners are popularly known as gher maliks).

In greater Khulna region unexpected and inhuman happenings out from shrimp cultivation, specially unplanned and illegal cultivation, now have become normal. Rather it is considered abnormal when no such events have occurred. The southern part of Bangladesh specially Khulna-region is badly affected with terrorism. The law and order situation in the area is aggravating day by day as hired goons of the gher owners resort to terrorism. Poor villagers whose lands are attached to the shrimp fields by force, and not with their consent are very likely to suffer mental and physical trauma. From the beginning, ever since such inhuman forcible shrimp cultivation by the outsiders, was started, the whole situation has been slowly but surely deteriorating.

In Batiaghata, the total amount of shrimp fields is about to 8000 acre. 5000 acre of the said amount is under Balladangi, Amirpur and Vandercot Union Parishad. Most shrimp cultivators have no licence. In Batiaghata, at this three union parishad, there is no control prevailing over the shrimp field and cultivation of the thana shrimp cultivation control committee. Gher owners do not maintain any administrative procedure or rules.

There is no national policy of government on shrimp cultivation. There are only some local rules (not statutory laws, only administrative orders) regarding shrimp cultivation. But even those are not followed at all. Local thana administration also recognises this.

Our constitution declares that everyone is equal before the law. But Batiaghata? It is in actuality, a deserted island. Might is right here. The villagers are deprived of their minimum basic human rights. Unplanned shrimp cultivation is not only destroying environment but also creating vague law and order situation. Owners of shrimp gher are violating human rights. And it becomes a regular practice. The shrimp cultivation has been started desertification process in the southern dis-

tricts unplanned shrimp gher destroys ecological balance of the whole area. Many tress have been destroyed. Survival of livestock is at stake and salinity is destroying soil fertility. But nobody of any quarter pay any real and continual attention to this alarming situation.

From Korunamoye to Jaber Sheikh: Who is the next target?

In 7th, 1990 shrimp cultivator and gher owner and one of the richest persons of the Pikeghacha union (polder No. 22) Mr Wazed Ali's gang attacked an area of polder No 22 to establish gher. Local men and women unitedly resisted

cases against them by the police and gher owners gathered in their village from morning. (In absence of the males, the females of the villages are maintaining some type of normality or at least trying to do so even now). At 10 AM suddenly everyone became terrified. Constable Selim with some other unknown person (may be police) attacked the villagers, brutally, in civil dress. As a result, an old woman aged 80, was severely beaten. The sari of a young girl was torn by the said group. A woman was kicked out to the river Rupsha. Such inhuman and merciless incidents were not for the first time in 7th April. Before 7th April, there were several



them. A woman called Korunamoye Sarder died as a result of their ruthless and random firing.

Sheikh Jaber Ali, (32), an Union Council member of No 7 Amirpur union under Batiaghata Police Station died on September 21 at Dhaka Medical College Hospital after he sustained injuries from a bomb attack allegedly by local and Khulna Jatio Party goons who own a number of large shrimp fields.

Jaber Ali, son of Afsar Ali of Karer Dhon Village (also known as Korra to the locals) is one of three murdered in shrimp fields in greater Khulna district. Anybody who goes against the gher owners, he has to pay a heavy price which is generally his life. Panic has gripped the entire locality. Now a general question rises — who is the next target of the gher owners after Korunamoye and Jaber Sheikh?

The problem is lack of minimum basic human rights.

Date line 7th April, 1995. Place: Jhalbari Village. Most of the male-villagers who have been turned into absconders, following the filing of several

instances of inhuman and barbaric happenings caused by the gher owners and their hired mastans.

While supporters of the women's movement are demanding equal rights for women, in Batiaghata an old woman aged eighty, a 24 year young woman and 12 year old girl are severely harassed/injured for want of minimum basic human rights. Equal rights is out of their imagination. They are struggling for the fundamental right to live with dignity.

Pretilatas are rising

After the death of Jaber Sheikh and the corpse was brought to the locality, the locals specially women have demonstrated their strong protest and hostility to non-local shrimp cultivators. They have taken possession of almost all gher owned by the non-locals and are set to resist the illegal shrimp cultivators at any cost.

The death of Jaber Sheikh has greatly moved the people of Batiaghata thana specially the people of No. 7 Amirpur Union and given them the impetus to flatly go against absentee gher organizers.

The striking point of the anti-shrimp cultivation mov-

ment is the vast participation of women. The social structure of these villages are very conservative. The rate of literacy among them is very low. But inspite of all that stands against them, the women of the Batiaghata thana are rising. The backward social structure has been changing to a new horizon. Women are no longer unconscious about their economic fate and social repression. The present movement against the gher organizers and outrageous local police administration makes them conscious, united and determined to reach their desired goal. No doubt it is an remarkable advancement when risk of fundamentalism and fatwabazi are attempting to suppress women countrywide. After the death of Jaber Sheikh, the women of Karer Dhon and Jhalbari village has made all out movement against the culprits and they grew resistances several times, even with their daily necessities like jhata.

Her name is Amina Khatun, she lives in Karer Dhon. Her

age is according to her information, any age from twenty to twenty-five. Amina with other village women grew resistance with 'jhata'. This writer asked Amina the cause of her participation in the movement in such a courageous way. This is a question of our survival. There is very few males in the village now. Most of them have absconded. The 'mastans' threaten us, the police suppresses us in many ways. How can we live if we do not raise our voice against the gher organizers, their gang and the outrageous police, an angry Amina replied.

"You, give me an answer of a question which we can not solve. Is it (Batiaghata-writer) is a part of Bangladesh or not? If not, I need not want to get any answer. But if this is a part of Bangladesh, then my dear son please tell me why such things are happening?" An elderly Naimura Begum aged 62 suddenly asked me the question which I could not answer.

Let us hope we will have an answer to the question, soon.

(The writer is the executive member of Law Review, University Student, Centre for Legal Research).

Conference to Focus on Violence

By Judy Aita

USIA United Nations Correspondent

In the United States one woman is physically abused every eight seconds. In Peru 70 per cent of all crimes reported to police are of women beaten by their husbands. In Norway 25 per cent of female gynecological patients have been sexually abused by their partners. In the biggest slum in Bangkok, Thailand, 50 per cent of married women are beaten regularly. Those statistics, compiled by the Pacific Institute for Women's Health, are for the year 1990, but violence against women is as old as civilization. Women of all ages everywhere have been and continue to be victims of violence. However, in most societies, until very recently, the problem has been tolerated and in some cases condoned, covered by a veil of secrecy and denial.

It wasn't until the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi that a group of American women lobbied to have the problem placed on the international agenda. For the first time an official UN document, entitled "Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000," shed light on the staggering pervasiveness of the problem; labeled violence against women "a major obstacle" to women's achievement of equality, development and peace; and called for legal measures to prevent gender-based violence.

Now, as preparations are being completed for the final women's conference of the 20th century, violence against women is one of the major issues on the agenda.

Maria Antonietta Berrozabal, a community activist and presidential appointee on the US delegation to the conference, says that violence against women is "one of the overarching issues" that will be addressed when the Fourth World Conference on Women convenes in Beijing in September. "It doesn't matter what region of the world, it is a problem to one degree or another."

Berrozabal said in a recent interview that at preparatory meetings she attended in Latin America, as well as for the US delegation, violence against women has become "our number one issue."

The issue has "always been there," she continued, "in some cultures to a greater extent than others; only now women have (seen) enough written about it and it's in the news media. It's now out in public so women are apt to acknowledge it and aim to do something about it."

Delegates to the conference have prepared a "Platform for Action" that they hope to have adopted at the conference, which will be held from September 4 to 15. The platform identifies 11 critical areas that are obstacles to the advancement of women. Violence against women is one of the key areas addressed.

The Platform for Action acknowledges that in all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, "women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse which cuts across lines of income, class and culture."

The term "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life," the platform reads.

It specifically cites types of abuse — including the sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, sexual harassment, intimidation at work or school, and forced prostitution.

The platform recommends that governments not invoke any customs, tradition or religious considerations to avoid their obligation to protect women from acts of violence; that they enact or reinforce penal, civil, labour and administrative sanctions in domestic legislation to punish and redress the wrongs caused to women and girls; and that they provide women who are subjected to violence with access to judicial process to remedy the harm they have suffered.

Governments and other groups are encouraged to provide shelters and relief for battered women and girls, to support the initiatives of women's organizations to raise awareness of the issue of violence against women, and to develop programs to eliminate sexual harassment and other forms of violence in schools, the workplace and elsewhere.

Berrozabal, who is active in politics and community projects in her town of San Antonio, Texas, said that one of the benefits of the Women's Conference and its preparatory session is that the meetings bring into focus "the depth, the gravity of the violations which are different from region to region and from culture to culture" and put the problem in a "global perspective."

Delegates have had to "deal with some areas of the world where what is being done to women and little girls that is violent is unimaginable to some of us, absolutely unimaginable," she said.

"So when we make a statement in the (Platform for Action) that we must combat and eradicate all forms of violence against women — that's a major statement; that's powerful statement, particularly in some areas where perhaps women's voices are not valued that much," Berrozabal maintained.

A 1993 World Bank report estimated that in industrialized countries, rape and domestic violence take away almost one year in every five healthy years of life of women aged 15 to 44. The World Health Organization (WHO) points out that violence may lead to depression, drug or alcohol abuse, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, suicide and death.

According to UN documents prepared for the conference, the statistics show an alarming variety and prevalence of violence against women. For instance, in Barbados one woman in

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

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BANGLADESH MAHILA PARISHAD

three reports being sexually abused during childhood or adolescence. In India, where "bride burning" is a known practice, official police records show 4,835 women were killed in 1990 due to the failure of their families to meet demands for money and goods. Globally, at least two million girls a year experience genital mutilation. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, 70 per cent of all reported cases of violence against women took place in the home. In Canada, 62 per cent of women murdered in 1987 died at the hands of their spouses.

Berrozabal pointed out that there has been an evolution, if not a revolution, in attempting to put an end to the problem.

The first step in some countries, as in the United States, is to acknowledge it — educate women that it exists and what it is," she said. "For example, in our own country we know that when a young woman is in a home where the father batters the wife — her mother — she grows up thinking that's normal. We have had to educate ourselves on the fact there are some things you don't tolerate as a woman. That's the first step."

The second step, Berrozabal said, "is to have a public acknowledgement that it is happening. The next one is to have the women themselves say it, name it, and then work to eradicate it, and finally, to have the governments accept those voices and fund programs that will actually take care of it."

Berrozabal noted that in the past 15 years the number of recorded rapes has continued to increase. "Then the question is: are there more rapes or is it just women now report them? My own opinion," she said, "is that probably they have been there all along."

Berrozabal said that she has been "impressed, motivated, and inspired by the programs of the women in Latin America. Most of the governments have sponsored programs for women against violence." She said that she took home to Texas — where there is a coalition of women's organization that have been working on the issue of violence against women for several years — many posters and booklets from Ecuador, Argentina and Colombia.

The Platform for Action will be adopted, she predicted. It will be "one more step on the way to women's empowerment around the world." But, she said, the most important part of the Fourth International Women's Conference is the tremendous impact "of women speaking for themselves" and having a forum where that voice is honoured.

Berrozabal said that she is heading to Beijing inspired "with the hope in the voices of the women from all over the world from little villages, urban areas, from indigenous communities ... that change will happen as the voices of those women get very loud."

"I never, never underestimate the tremendous power of the voices of women," she said.

Women's rights set back

by Mounir B Abboud

legal situation nor did it represent an addition to the personal status law. "The ruling merely confirmed the man's right to remarry. It is based on the Constitution which stipulates that Sharia is the main source of legislation. This ruling is in accordance with the Sharia."

Islamic writer Safinaz Kazem holds a different view. "Just as the Qur'an allows a

man to marry up to four wives, it also provides preconditions." She referred to a Qur'anic verse which says that unless a man deals with his wives equally, he should content himself with one wife. "You cannot take one part of the Qur'an and ignore the other

stitutional Court not only confirmed the personal status law but "represented an attempt by the reactionary extremist trend to use this law to impose their views on society."

The ruling, she added, "posed a threat by establishing a precedent for many women

issued by Education Minister Hussein Kamel Bahaeddin.

The decree, which required parental approval if a girl wished to wear the veil to

school, had angered both radical and conservative Islamic quarters. One group denounced it as a violation of Islamic Sharia, declaring it "made disobedience to what God ordained."

On behalf of 50 parents, 10 Islamic lawyers filed a lawsuit

seeking the decree's abrogation. In its order, the three-member court under presiding judge Abdel Aziz Hamada said: "Regulating public freedoms can be done only by means of a law. These freedoms include personal freedom which Article 41 of the Constitution described as an inviolate natural right."

The court pointed out that the current education law does not include any provision specifying school uniforms and does not authorize the Education Minister to do so. "Consequently, the Minister's decree amounted to an encroachment on the powers of the legislative authority," the court said.

Shouts of "Allahu Akbar (God is great)" resounded from bearded Islamists in a courtroom as soon as the judge pronounced his verdict. Schoolgirls wearing the veil or the khimar (a veil reaching down to the waist) beamed.

Said lawyer Abdel Hattim Mandour: "This is a blow in the face of the government. We thank the Minister of Education for pushing the people to speak out by issuing this decree."

The court order may be contested within 30 days, but the decree will remain frozen according to the lawyer. — Depthnews Asia

BEIRUT (Depthnews) — Advocates of conservative Islamic doctrine here claimed recently two legal victories — one on polygamy and another on the wearing of veils by female students.

Feminist circles have reacted angrily to a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court affirming a man's right to marry up to four wives.

The Court under Judge Awad El Morr ruled that a wife filing for divorce because her husband took a second wife has to prove to the judge that she suffered material or psychological hardship because of the husband's action. Otherwise she will not be eligible for divorce.

Legal experts explained that under a personal status law passed in 1979, a wife was entitled to automatic divorce — provided she applied for it — if her husband took a second wife. But this law was amended in 1985 with the additional provision about the resulting "harm".

Judge El Morr ruled that "every man has the right to marry up to four wives in accordance with the clear texts of the Qur'an (Islam's holy book) which permit polygamy." The wife therefore has no right to seek divorce simply because her husband remarried — the second marriage does not by itself constitute harm even if the first wife re-



The new court ruling is an 'attempt by the reactionary extremist trend to impose their views on society'

parts," she said. There is also an Islamic tradition, she added, that a woman is entitled to a divorce for the mere fact that she dislikes her husband, provided she renounces her rights as a divorcee such as the right to alimony. "This Islamic licence has been in force since the days of the Prophet himself," she said, when he granted divorce to a woman with this complaint "on the condition that she did not claim her rights."

Hala Shukrallah of the New Women's Studies Centre said the ruling passed by the Con-



নূরজাহান ফিরোজা কদবানু
হত্যাকারী ফতোয়াবাজদের
প্রতিহত করুন