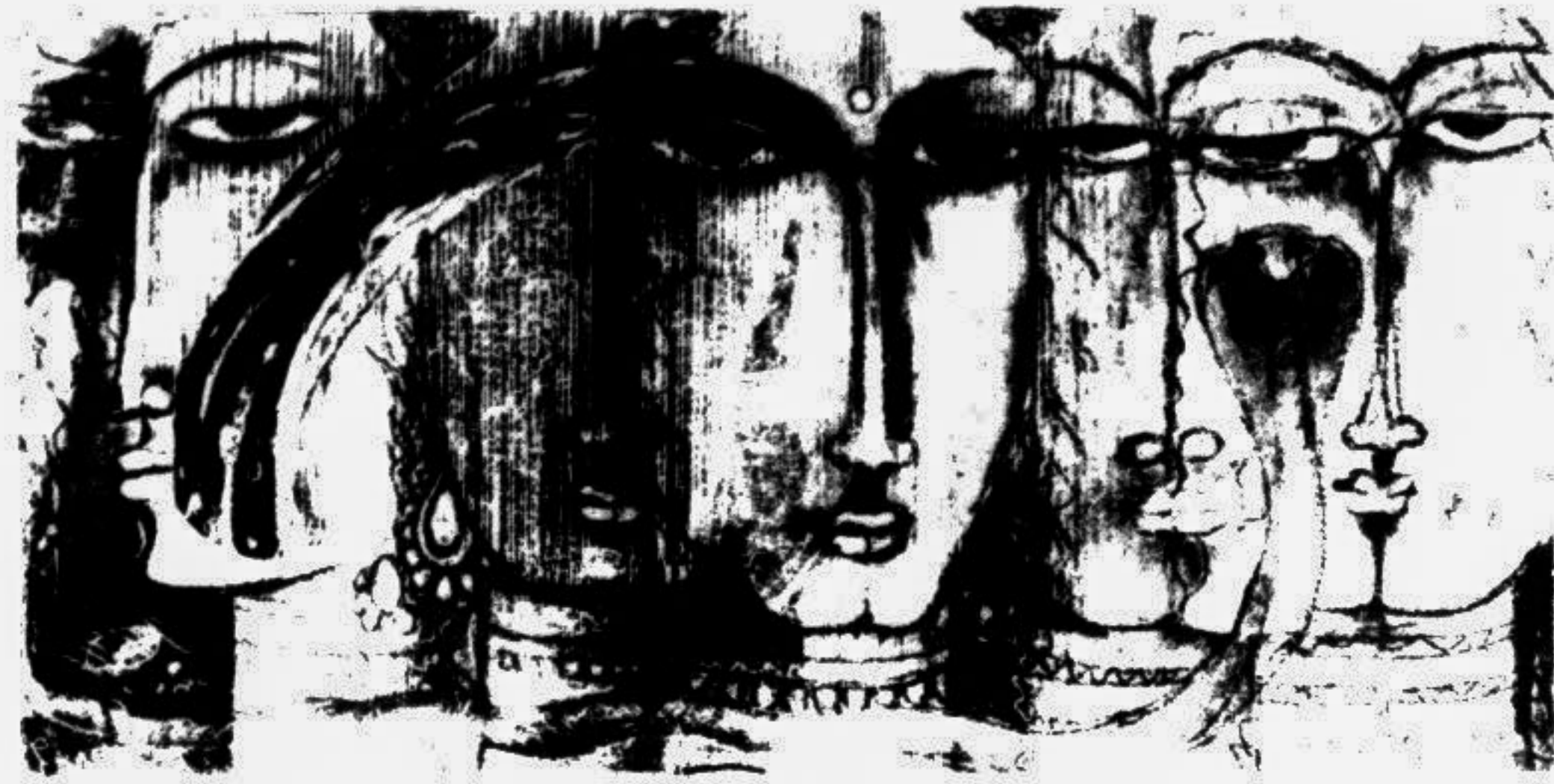


# Remember Yasmin, Every Month

by Farida Akhter

**T**HIS is a reminder. On 24th August, in the early morning Yasmin's dead body was found on the road side near Dash Mile on the way to Dinajpur. She was coming from Dhaka by a night coach to see her mother, Sharifa Begum. She got down at Dash Mile to take another bus to reach her village home. A police van came and took her claiming that they would take her safely to her destination. Yasmin never reached her village to see her mother. Yasmin was not at all safe in the van. The post mortem report showed that she was raped and killed. The government, however, tried to hide the fault of the police, by issuing a false press note to say that Yasmin actually jumped from the police van. But the question is, why Yasmin had to jump from the van?

The people did not accept this atrocity of police. Therefore, they protested against this violence. Seven people were killed in the firing by police, hundred others were injured. The protest continued in Dinajpur. Women's organisations, lawyers' associations, development organisations and various political parties joined the people of Dinajpur. The protest was also raised in Dhaka by Sammilita Nari Samaj, a collective of women's organisations and development and human rights organisations. They demanded trial of Yasmin's rape and killing. They demanded to the Prime Minister the removal of the Home Minister and punishment of all those in administration who were responsible for the incidents afterwards. The Sammilita Nari Samaj brought out processions on 4th September and on 12, September protesting against Yasmin's rape and killing. On 12th September, police lathicharged on the women's procession.



Sketch, 'Faces of Women' — Courtesy: Farzana Azim Kanta

Members of women's and human rights organisations visited Dinajpur and expressed their solidarity with the movement initiated there. Sharifa Begum, though she is shocked at the death of her daughter, has been demanding the trial of the police who have raped and killed her daughter. She does not want any monetary compensation nor any help in any other form. The Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia has visited and paid a cheque of Tk. 1 lakh to her. She has also assured Sharifa Begum about the trial of the accused police.

The Sammilita Nari Samaj has brought a torch procession at night on 23rd September. This procession is in the demand of security of women at night. We remember the case of a girl picked by police on 24th August in Dhaka on the grounds that she was suspected to be a prostitute. We ask, whether police have the right to pick up any woman in their van, even if they think she is a prostitute. Whether police have any authority to decide who is a prostitute, and who is not? The incidence of the rape and murder of Yasmin has much relevance to this question of how police take

such decisions and on what grounds they can pick up any woman in their van? We want to raise these issues, because women's public lives are at danger because of police interventions.

We do not want to say that the police as a law enforcing agency necessarily against women's security, but the interpretations of law by police according to their own will must have some restrictions, so that they themselves do not become the violators of law. We are more surprised when the Ministry of Home tries to defend the violations of police instead of taking a stand in favour of the people. This attitude of the Ministry of Home and the associated administrative bodies poses a threat to democracy. Police become the supreme power even if they commit crime.

The trial of police and the associated departments in Dinajpur such as the District Commissioner is of utmost necessity in order to assure that the law enforcing agencies are meant to protect people, not to kill them. We have repeatedly urged the Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia to take personal initiatives into the matter instead of relying on what the administration is telling her. As she has committed herself to safeguard the women's rights in her country, while she was at the Fourth World Women Conference, this is the right time to respond to a very critical question of women's security.

We also urge the political parties not to use the issue of Yasmin's rape and murder as an anti-BNP propaganda. This is a clear case of atrocity of police administration. Therefore, it must be addressed from this point of view only.

# Does A Wife's Nagging Do A Man Good?

**I**S a wife that nags occasionally better than no wife at all? A University of Chicago researcher believes men should think so. In a fascinating speech before the Population Association of America earlier this year, demographer Linda Waite reported on a wide range of studies showing that married men typically live longer and enjoy significantly better health than unmarried men.

In fact, Waite says that, on average, a man's lifespan is shortened more by being unmarried than by being poor, overweight, or having heart disease.

Divorced men are particularly likely to experience

encourages self-regulation — someone who nags them."

Yikes. Waite's suggestion that a wife's nagging does a man good is every husband's worst nightmare. While most men probably would admit that it is beneficial to have a wife who gently encourages them to lay off the red meat or to ease up on the accelerator, the last thing most men want is an Open Season declared for the constant hounding normally associated with the term "nagging." (That noise you hear is the sound of men climbing onto the corner of their roofs — the place King Solomon said he'd rather live "than in a house with a quarrelsome woman.")

by William R. Mattox, Jr

health problems. When compared to married men, divorced males are twice as likely to die prematurely from hypertension, four times as likely to die prematurely from throat cancer, and seven times as likely to die prematurely from pneumonia.

Divorced men also have significantly higher rates of depression, substance abuse, auto accidents, and suicide. "Being divorced and a non-smoker is only slightly less dangerous than smoking a pack or more a day and staying married," observes David Larson of the National Institute for Healthcare Research.

Why does marriage offer

I doubt Waite really wants women to pester their husbands mercilessly. Or for men to start climbing onto their roofs.

Waite's chief aim is not to promote nagging but to heighten public awareness that research shows married people live longer and enjoy better health. She thinks such findings need the same sort of public attention that has been given research on the health consequences of behaviours like cigarette smoking and exercise — especially since it is increasingly clear that marriage affects health more than health affects marriage.

As with all research of this kind, it is important to

## LETTER FROM HARVARD

# Multi-culturalism and the Need for Commonality

**A**T Harvard, fall has always been my favorite season. After the hot and muggy summer, the weather becomes cooler, the leaves begin to turn color, and the students return to college, an endless cycle from time immemorial, or at least since 1636. Harvard bustles with activity, wide eyed eager freshmen and men accompanied by their proud parents move in to the dormitories, watched by coolly non-chalant upper class undergraduates and graduates. There is an air of anticipation, a certain sense of excitement, for a new academic year is beginning.

It is exactly two decades since I arrived at Harvard as a freshman from Bangladesh. Much has changed, and much remained the same. In 1975 I came as a young student, overawed by the possibilities and the potential, the feast of opportunities awaiting me in one of the greatest universities in the world. In 1995, I am returning as a member of the faculty, as an assistant professor of demography, once again a member of the Harvard community, but with a different vantage point, a different set of responsibilities.

The thing that strikes me the most is how the student body has changed in the intervening twenty years. When I was an undergraduate, white males dominated the scene. This year 47% of the entering class at Harvard College are women, and all ethnic groups are represented fairly substantially, particularly Asian-Americans. The graduate schools, always more diverse in terms of their student body than the college have also become less male centered and also more international. Harvard perhaps more so than ever before remains a Mecca for the best and the brightest from all over the world.

The changing demographic makeup of the students at Harvard is reflected in an ongoing passionate debate about multi-culturalism and the need for commonality. What is the core of knowledge that undergraduates should acquire, the essence of what it means to be educated? These are of course issues which extend beyond Harvard itself, but given its stature, the Harvard experience has received the most scrutiny.

In years past the curriculum reflected a barely diluted Euro-centrism. With the literature, philosophy, history and politics of the west holding sway. I vividly remember reading Shakespeare, Dante, Aristotle, Plato, Nietzsche, Freud and Marx. I waxed eloquently

about the world (i.e. Europe and America) between the Wars (the First and the Second), the Russian Revolution, and the barbarity of the Japanese, and the magnanimity of the Americans in rebuilding Europe and Japan. It was an intellectually intense and exciting time but also vaguely unfulfilling. I remember wondering about the total lack of attention to non-western traditions and histories. It is as if the rest of the world existed only as minor props on a stage where Europe and America were the leads.

being supplemented by the Indians, the Chinese, the Africans, and the Incas. The rigor and coherence of the classical canon has given way to the loose standards of a new politically correct multi-culturalism, where the writings and concerns of a few dead white males are being replaced by those of many different men and women of color. For many conservative critics, this state of affairs portends of doom, a fragmentation of the educational experience, the end of commonality, the abandonment of a shared sense of values.

The other side of the coin



## REFLECTIONS

by Dr Omar Rahman

For American conservatives, those were the halcyon days, where everyone knew who the educated were and what they stood for. In their view, universities have now become towers of babel, with students being offered a smorgasbord of courses reflecting cultural traditions from all over the world. The Greeks, the Romans, the British and the French are

is of course that it has become increasingly hard to convince a multi-ethnic student body who come from all over the world, that to be educated means to exclusively learn about European and American cultural traditions. As it is, one is barraged with so much information about the west, that for students with a different heritage, regardless of where they were

born or brought up, it often seems that the rest of the world is completely ignored. Curricula are about intellectual legitimacy, they are a source of validation of one's identity, heritage and experience. If one learns about the Greeks and the Romans, and not about the Yoruba, the Chinese and the Indians, it perpetuates an insidious ethnocentricity, a superiority complex for those who are heirs to Euro-american cultural traditions and a marginalization for those who are not.

The charges of conservative critics about the lack of intellectual rigor, the dilution of standards in the new multi-cultural curriculum are just a smokescreen, an attempt to provide credibility to the desire to be non-inclusive, to retain the old and keep out the new. When the American novelist Saul Bellow in an infamous critique of multi-culturalism wondered about there not being a "Proust of the Zulus", he revealed more about his literary biases than about his commitment to intellectual rigor. Much of the new scholarship of multi-culturalism is of course disturbing to conservative critics for it questions the established world view, the moral legitimacy of imperialism, the certainties of 'manifest destiny' and the

white man's burden'. It calls into question the dichotomization of cultures into winners and losers, and the lack of representation of women and other disadvantaged groups in intellectual discourse.

And what of commonality, a shared sense of cultural values. For conservatives this is an exercise in nostalgia for a time which no longer exists, an era of shared elitism and accentuated differences, a bonding based on exclusion rather than inclusion. In today's world where ethnic and nationalistic conflicts based on the demonization of those who are different is becoming sadly more and more prevalent, the role of Harvard and of universities in general is to broaden their students, to expose them to a wide array of experiences and cultures in the hope that in learning about others, they will all come a little closer to each other and find out that they are more alike than different. Their commonality will stem from their passion for a more a nuanced and multidimensional truth than is offered by demagogues.

It is with great pleasure that I note the fact that the class of 1999 in my alma mater will certainly have a more richer and fulfilling experience than I did in the class of 1979.



men such extraordinary health benefits? Waite says marriage gives men a sense of obligation to others, which discourages them from high-risk behaviours (like driving too fast and drinking too much) and encourages them to make and save more money (which can be used to buy better health care and safer surroundings, among other things).

But here's the clincher: Waite says "marriage provides individuals — especially men — with someone who monitors their health and health-related behaviours and who

recognize that these findings reflect averages. They in no way suggest that every unmarried person is doomed to bad health or that getting married gives one immunity from the negative consequences of say, eating pork rinds.

All things considered, then, stable marriage is good for one's health. That's not just my opinion — it's a nagging truth.

William R. Mattox, Jr is vice president for policy at the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.

# Victims of Discrimination Yet Preservers of the Environment

**T**HE Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro held in 1992 acknowledged the indivisibility of environment, peace and development. It also recognized that the root cause of human insecurity is related to poverty, hunger and illiteracy and that these were deeply connected to the degradation of the environment. They created inequality and injustice.

The recent UNDP HID Report shows women of the world making very little progress. It is a world torn apart by war, violence, inequality, degraded environment and injustice where women and children are the worst victims.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics July, 1994, the relative absence of women in the total population occurs at all ages and is made visible by the sex ratios by age. Women are particularly missing in the older and adolescent ages. Sex ratios at ages 10 to 14 years above are far above the average of 106 men per 100 women. Above average gender difference in mortality experience is probably the underlying cause of such distorted gender ratios. Women are also highly under-represented in the urban areas indicating that they are likely to be living in the rural areas compared to men.

Compared to men, women are over-represented in poor households. A significantly higher proportion of the members of women headed households live in extreme and ultra poverty compared to the members of men headed households. Since women are proportionately more in women headed households this means that women are more likely than men to be living in severe poverty conditions. In fact the bottom 20-30 percent of women headed households are amongst the poorest in Bangladesh.

Although the Government is headed by a woman, women have extremely limited access to the highest level of power. Women's representation in the highest decision-making bodies is negligible, and mostly of token value. Even in public service women have not reached sufficiently high positions to be able to influence public policy, and female quota remain unfulfilled. Women's participation in local community organizations is rare and their representation in the democratic process is only by nomination of elected men.

Violence against women: the most visible and extreme form of oppression of women by men in any society is violence against women. The recent tragic event of violence, rape and murder of a fourteen-year old girl by the police in Dinajpur shows how women are subject to violence even by the law enforcing agencies. The following press release issued by the government without even investigating on this most brutal act shows the lack of commitment on the part of the government machineries for protecting basic human rights of its citizens and the sense of insecurity of our women.

In Bangladesh domestic violence is also pervasive and common. However since such behavior tends to be concealed, statistics on domestic violence is difficult to collect. Women are extremely vulnerable to non-domestic violence. Not much is known about the extent and intensity of common violence against women either within the home or outside except in extreme cases which merit media coverage.

These reports show only the tip of the iceberg, but reveal nature of crimes perpetrated against women. The major type of crime against

women is rape followed by assault, murder, kidnap and suicide which is often actually murder. In addition to all above women and children die in thousands during natural disasters such as cyclone and tidal surges in the coastal area. These numbers are not compiled in the statistics. It is to be noted that the majority of the female headed households cluster in the coastal area of Bangladesh.

Thus women are victims of a vicious cycle of poverty, human rights abuse and environmental crisis. In all this how are women coping? A group of women have responded to one of the most crucial environmental issues facing the country — water the most precious life giving natural resource of the world. "Water is the source of all life."

The Holy Koran. "The river of life, dark and deep, moves swiftly. The two sides are muddy, the middle is depthless." Catillapada — 8th century Bengali Siddha poet. Life and river are seen as one.

Although 70 per cent of the earth's surface is covered by oceans and seas, fresh water is limited. It makes up less than 3 percent of the entire water. A country known as 'land of water or better still water in land' is now faced with acute water shortage during the dry season. The people and river ecosystems depending on the Ganges suffer from withdrawal of water by dams by upper riparian country. The rivers are silted up and cannot discharge flood and rain water during monsoon, resulting in frequent and heavy flooding.

The rivers are polluted, without fish and are dying due to intervention by upper riparian nation whose need

for water is increasing mostly for industrial and agricultural reasons. No one should take the responsibility of killing the most sacred of rivers as considered by many, to meet demand upstream at the cost of downstream humanitarian and ecological crisis and question of survival. There may be a major eco migration if we do not take timely decision now.

In 1993 women's group in Bangladesh organised a workshop on Women and Environment where we formed a Task Force on Women and Environment. We identified water resource as our key concern. We took up the Ganges water sharing problem with India as a common cause of concern. An expert group of women formed together with male experts. Women for Water Sharing to study the situation and take action. Our findings convinced us that the misery of our people particularly women and the degradation of the important ecosystems including world's largest mangrove, the Sundarbans which depends on Ganges flow, will have far reaching effects if not checked right away.

What we lose in 5 years we may not be able to redress in 50 years. The group visited India and with positive response from citizens in India held several exchange of views and agreed to a joint framework of agreement. The joint statement is a call to the governments and leaders in the respective countries to come to an agreement on Ganges water sharing immediately, based on the framework of understanding achieved by Women for Water Sharing. We have been invited to Bihar, India by women and citizen's groups who believe in regional cooperation and peace. Our initia-

tive is to be a peacemaker.

Bangladesh is under threat of sea level rise. More than 25 million people, which is about 1/4 of its entire population live in the coastal area. Such are examples of regional and global environmental catastrophe which the people of Bangladesh are subject to for no fault of their own. These will create future threats to peace and security in South Asia. In all this women and children will

suffer the most. Woman must protect herself and her environment by taking action against destruction of natural resources on which her life and that of her children's depend. In this case, we should link improved status of women with the care of the earth.

(The article is based on the author's statement to the just concluded Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing, China)



— Photo courtesy: Noazesh Ahmed and Naib Uddin Ahmed

# Asia's Amazon Is Vanishing Too

**I**T is called Asia's Amazon: nearly 550,000 sq km of dense rainforest that drapes the rugged contours of the dragon-shaped island of New Guinea.

The forest makes up eight per cent of the world's virgin tropical jungle, and the it is said to be at least 70 million years old — going back to the time when the island was still part of the Australian landmass as it broke away from Africa.

Today, a fluke of colonial history divides the island and its forest between the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea. The national boundary is an incongruous, ruler-straight frontier that follows 141 degrees East meridian, cutting through forests, mountains, rivers and swamps.

Like the Amazon, these rainforests are seriously threatened. Logging roads criss-cross the once impenetrable forest, mining towns grow like blisters out of clearings and the rivers run red with washed off topsoil.

Adverse international publicity and dwindling forests back home have driven Malaysian and Indonesian companies to mine logs in timber-rich Pacific islands to

maintain their long-term contracts with Japanese and Korean mills. They have even ventured to Surinam in South America, leasing a swath of forest that is 25 per cent of the country's area.

Vanuatu last year banned the export of raw logs, but this has drawn a fierce legal challenge from four Asian logging companies. Green groups in Vanuatu fear that at present logging rates, the tiny archipelago will lose all its trees in three years.

"The damage caused by excessive logging is assuming criminal proportions in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Western Samoa," says Fiji-based Atu Emerson-Bain, author of 'Sustainable Development or Malignant Growth: Perspectives of Pacific Island Women'.

Alarmed by the loss of their forests, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands are drawing up a regional code of conduct for sustainable forestry. They hope that together they will be better able to resist the temptation to sell their trees before it is too late. — IPS