

FOCUS

Women on the Move

Women Across the Country Protest Yasmmeen's Rape and Murder

HUNDREDS of protesting women took to the streets of several district headquarters throughout the country on 12th October, 1995, demanding the trial of police personnel involved in the recent barbaric rape and murder of 14-year-old Dinajpur girl Yasmmeen. The mobilisation was organised by the Shommitto Nari Shomaj, a collective body which brings together various women's organisations and individuals.

The rallies were aimed to inform the public in general, and women specifically, of the atrocious acts of police violence, as well as to build support for the cause outside the capital. They received a spontaneous response from a large number of people from the 12 districts — namely, Chittagong, Jessore, Mymensingh, Tangail, Faridpur, Narayanganj, Kushtia, Netrakona, Jhenidah, Cox's Bazar, Tongi, and Rajbari.

All participants of the mass gatherings pledged to carry on their movement against the authorities until the 'pishach' (brutes) who took Yasmmeen's life and other similar violators of women's rights are brought to trial. They demanded the removal of the Home Minister.

Speakers at the congregations condemned the police firing on the Dinajpur public which resulted in seven more uncalled for deaths. They appealed to the government to lift the false cases filed against some Dinajpur locals who were active in protesting against the people.

The news of the gang rape of another teenager, Morjina, by two police constables and another civilian in Chuadanga (Oct 11) fresh in their ears left all the demonstrators stunned and even more outraged.

Cox's Bazar
Few hundred women.



Mymensingh

many from remote villages, assembled at the Public Library ground at 11:00 am. Local organiser, Khurshid Ara Huq, chaired the gathering, which was addressed by Natasha Ahmad and Shamima Parveen, members of the central Shommitto Nari Shomaj. In her speech, Natasha Ahmad, demanded the immediate publication of the report filed by the one-man judiciary enquiry committee. The meeting was followed by a protest march which went around the main streets of the town. This was reportedly the first all-women march of its kind in this town.

Chittagong
About 250 women of all classes and professions joined the meeting in front of the Shaheed Minar. Jhorna Barua chaired the meeting, and advocate U M Habibun Nessa and Rokeya Kabir represented the Shommitto Nari Shomaj from Dhaka. They urged all advocates of democracy to carry on the movement till the demands are met. They demanded the immediate cessation of all police atrocities. During the

Mymensingh
Local women brought out a militant rally from the Muslim Institute at 3:00 pm.



Mymensingh

speeches a considerable public gathered around the women and showed their solidarity with the movement.

Jessore
Over 1000 women gathered as the local school ground. A militant procession chanting slogans against police violence, and demanding trial of the killers etc, marched the streets of Jessore, and later congregated in front of the DC's office, where a memorandum was presented. A public meeting followed, chaired by local Bokul Begum and addressed by the ADC, local magistrate Shamima Yasmmeen, Dr Naila Khan and Mahbuba Leena from Shommitto Nari Shomaj, Dhaka, local commissioner of municipal corporation Nurjahan Begum etc. They also demanded the trial of local girl Lipi's killers, and urged the women's organisations to extend the movement to even more remote areas.

Mymensingh
Local women brought out a militant rally from the Muslim Institute at 3:00 pm.



Jhenidah

Hundreds of women marched the streets of the town chanting slogans. At 4:00 pm the procession settled at the 'Krishno-Chura Tol' beside the railway station. Eminent educationist Sofiya Karim chaired the meet. Rekha Chowdhury and Farida Akhtar represented the Shommitto Nari Shomaj from Dhaka. The speakers at the meeting condemned the Dinajpur incident and expressed their solidarity with the movement.

Tangail
Almost 3000 women and men gathered at the Shaheed Minar ground at 11:00 am. Advocate Chobi Ray of the Tangail Bar Association chaired the meeting. Fawzia Khandokar and Sima Das represented the Shommitto Nari Shomaj from Dhaka. 14-year-old Umme Salma Laila recited a self written poem on Yasmmeen. The speakers pointed out that the ongoing movement is a democratic demand of the people of Bangladesh, and called upon people from all walks of life to join in.

Netrakona
A procession of few hundred women, with banners, festoons and placards left the Shabolombi office to march 8 miles into Netrakona town, where went around the Shahid Minar, Judge Court, DC's Office, and then back to the Shahid Minar. Here a massive rally was conducted, chaired by Shumitra Sarkar, and also addressed by Afroza Ruby and Krishna Chondra from Dhaka. The speakers said that any attempt to hinder this ongoing movement would be seriously confronted.



Netrakona



Tangail

the Tongi meeting was attended primarily by women factory workers. The gathering was small but militant, and was conducted near the main bus stand. The meeting was addressed by Rokeya Rafiq Baby and Khalida Khatun from Shommitto Nari Shomaj, Dhaka, and also several local women. Many of the listeners had been previously unaware of the details of the Yasmmeen incident. They all declared their solidarity with the demands. The 7 killed in the police firing were declared as martyrs of the land.

Tongi
Being an industrial area,

Faridpur
500 women and men gathered in front of the local press club at 11:00 am. Rokeya Begum and Shahnaz Hasan Shumi represented the Shommitto Nari Shomaj from Dhaka. The speakers reiterated that law enforcing agencies have become criminals and are holding the public hostage. A militant rally ended at the Police Super's Office, where a memorandum was handed over.

Jhenidah
Over 900 women marched towards the DC's Office.

Narayanganj
Few hundred women gathered at the Ali Ahmed municipal auditorium at 3:00 pm. The meeting was chaired by Anjuman Ara Akshir of Mohila Parishad. Amongst the speakers were Rashida Begum from Shommitto Nari Shomaj, Dhaka and also local leader Monira Akhtar, Rahima Khatun from Shomaj-tantrik Mohila Forum, Lakshmi Chokravarty etc. A militant procession later marched through the town.

Shahnaz Shumi and Afroza Ruby

where a memorandum was handed over to him. A meeting followed, chaired by Sabe Ara Jhorna, and also attended by Mahbuba Neeru from Shommitto Nari Shomaj in Dhaka. The meeting was addressed by the DC, a local MP, the chairperson of Mohila Parishad, Shoptogram leaders etc. They also demanded the trial of Morjina's rapists.

Kushtia
A meeting of over 400 women was led by Rashida Hossain, representing Shommitto Nari Shomaj, Dhaka. It was also addressed by Journalist Mominul Huq Shuruj and others. A procession marched from the municipal office, through the town, and then presented a memorandum, to the DC.

Women's Movement will Continue

by Farida Akhter

WE, the members of Sammitto Nari Samaj, the collective body of women's groups presently organised to protest the rape and murder of Yasmmeen were shocked to see the news item on the rape of Morjina by police in Chuadanga. It was the front page news of all the national dailies on 12th October. The report said that Marjina (14) was travelling by Chapainabagan-bound Mahananda train from Khulna. She boarded the train from Darshana station to go to Bheramara in Kushtia to see her sister. The incident happened when the train made its usual stop at the Chuadanga station. The policemen, constable Abdul Jabbar and Lutfar Rahman along with one Bacchu dragged out Marjina from the train and took her to a place near the adjacent local stadium where they repeatedly gang-raped her. This news item was just like a hammer on our conscience again. We were reminded brutally again

that the administration cares less to all the demands and protests made by women and the conscious people of the country. They continue to rape. They continue to become a threat to women's safety.

We were divided into a group of two members each to go to 14 districts on the same day to attend the protest rallies organised by Sammitto Nari Samaj. These rallies were organised by local women's groups under the banner of Sammitto Nari Samaj to remind the administration that Yasmmeen's rape and murder trial must be conducted immediately and punish the accused police and the relevant personnel of the administration. We have already organised meetings and rallies in the capital city of Dhaka several times; have given a memorandum to the Prime Minister demanding the removal of the Home Minister and for taking nec-

essary actions against police and the administration responsible for Yasmmeen's rape cum murder and killing of seven people in Dinajpur. The Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has already visited Dinajpur, met Sharifa Begum, mother of Yasmmeen. She has heard with her own ears that Sharifa Begum did not want money or any monetary compensation. She wanted justice. The culprits must be punished. The Prime Minister has also seen the bereaved families of the seven martyrs. Yet no action is taken. The investigation report is already submitted to the Ministry of Home. On the contrary, we find that police atrocities are continuously happening all over the country.

verse remark was made by any member of the general public. However, members of police in some areas were wondering about why the slogans were anti-administration, and anti-police in particular. In one area, they asked, "what did police do?"

"Don't you know?" asked women.

"Don't you read the newspapers?"

Maybe it was a genuine question by the police. That means, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the police headquarters have not yet issued any circular letter warning their forces against the act done by their fellow members. Perhaps they are not concerned that the image of the police has been tremendously lowered in the eyes of the general people, women in particular. It is their duty to upgrade the image by behaving properly, by playing the role to protect the people.

The Sammitto Nari Samaj will continue the movement till actions are taken against the persons responsible in the administration, the alleged members of the police and against the Home Minister. Yasmmeen's rape & murder is not an isolated incident. The police force are proving themselves that it is a systematic act of these members of "law enforcing agency." The district level meetings are creating a ground for country-wide protest against police atrocities. Women and men in all other districts are joining in. How long the Prime Minister going to keep quiet on the issue?

Sammitto Nari Samaj is committed to continue the movement till we find that Yasmmeen's rape and murder trial is held and all those responsible are punished and till we are assured that no more Marjinas will have to face atrocity of police. Women's security must be ensured.

Accounting for Justice

by Hameeda Hossain

MEDIA coverage of cases of rape and violence has usually been limited to brief and insignificant reports in the mofussil pages in newspapers. But the alleged rape and death by police of 13 year old Yasmmeen at Dosh Mile Road in Dinajpur hit the headlines on the first day. Protests, in this case, against police violations, encouraged equally by administrative cover up as well as by political neglect and complicity have echoed a delayed response to the endemic issue of rape and custodial violence.

Converging under the banner of the Shommitto Nari Shomaj, women's protests spanned over twenty towns during the two months. They have raised fundamental issues of the threat to woman's security and freedom of movement by the prevailing 'social morality', as well as the misuse of law and political unaccountability in Bangladesh.

In the encounter at the bus stand Yasmmeen faced suspicion rather than concern. She had worked as a domestic maid in Dhaka for a year, and in this capacity she had taken on responsibilities far beyond her years to support her family and to meet her employers' demands. Yet when she waited at the tea stall for a connecting bus, her privacy was threatened by a barrage of questions and her freedom of movement challenged by forcing her to go in the police van. This experience is not atypical, and indeed most women, young and old, face varying degrees of sexual harassment working on the streets, in rickshaws and even in offices and workplaces. While the police are known to be inhibited about registering complaints of domestic violence, or even rape and harassment, they do not hesitate to charge casual strollers (both women and men) with 'suspicion of loitering'. Such arrests are allowed because the police have assumed the role of protecting 'patriarchal moral values' rather than maintaining social peace.

An increase in incidents of custodial violence leading to death has been reported in human rights reports (US State Department Report) yet

seldom have police officers been asked to account for these violations. The only time police officers were convicted was in the case of a young boy who died as a result of torture in a police thana in Dhaka. Since Yasmmeen's death at least four cases of harassment and rape by police have been reported in the media (including the Chuadanga rape). Although there are rules and regulations, even in the Police Code, to hold them accountable, administrative actions in these cases have not been made public.

Yasmmeen's death provoked a much stronger protest because instead of even the bare minimum of disciplinary action there was an administrative cover up, political neglect and complicity. The Home Ministry attempted to disown police responsibility by claiming that Yasmmeen was a prostitute. As if this justified her rape and death! Political representatives absent themselves from the critical scene and then diverted attention to political motivations behind the protests.

Senior police and administrative officials tend to evade responsibility by claiming political compulsion from their superiors. Violations of an official's constitutional obligations or professional code, particularly in evading justice in cases of murder and rape cannot be absolved in the name of political pressure.

When women are brought into police thanas, on more suspicion, or even to file a complaint, they are generally subjected to indecent questions, harassment and abuse, which reflect police attitudes. Practical needs for a separate detention room with proper protection of a woman police officer have not been considered necessary. Some months ago the Minister of Home Affairs and Inspector General of Police separately announced that women's cells would be set up in Metropolitan police

headquarters, but the scheme has obviously been put on the back burner. Yasmmeen's mother demands justice for her daughter's murder. Her demands are backed by scores of human rights organisations across the country. Will our Courts be able to ensure justice for Yasmmeen?

Some years ago a similar incident was reported in Maharashtra, India. Two police constables were accused of raping Mathura, a 14-16 year old tribal girl in jail. As the case moved from one court to another, the judgement altered from an acquittal on grounds of a 'world of difference between sexual intercourse and rape', to conviction by the Bombay High Court's recognition of 'Mathura's passive submission to force'. The Supreme Court later acquitted the constables on grounds of false allegations. Police provided solidarity for the accused, while the victim received popular support. While Mathura was not vindicated the case became a powerful symbol for the women's movement for justice in India, inducing many legal ex-

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Faridpur

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Keepers of the law assume they are above the law, and unless compelled to, they refuse to account for their actions. This is so because we meet lawlessness with silence. Reports indicate that the Enquiry Committee into Yasmmeen's murder, constituted by a judge, has submitted its findings but unless it is made public it will not restore confidence in the ad-



Faridpur

ministration's enforcement of justice.

The Shommitto Nari Shomaj seeks justice for Yasmmeen's murder in part as a deterrent to rape violence. Because we need to preempt a Mathura outcome we must maintain the tempo of the movement by monitoring disciplinary actions, investigating every police violation or official neglect in investigating of trials of cases of endemic violence against women. We must monitor Yasmmeen's case itself as it moves through the court system.

Women's demands go beyond immediate conviction to



Faridpur

press for accountability and transparency of law enforcing processes. The rape and murder of thirteen year old Yasmmeen should provide the movement with a strong impetus to press for the following demands:

1. The Enquiry Report should take into account fact finding investigations conducted by human rights organisations and be made public.
2. Impartial investigations into recent cases of police violence against women to include human rights investigators.
3. Setting up of women's calls in police thanas, to include women social workers in addition to a woman police officer.
4. Women should not be taken into police custody after dusk, and never without a female police escort.
5. Reform of laws which limit the victims access and use of the judicial system.
6. Creating an environment to ensure security of women without threatening their independence.

These demands will not be met unless the women's struggle establishes itself on a firm foundation for gender justice for all communities, religions and classes, and builds a supportive network for the victims. The government has promised to set up women's cells in metropolitan police headquarters, but can we not ourselves form Anti-Violence Committees in different thanas to monitor, investigate and report on violence against women committed by law enforcement agencies or instigated by fatwa givers. Can we form a task force to review the basis of inequality in our laws and to analyse how this induces violence?

Justice for women has entered the political rhetoric in Bangladesh, but it remains outside the sphere of action, no matter what commitments the PM may have made in Beijing. The women's movement needs to break his silence so as to reclaim a society based on human rights and justice. The Yasmmeen's of Bangladesh will teach us to scream aloud against injustice and to resist the arbitrariness of social norms and political force.

A Rude Awakening

by Naila Z Khan

THE rape and murder of Yasmmeen in Dinajpur on 24th August, and an almost macabre sequel in Chuadanga recently, has been like a wake-up call to the supremely complacent educated women of this country. I consider myself to be one such individual, whose token acknowledgment of the women's movement is a poster in office which reads "Women's Rights Are Human Rights". The said incidents have made a travesty of these rights.

And the wake-up call is fast turning into a rude awakening. On 1st October a research finding published on the occasion of International Children's Day by Radda Barneen says that most of the rape and street violence today were on children of 8-14 years of age. Worse still 45% were committed by police personnel. Younger children are being inducted into prostitution more than ever before. My friend Helen Rahman from Shoishob, an organisation educating street children, had said the same thing at a roundtable conference with Daily Star almost two years ago. Even as I write

there is an 8-year old admitted in my hospital gang-raped in Jessore.

If we think such incidents do not touch our own well-insulated lives we are only deluding ourselves. An Ain-O-Shalish Kendro lawyer was telling me that over 70% of middle-class wives take beatings from their husbands. That is the worst kind of disempowerment and indignity for any person. Our mothers worked hard to educate themselves and also bring equity in our lives. Maybe this is a rare and great opportunity for us 'highly educated' women to give back some sense of dignity to those who still have none.

A large chunk of this rare elite and middle class women were missing from our 12th October demonstrations in the various districts. During the procession in Jhenidah many young girls and women ran out of their houses saying that they wanted to join us. Violence transcends all socio-cultural and economic barriers, we are all victims to it, and there is a slow fire burning in every woman's heart.

Cox's Bazar