

Women on the Move

Fighting Against Fatwa

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE word *fatwa* is becoming more and more a term of dread for women in the rural areas and NGOs who are trying to improve their lives by giving them opportunities of work and education. There is no longer any doubt that the *fatwa* is being used to squash any kind of empowerment of women which threatens the status quo of women being docile, dumb and obedient. This year alone, a Mahila Parishad statement declares there have been 45 cases of *fatwa* against women. What is encouraging however, is that while the *fatwa* *baaz* are proclaiming these arbitrary verdicts, a counter movement against *fatwa* is growing strong. With the help of various women's organisations such as Mahila Parishad, Ain O Shalish Kandara and Sham-milito Nari Samaj and various NGOs, women all over the country are growing active in their opposition to this medieval concept of *fatwa*. Only last month a news item in this daily reports the punishment of an Imam by a *shalish* or local court for proclaiming a *fatwa* against a woman. At the *shalish*, a union chairman, in the presence of members of several women's organisations, found the Imam guilty. He was fired from his job and asked to leave the village.



Mobilising to protect injustice

villages. The teachers of various villages decided to discuss the matter. On the way to Bahupara and Charupara, a group of these women teachers met Azadi and greeted him who turned his face away. He started shouting that he did not speak to women. The teachers asked him to be silent and demanded why he had said objectionable things at the *waz mahfil* where he had referred to them as offsprings of traitors and dogs. By this time *samity* members and other people had gathered.

Another incident that occurred also last month, shows that women when united are capable, by themselves, of resisting these anti democratic, oppressive forces. It was possibly the first time that village women actually stood up for themselves against the *fatwa* *baaz* and were actually supported by other village folk both women and men. The following account gives a clear picture of the utter villainy of these so-called religious men who have abused religion by making it a tool of oppression and injustice. It also demonstrates that these frenzied religious fanatics are basically ignorant, narrow minded people, little more than *mastans* who thrive on people's passivity and helplessness.

On the 6th of November, the Thana Executive Officer (TNO) and OC (Officer in Charge) went to the venue of the meeting to stop the moulanas. An argument ensued between the police and the participants of the meeting. "You won't like Shaptagram's activities", said the police, "because when they learn to read and write, the women will realize your evil activities, your oppression, illegal *talaaqs*, your scams."

The people of the village tried to bring the situation under control but Moulana Momin Jihadi taking Azadi's side decided to file a case at the thana stating that the forty four women had attempted to hijack Azadi. For this purpose Jihadi tried to get false witnesses amongst the village folk who refused to be a part of this scam. His plan thwarted, Jihadi than went from place to place

gathering like-minded moulanas and arranged to have a hearing on November 6th. With the help of four microphones they announced a protest hearing against the alleged 'attack' on Moulana Azadi by Shaptagram women. "Light the fire, burn them", they chanted.

The members of Shaptagram were prepared for the onslaught. They gathered around the Shaptagram office in Kurapara and also waited in the streets to make sure that the terrorists could not enter the office. Meanwhile the thana authorities had been made aware of these happenings.

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The thana's executive officer warned the processionists not to make public statements and if they had anything to say they should make written statements. He asked them to refrain from going to the Shaptagram office. On the 7th of November the religious extremists submitted a written statement giving their version of the incidents. Here is a list of the statement given to the thana:

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On 6.11.95 Moulana Abdul Hai of Shah Jui Fazil Madrasa organized a meeting where the god fearing people of the area protested the barbarous attack on Moulana Abdul Azadi, Moulana Abdul Hai and other moulanas who they said were masquerading as Muslims. These people were enemies of Islam and the staff of Saptagram were to be blamed. Saptagram should be stopped for giving women anti-Islamic teachings. Their anti Islamic books which should be banned speak of anti Islamic things about purdah, *talaaq* etc. Those moulanas who have supported these people are also anti Islamic and they had better mend their ways or else face the consequences.

If any future meetings are disrupted then the god fearing people will brook no opposition.

The authorities have been called to maintain neutrality. There will be a procession from Pangsha Jaqme Mosque to the burial ground of Shah Jui Shaheb.

For those of us who live in the city, this story may seem quite unreal and too absurd to be true. But for the women in the rural areas, these occurrences are a part of daily life. Too many innocent lives have been destroyed, maimed or tormented by these illegal religious edicts declared by hypocritical, corrupt religious extremists. These *fatwa* *baaz* have literally gotten away with murder because of the support of ordinary people blinded by distorted interpretations of religion. The Pangsha and Savar incidents have set the precedence for active opposition against these religious bullies. The fact that women and men and even other moulanas supported this resistance indicates that people are beginning to realize the injustices inflicted by these evil elements who can manipulate their minds and sense of right and wrong with their threats and assumed superior knowledge of religion. Finally it is the criminals who are being punished instead of the victims.

The facts about the Pangsha incident have been taken from a Saptagram report and from the written statement given by Moulana Abdul Hai and his associates.

নারীর সংগ্রাম, বাংলার সংগ্রাম: বাহান্ন থেকে বর্তমান

To commemorate our Independence Day on 16th December Sammilito Nari Samaj has organised a series of events. For the first time ever a photographic exhibition titled 'Nari Sangram Banglar Sangram: Bahanno Theke Bortoman.' This will focus on the role of women in the various movements, from the language movement of '52 and every other movement upto the present time. Rare photographs of women will be exhibited.

Venue: Zainul Art Gallery, Art Institute, Shahbagh, Dhaka.
Date: From 13th December to 16th December 1995.
Time: From 2 pm to 7 pm.

A cultural programme has also been organised by Sammilito Sangskritik Jote titled 'Nari Sangram, Banglar Sangram: Bijoyer Pochish Bochor.' Participants include: Group Theater Foundation, Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and artists who were involved in the Freedom Movement, Kobita Shomonoir Parishad, Chhayansat, Anandadhani, International Dance Council, Nari Unnayan Theatre, Nobopras Andolon, Mahila Basu Shilpi and many others involved in the people's movement.

Venue: Mukto Moncho (open air stage) in front of the Public Library.
Date: 13th December 1995.
Time: 5 pm to 9 pm.
All those who are interested are requested to attend.

A Homage to Begum Rokeya

The Pioneer of Women's Emancipation

by Prof Roushan Ara Haque

THE 9th of December, 1995 is the 63rd death anniversary of that magnanimous lady Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein who by her above fervent appeals have inspired millions of oppressed women of the then undivided Bengal to come out of their seclusion and bondage of slavery. She was a progressive humanist philosopher and a dedicated social reformer. She was a great exponent of women's emancipation from illiteracy, degradation and slavery due to religious superstition. She fought almost single-handedly for their liberation.

She was far in advance of her time. The Women's emancipation movement was first started in the west in 1792 by Mary Wolstone Croft who in her book, *Vindication of The Rights of Women* claimed equality of rights for both men and women. In the same decade Virginia Wolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* and Simon de Beuvre in her *The Second Sex* had claimed equality of men and women by birth. They have challenged the logic and authenticity of the 'Plastic Surgery Theory' that wives are born out of the ribs of their husbands, as described in the holy books of the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims.

They proved this theory as nothing but a fallacy created by men to fool, subjugate and exploit their wives at their sweet will and as their own property. Begum Rokeya also in her book *Badges of Slavery* had challenged the origin of that theory as being God-sent messages. She rather declared with firm conviction that these are so-called saints-made strictures to perpetuate their control over the opposite sex. She further stated that some rights Islam had granted to women had also been denied to them by the orthodox leaders. Therefore, women should disobey all such man-made strictures and educate themselves for their own emancipation.

Begum Rokeya was very progressive in her ideas. As early as in 1910-20s she, with her deep insight, could identify the root causes of the miseries of the distressed women of the then Bengal. Accordingly, she laid down the basic principles of alleviation of their sufferings which are almost identical to those 'Three Forward Looking Strategies For The Advancement Of Women, that is, Equality, Advancement and Peace', as declared in the Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference Of Women (FWCW) held at Beijing in September, '95. Rokeya's mottoes were as follows:

- a) To achieve equal rights

Women are the better — half as they are the mothers of the creation. Women are born equal but made subservient by man-made strictures. Women should educate themselves to achieve self-reliance and equality.

- a) To advance them by giving proper education and making them self-reliant.
- b) To make their lives peaceful by liberating them from slavery, poverty and religious superstitions.

Her great wisdom and foresight had changed the views of the then social leaders and convinced them the urgency of educating the

ments of knowledge are more useful than ornaments of gold.

Her mission in life was to uplift the status of women at home and in the society by educating them to be ideal wives, mothers and citizens of the state. With that end in view she had established the Sakhawat Memorial School in 1909 with only seven students and a few benches. She rightly believed that women's real worth lies not in her looks or clothes but in her



women. In *Aborodhbasini* Begum Rokeya had strongly criticised the imitators of Persian culture which had compelled the women to remain inside the Harem to be used as instruments of pleasure and luxury of their owners having no identity or opinion of their own. She had also strongly criticised the women for their love of ornaments which, according to her, are nothing but badges of slavery. She advised the parents to educate their girls with the money they spoil on ornaments, because orna-

ment of knowledge are more useful than ornaments of gold. Her mission in life was to uplift the status of women at home and in the society by educating them to be ideal wives, mothers and citizens of the state. With that end in view she had established the Sakhawat Memorial School in 1909 with only seven students and a few benches. She rightly believed that women's real worth lies not in her looks or clothes but in her

qualities of head and heart, in spite of belonging to a higher society, her strong and compassionate commitment for the society led her to a life of a dedicated reformer. She spent all the money left by her husband for the alleviation of the sufferings of the distressed women. Begum Rokeya strongly emphasised that a society cannot progress far if its female section is not equally educated and not given equal status. Through her writings she had strongly criticised the social oppressive rules against women. She fervently

- a) By establishing one Rokeya Academy all her literary activities should be published and copies of her books should be sent to all public libraries of the rural areas.
- b) The residence of Begum Rokeya in Payraband should be preserved and a library a Museum and a Tourist Centre should be made there.
- c) More writings of Rokeya should be included in the syllabus at all levels of education.
- d) One Begum Rokeya Chair should be established in all the universities.
- e) To help the destitute girls one Rokeya Sadan should be established in each Thana Headquarters.

Working Women — Supermoms or Flops?

by Muneera Parbeen

So okay, we are all decided now on the fact that women can combine a career along with their traditional role of housekeeping. What that means practically is that women now have taken on two full-time jobs simultaneously. "Mama keeps house and papa earns the money" is the traditional way that all houses were run until a time came when for necessity as well as to satisfy her own being, women came out to work. It was a long time before she was accepted totally (though not in all communities as yet). So what else is new?

Well, nothing new but there is that problem again. Most jobs now welcome women with open arms but now that women are running two full-time jobs at the same time, it is her problem that it's extremely difficult to cope. Imagine an 18/20 hour shift where a woman stands on her feet, running a job, a household and bringing up a future generation!

For most men it's easy. Even working a 12-hour shift is relatively easier because they wake up to a readymade breakfast. At the most, the extra chore they do is drop off the kids to school and then he is off to his work, be it meeting deadlines or a lunch time meeting. At the end of the day he returns home and relaxes on the sofa (newspaper in hand) with his feet up. The children come in between to delight him with their various achievements at school as he awaits a hot dinner, lovingly cooked by his wife. Over the weekend, the most that he does is some grocery shopping, perhaps taking the children to a park and then he sleeps off his weariness for the rest of the time.

If seen now from a women's point of view, the day starts in the early hours of the morning. She gets up, lights the stove, prepares breakfast, calls up her children, and husband. She then dresses up her children, combs their hair while coaxing them out of their sleepy moods, sits them at the breakfast table, stuffs their tiffinboxes (with food she has already prepared) in between answering a million times to the enquiries of her husband who mostly cannot locate a tie or a key. She then per-

end until everything has been tucked in for the day and prepared for the next day. As she climbs into bed, it is almost time for her to get up again. In this way a woman assumes the role of a supermom.

Money of course could possibly help to ease such a situation. It would help to have a string of timesaving gadgets (as washing machines, dishwashers, microwaves etc) and house hold staff to fall back upon.

But, in reality, how many women can afford all of these? Now if this situation is shifted a little bit more to fit into an average household in a society like ours, things get even worse! The amount of manual work a woman would then have to do is enough to turn anyone off. Put in the essential bits of our family as the in-laws and relatives and we get all the ingredients of an avalanche. Back biting, criticism and a 24-hour crisis on money is the problem facing every family. Here too women play the role of 'supermoms', combining a successful family life and highly stressful (& successful) career, yet how many are acknowledged for their achievements? If by chance, a single thing falls apart (as a child contracting a bad disease or an old mother having a fall) the immediate reaction

from all corners is "the fault of her having a career." It wouldn't have happened if she had been at home all the time, is what almost everyone would say.

Life goes in spite of all and the supermoms who break bricks all day long at some construction site, return home at dusk on an empty stomach, to cook and feed her starving children and to endure the beatings and inhuman demands of her rickshawpuller husband.

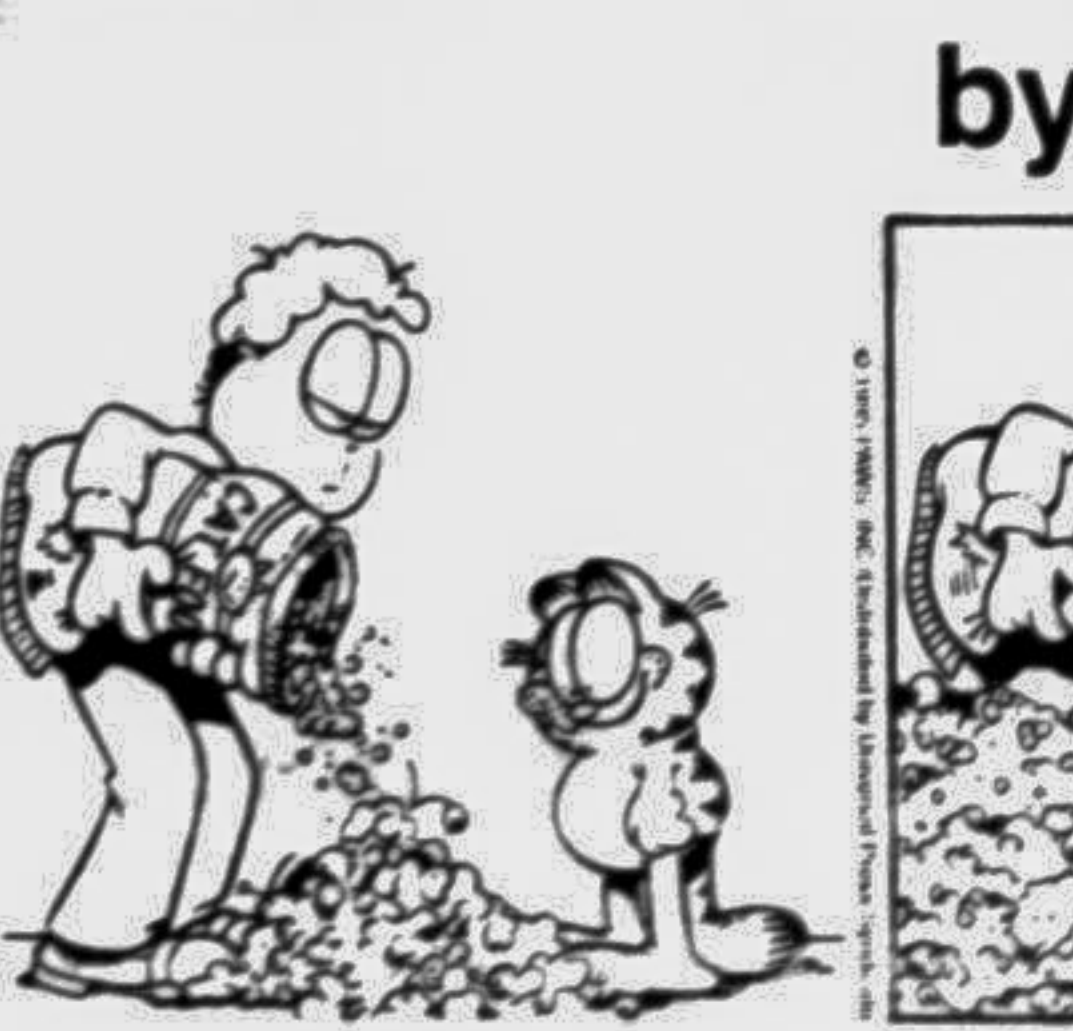
Life goes in spite of all and the supermoms who break bricks all day long at some construction site, return home at dusk on an empty stomach, to cook and feed her starving children and to endure the beatings and inhuman demands of her rickshawpuller husband.

In many developed societies nowadays, men are coming forward to help their female counterparts. We hear of husbands cooking, doing the laundry and changing the nappies of the toddlers. In our society we would immediately brand the wife as selfish and say that, "Oh she? She has her husband wrapped all around her little finger". We look down upon such contributions from a man and it is to some extent our own fault that we cannot accept what we can't do without. Many men (in other countries) leave their jobs to stay at home for the few years that a young child is growing so that their wives can continue their careers. Of course, at this stage, that would seem extremely strange to most in our society (even though this would be the most logical thing to do). But men, still have to come forward, at least half the way.

Women are successful supermoms, but they too are human. Why do all the work if you have a partner to share them with? Isn't that what partnership is all about? A little give and take is all that it needs. It is encouraging to know that even in a society as ours, men are rapidly coming forward to help. One would hope that it happens at all levels of society.



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by Jim Davis