



Gender

Random thoughts on women in Bangladesh

by Sigma Huda

SITTING IN THE pitch-black darkness of Kuakata Beach on the last night of the 20th Century, I began to ponder on what the 21st century holds for the Bangladeshi women. The last few years of the last millennium were extremely traumatic for Bangladeshi women. The very men by whose side they safely and valiantly fought from time to time in various movements to free their beloved motherland from the yoke of foreign rulers and exploiters, and to establish their very own cultural identity and language, suddenly turned renegades and felt no hesitation to violate not only the physical beings of their mothers, sisters and daughters but also their dignity. However, despite the rapid increase of crime on women, there were many achievements towards enhancement of Bangladeshi women's status in society. Even before the end of the 19th century, Bangladesh or what was known as East Bengal saw quite a number of Bengali women writers, intellectuals, politicians and suffragettes make their mark in their respective fields. As years passed, numbers grew steadily and many more women joined the ranks of successful women and in professions earlier exclusively marked for male. Yet, despite their progress, the Bengali women were relegated to second place and ironically accepted their position as such. Individual achievements made no impact on their family life or on their accepted stereotyped role. They did not nor could they dream of any other role. The few exceptions were talked of and scorned not only by the men but also by the women at large.

Then came the War of Liberation. Our valiant mothers, sisters and daughters, as in the past, felt no shyness or hesitation to join the war to protect and save their homeland. Many of them took up arms at the side of men; suicide squads were formed spontaneously while others were kept captive by the Pakistani forces to whet their sexual appetites or for ethnic cleansing also contributed greatly to the cause of Bangladesh. However, the independence and achieved through so much bloodshed and sacrifice did nothing to improve the status of women. Those who sacrificed their sexuality, dignity and lives at the hands of the oppressors were not given their rightful honour and place in society. Nor has the government or the Ghata Dal Nirnay Committee taken any steps to avenge the grave wrong inflicted on them. On the contrary, on the plea of protecting them, all evidence were destroyed and at the same time the government introduced and reserved quota for employment of such survivors. The irony of it all is that with the introduction of such quota the government took steps to earmark them for the rest of their lives instead of adopting measures for proper integration into mainstream society. Their own families rejected the recovered girls from the Pakistani military camps. The survivors were also made to abort their unwanted pregnancies and, in cases where the war babies were born, they were not able to exercise their right to keep their babies due to social constraints and taboos. In fact, as stated above, the government took care to destroy all evidence of such rape, which minimised their chances of success in any legal actions that they may have wished to initiate against the perpetrators.

At this point I must narrate one such sad case I came across as a human rights activist. At the end of the war and after the surrender of the Pakistani forces, the government recovered a young pregnant girl of about 12 years from one of the Pakistani military camps. She was taken to the shelter home set up under the Women's Welfare Foundation. There was an attempt by the authorities of the home to reconcile her with her family but the family rejected her on the ground of "shame". She was then made to abort. This was extremely traumatic for her and she lapsed into deep depression and complete silence. Not being able to communicate with her, the authorities forwarded her to the Mental Institution at Hemayetpur, Pabna. It was only in late 1998, that on one of my visits to the institution to recover another victim that I learnt of her case. I looked into her medical files and discussed with the attending doctors as to her mental state. She was not mentally ill so as to be confined in the institution. They gladly handed her over to me. She is now a residential employee at the Centre for Training and Rehabilitation of Destitute Women, CTRDW, taking care of abandoned children. She has recovered her speech and interest in life. She loves children and hopes to marry one day. However she is now about 40 years old. Who do we blame for her predicament? Do we initiate legal action only against the rapists or against her family or against the authorities who, in order to avoid their responsibilities, wrongly committed her to a mental institution for long 27 years or against all of them? I seek my readers' reaction to the case.

Despite the above, there has been a lot of progress in women's march to empowerment. The year 1972 saw the spirit of women in restructuring their newly liberated country. Their sincerity and commitment had no parallel. Alas, it was a short-lived joy. The common people who suffered at the hands of law enforcers believed that as the laws were from the days of Pakistani rule they were of no effect and had ceased to exist from the day of liberation. Thus we saw men kidnapping girls and forcing their hands in marriage. With the backing of political powers these men were above the law. Despite this scenario educated people began to hold seminars where lawyers brought to the notice of the public the legal status of women and their rights. In 1979, at one such meeting, I saw a substantial number of ladies and young women wearing the lawyers' coats. On query, I learnt that they were lawyers. I was thrilled, as till that day, I never knew we had so many women lawyers as previously I never saw them in Court. It suddenly struck me that here we are talking of how to conscientise people about their rights when we could easily form a women lawyers group who could not only act as a buffer to other lobby and advocacy groups but also disseminate basic legal knowledge in easy-to-understand language and render legal aid to the distressed and oppressed women of our society, especially those who cannot afford the services of lawyers. To think meant to act and thus the Bangladesh Nation Women Lawyers Association was formed. The BNWLA served two purposes: a. to render free legal support and services to needy and oppressed women, and b. boost confidence and give pro-

motional support to women lawyers who were denied opportunity in an unequal situation to practise their profession in various courts. The BNWLA, with the support of other NGOs, began to hold country-wide legal awareness and advocacy workshops in villages across Bangladesh, which were participated by rural women and women lawyers.

A few years earlier my husband and I had formed the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR), which assisted the public in enforcement of their rights especially when the law enforcers violated such rights or when, the unfortunate public, for no fault of theirs, were unlawfully confined either in jails or tortured in police custody. Trespasses, encroachments, land disputes, family disputes, illegal termination from service including dismissals etc. were/are handled by BSEHR which soon became a household name. BNWLA began to act as a support organisation to BSEHR with special emphasis on women clients. Today, both of them enjoy national and international recognition as effective and trustworthy organisations.

With the emergence of non-governmental organisations in post-war Bangladesh, realisa-

tion came that development would be easier, smoother and quicker if women could be brought into the programme. Small groups of women were formed at village level that discussed the nature and granting of loans to *bona fide* seekers, gave support to their distressed sisters especially when wrongs were inflicted on them. Most importantly, sisterhood was established and the spirit of solidarity was developed. This was the foundation to the empowerment of women and ever since, the women of Bangladesh, by and large, began to progress in the development of their political conscience. They became articulate and did not hesitate to speak their minds. This was evident in the 1991 parliamentary elections when for the first time the women openly differed from the dictates of their long established male dominance. It was reported that quite a number of divorces took place due to this independent exercise of options and choice. Ever since there has been no looking back and today's women are bold enough to participate in political rallies, election campaigns and even to contest for seats in local government elections. This, of course, caused commotion and we often hear of how the fundamentalists, obscurantists

and orthodox people, in the name of religion, created obstacles often leading to physical assault especially when women assemble for conventions and meetings. I am glad however that our women are brave and do not feel threatened by such moves.

These attempts to subjugate the women have only spurred our women to recognise that a united movement is essential to establish women's rights as human rights. Networking with a co-operation between organisations became the call of the day. As a result, confederations such as *Samilito Nari Samaj, Nari Pokkho, Sanghati* etc. were formed. United efforts saw justice being done in Saleha murderer case, Rima murder case, Yasmine rape and subsequent murder case. However, in the sensational and gruesome rape and murder case of Seema Chowdhury and rape of minor girl Tania, the failure of women groups to unite and network due to political partisanship and different political beliefs have led to acquittal of the accused in Seema case on grounds of improper investigation, insufficient and/or lack of evidence and apprehension of miscarriage of justice. What was revealed in these two cases is that by such failure to pursue an effective united networking sys-

tem we failed to keep the pressure on the investigation authorities to properly conduct their investigations so that the poor victims of violence could be avenged. However, in the Seema case, BSEHR filed a criminal case against the investigation officers for:

- a. causing disappearance of evidence of offence or giving false information to screen offender (section 201 BPC);
- b. for framing incorrect record or writing with intent to save person from punishment (section 218 BPC);
- c. for corruptly making report etc. contrary to law (section 219 BPC); and
- d. for abetting in consequence where no express provision is made for its punishment (section 109 BPC).

I must mention here that as prior sanction is required before a criminal case can commence against a government officer, we applied for it to the Ministry of Home Affairs who gave us the sanction to proceed against one official only but the Prime Minister's office took *suo moto* notice of the same and issued us the necessary sanction against all three accused. This could well be attributed to the Prime Minister being a female.

But by and large the authorities as well as the politicians are not concerned about women issues. So much so that even the women in politics do not concern themselves about their rights or status or that they desire to improve their lot. Femininity is usually confused with subservience or subjugation. I humbly submit that this is not correct. One can be assertive in protecting her right as an equal partner and in establishing her human rights and still remain feminine. We must not confuse feminism with being feminine. The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language has very explicitly defined 'femininity' as the quality of being feminine and 'feminism' as the policy practice or advocacy of political, economic and social equality for women. On occasions I love to dress up and have often been told that I dress up to attract attention. But being a Libran I am basically prone to dressing up and looking good — not to please any one but for my own vanity. This does not mean that I am not involved in the struggle for equality or in the movement to enforce women's rights as human rights. In fact, if we look at our two ideals — Begum Rokeya and Begum Sufia Kamal — we shall find that both of them were positively feminine and feminist at the same time and these two qualities made them more acceptable to the women of our country.

On paper and more specifically in the Constitution of Bangladesh, women are deemed to enjoy equality. In fact Article 27 of the Constitution States that all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. Further Article 28 states that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. It goes on to again specifically state in Article 28 (2): *Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life.* Article 26 of the Constitution in its two parts have asserted: *All existing laws inconsistent with the provisions of this Part (meaning that part of the Constitution dealing with Fundamental Rights) shall, to the extent of such inconsistency, become void on the commencement of this Constitution.* Again, *The State shall not make any law inconsistent with any provisions of this Part (meaning the Fundamental Rights part of the Constitution) and any law so made shall, to the extent of such inconsistency, be void.* Having said this, we however find that where the question of women enjoying equal rights within the family sphere such as equal right to divorce, inheritance, guardianship etc. are concerned we face obstacles in the guise of personal and customary laws. Discrimination is also prevalent in the nationality and citizenship laws. A Bangladeshi female citizen cannot transfer her nationality to her children while, on the contrary, the Bangladeshi male can by virtue of his own nationality pass down his nationality to his offspring or descendant. Law has imposed these discriminations upon women and it is again the law which decries such discriminations.

Despite the dismal picture painted by the world that he Bangladeshi women are behind times, they are subservient to and controlled by their men etc., we can hold our heads high and retort that we too have our heroines and that we too have on many occasions proved to the world that our women are

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Today, we do see more and more women entering public life as elected members of local bodies despite all the barriers including violence perpetrated by those who detest changes and cannot accept their women being visible and participating in the evolution of policies or in positions of authority. Indeed, a long way from the days of Begum Rokeya! She must be feeling proud that she has paved the way to enlightenment of the Bengali women.



Women are more vocal these days than ever before for their rights

The millennium is ours

by Farida Akhter

CAN WE READ the future from the present? Yes. As a historical being and a materialist we must be affirmative. Do we live the past in the present? Of course, we do. Human beings are fascinating. They can recollect, re-gather and offer new interpretation to the past and present experiences. Memory is feminine, since its primary task is to re-produce and re-present what is absent. Masculine culture forgets the past. I believe that creating the future from the present embedded in the past is a feminine proposition. In this spirit in mind I will make some general comments when we playfully engage in making some futuristic observation from our life experiences. Many forward-looking questions are arising in our minds. How would the coming centuries and millennium world be? What is possible and achievable and what we must keep as our dreams and utopia.

As a person in Bangladesh, I feel that I am very lucky. Bangladesh is located in the 'South' in accordance with the world order mapping, a country which has experienced a liberation war. Being a member of a southern country, I have the opportunity to observe and experience the world dominated by North and can uncover the rhetoric and mystery of civilisational promises of the dominant powers. Clearly it has failed. Take the example of development.

"Development" is an inherently arrogant notion

The notion of "development" is inherently arrogant. It presupposes that the present model of western civilisation, particularly the industrial culture, is the only model available to us. We are backward and only the North is civilised and developed. To build a future civilisation for all we must reject this notion of development. I think we, in the south, can do that more easily than our sisters of the North. In this sense I am lucky.

Development does not mean more cars and more high-rise buildings, more cities, more consumer goods. We have seen that this has resulted in more

pollution and traffic jam, and destroying the very basis of life. At a more personal level we may experience that it results in more hypertension, depression and unhappiness among people. This model of development has already caused serious erosion of biological diversity, created alarming scarcity of drinking water. In Bangladesh we are now dying by arsenic and poisons in our drinking water, agriculture has been reduced to a very narrow genetic base, which is very dangerous. We are heading fast for a final battle

from the South. We have entered into an era we can term as the new world of the pirates re-colonising us through legal treaties, rules or agreements between States drafted by predators. Bangladesh is still one of the richest countries in the world, which enjoys immense biological wealth, local and indigenous knowledge and enormous energy of mind and spirit. So, to build the future for all we must protect ourselves from false promises, our resources as well as our knowledge and the divide between North and South is indeed an illusory demarcation.

Connected with the women of the world not only through my feminine spirit, but also through multiple connectedness of economy, globality, communication and most importantly the feminine dream. This global connectedness with other southern countries and people of the north is a tremendously powerful link that we should take full advantage in our work. The more we concentrate on our common future, the more it becomes clear that the divide between North and South is indeed an illusory demarcation.

edge and feminine politics. **Khona, a symbol of feminine knowledge**

Khona is a legendary personality in the mythical stories known to the common rural people, specially the farming communities. She was known for her knowledge in astronomy, meteorology and about day to day household affairs. She had a cosmic vision of the universe and agricultural practice to her was a form of realization of her feminine wisdom. Proverbs like *Jodi Borshey Magher Shesh, Dhonna Rajar Punna Desh* is commonly known to us all, even to the city people. It means sudden rain at the end of Bengali month Magh (late January or early February) is considered to be a good luck for the Kingdom and the King. Such rain is good for winter crops, horticulture and fruit trees. There is more bacterial activity in the soil making it more fertile. The rain at the end of Magh hastens the arrival of Falgun, the spring season. Khona's wisdom here has links with the state, polity, governance, and livelihood of the people with Sun and Rain. "Be Cosmic" is also proactive and productive and constitutive of the polity.

It is said the Khona's real name was Lilaboti. She was a Princess of Lanka deep. She was extraordinarily gifted with knowledge and feminine spirituality. After her marriage with Mihir, the son of pundit Baraha, in the court of King Bikramaditya, Lilaboti participated in the King's court with other wise-men. But at one point her father-in-law, felt that Khona was exceeding him

in wisdom. According to his order Khona's tongue was cut and therefore, she was made dumb. She died because of severe bleeding. Her husband Mihir noted down more of her words before he cut her tongue.

Khona highlights the repulsive atrocities of patriarchy, reducing women into speechless silence, very similar by which so called modern science and technology has silenced the wisdom of the people for the profit of the multinational. Even at this time of history our rural women are the possessors of knowledge on very fundamental issue such as seed preservation, knowledge on the identification of uncultivated food items in and around the fields, water bodies and more importantly, they know the plants which have medicinal qualities. They understand the interlinkages between seed, soil, sun and water, the basic elements of production and reproduction. There are many more Khonas spread all over the rural society. Our future survival will depend on their ability to take up the battle against Monsanto, Novartis, ACDI and many transnational companies and NGOs who have allied with these forces.

From Rokeya to Sufia Kamal

The twentieth century started with many enlightened women such as Begum Rokeya, Karimunnessa, Nawab Faizunnessa and many others. It was not easy for them to be self-educated. They managed to use the small lamps at night, after everybody went to sleep. Women enlightened themselves, when

Over the entire span of the century women fought against colonialism, participated in the language movement and the movement for democracy. Usually people think that women's movement is only against violences such as rape, killing, wife battering, acid throwing etc. But the history shows completely different picture. The major movements in the history of this region could not take place without women's participation. Male historians have ignored, suppressed and obliterated the records.

survivors over biological resources and water. In short, this model of development kills people. As a southern woman, I am "lucky" because I can see and perceive it now, and can act before it is too late.

The northern countries are now hungry for biological diversity. They have been pirating resources illegally but now creating legal instruments like patenting of life to steal more

joyous life. We must enjoy life, but must not turn into a consuming machine. The experiences of the past have taught us that we must transform the meaning of "development", we must revitalise the promises of emancipation with different goals, spirit and lifestyles.

Global connectedness is positive

I am also lucky because I am

connected with the women of the world not only through my feminine spirit, but also through multiple connectedness of economy, globality, communication and most importantly the feminine dream. This global connectedness with other southern countries and people of the north is a tremendously powerful link that we should take full advantage in our work. The more we concentrate on our common future, the more it becomes clear that the divide between North and South is indeed an illusory demarcation.

dominant power of the world. With all the patriarchal discriminations against women, we have survived the last millennium. We have survived the witch-hunting to wife burning, battering and all forms of violence against women and subjugation. In the South Asian region, we grew out of the wisdom of Khona. We can take her as a brilliant example to symbolise the struggle of feminine knowl-

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