

Selected extracts from the March issue of Forum

Sultana's Nightmare: Henas and the Feminist Movement

SHAHANA SIDDIQUI

SOME 20 years ago, a mother and a daughter visited our household to seek advice from my family. It was one of those busy days, with people coming in and out and so they were asked to wait while I kept them entertained. Shafia Khala, our ayah, chatted with the mother while I made friends with the pretty young girl, a few years older than me. After they left, Shafia Khala re-told the story that, looking back now, seems very inappropriate for a pre-teen child. It was a horror story of rape and pillage of that young girl and her older brother. The siblings were kidnapped when the girl was about 12 and the boy was about 14. I forget how long they were in captivity but just about every day the girl was raped while the brother was physically tortured and made to watch his sister being violated. After spending a fortune running from one authority figure/office to another, the parents finally rescued the children. Not all the perpetrators were brought to law. Along with the emotional trauma,

the girl's reproductive system was completely damaged and her brother lost his sanity. This story still haunts me. Her face still comes into my thoughts from time to time. Moreover, her story angers me. It angers me that 20 years later, nothing fundamentally has changed for many girls/women. It angers me that four decades of feminist movement, thousands of street protests, millions of dollars worth of gender empowerment projects, and two monumental laws (Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Daman Ain, 2000 and The Domestic Violence Bill, 2010) later, we are still haunted every day with stories of rape, violence, inhuman torture against girls and women and worst of all, the stigma that is attached to this violence that stops us from seeking justice within our families and the formal courts. From the girl who came to my house 20 years ago to the recent Hena tragedy, to be born a girl is to live a life of fear for our basic safety and this intangible yet life encompassing concept of honour. While we write angry letters of



ZAHEDUL I KHAN

protest against the shalish committee in Shariatpur that issued the fatwa against Hena three weeks ago;

while we raise our fists against patriarchy at every public forum; while we take these perpetrators to court

one by one, I wonder how any of this make the streets safe, the neighbourhood friendly, and the people more

caring and respectful? There is no doubt in any of our minds that Mahbub and the shalish committee are violators and killers of little Hena. But are they the only ones who took Hena to her untimely death? We rightly denounce the fatwas and argue that these "religious" directives were banned by the High Court. But the sad truth remains that far too many people in Bangladesh still rely on the informal arbitration and mediation systems such as the shalish to solve their day-to-day problems. Communities revere the religious leaders and look towards them for directions. Women rights activists or other rights-promoting organisations/individuals in the local communities are respected but not seen in the same light as the religious leaders.

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on March 7. Shahana Siddiqui is a member of the Drishtipat Writers' Collective. She is a development practitioner and can be reached at shahana@drishtipat.org.

Women in the CHT: The Violent Hills

HANA SHAMS AHMED

PAHARI women are among the most marginalised and vulnerable groups of people in Bangladeshi society. They live as quadruple minorities under present social and political institutions. In a patriarchal and male-dominated society, they are a gender minority. In a Muslim-dominated country they are a religious minority. In a nationalist, Bangali-dominated society they are an ethnic minority. Within their own patriarchal community they face marginalisation, exploitation, and increasingly, violence. A strong political movement exists to resist this multiple marginalisation, but it has not been able to create enough resonance within the wider political structure. The overwhelming number of Bangali settlers in the CHT has resulted in harassment and violence against Pahari women within the once secure neighbourhood of their homes. With no control over land dispossession and the non-functioning of the Land Commission to blame for this, and no sign of the army's loosening its grip over the CHT, it is indeed a worrying trend. There is no documentation of the exact number of women physically assaulted or sexually harassed or raped by the



MAHMUDUL HASAN

to justice and absolute impunity that perpetrators enjoy. In rape cases, the victim ends up going through further harassment from the side of the administration and law enforcers -- there have been instances where doctors at hospitals have refused to give Pahari women physical check ups or delayed the physical check ups so that the evidence disappears; the victim's family is asked to produce a 'witness' by the police; there is intimidation from the security forces, in at least one case the raped girl was further molested by the physical examiner himself; one victim who did not know Bangla had to 'act out' the crime in front of the court; there have been complaints about police delaying/refusing to take the case and many have been too afraid to file a case in fear. These and many other administration-led intimidation and harassment ultimately results in the perpetrator getting away with his crime.

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Hana Shams Ahmed is a member of the Drishtipat Writers' Collective and can be reached at hana@drishtipat.org. This is a condensed version of a paper that was presented by the author at a consultation organised by APWLD and WAO with the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in January 2011.

army and Bangali settlers in the CHT. Before the CHT 'Peace' Accord was signed there were reports of mass rapes by the army, some of which were documented in CHT Commission's report 'Life is not ours' and Amnesty International's reports 'Unlawful Killings and Torture in the CHT'. But there have been no investigations and no subsequent legal redress. And this impunity still continues even after insurgency ended more than 13 years ago. The biggest concern in rape and other violence against women in the CHT now is the lack of access

Empress Extraordinaire

RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN

NURJAHAN has been made into an icon amongst the Mughal women and her image has been popularised in literature, songs and poetry. However, recent day scholarly studies have somewhat deflated the image of Nurjahan by introducing a whole line of Mughal women who held powerful positions and negotiated important and sensitive political treaties. Yet Nurjahan remains one of the most extraordinary Mughal women because of her assertive female individuality that challenged the normative role of a Muslim woman. When revisiting historical figures such as the Mughal women, especially Muslim Mughal women, it is useful to break down the public-private dichotomy established in earlier historical representations and locate women outside the realm of submissive privacy of the sexualised harem; it is however, also necessary to recognise the unique individual qualities asserted by certain females like Nurjahan, who actually superseded many of her predecessors and successors. It is because of the unique qualities possessed by Nurjahan along with the circumstantial elements that made her stand up as a strong female icon even in the face of orientalist patriarchal historiography.

The implications of contemporary historical recreations of the Mughal emperors are loudly pronounced over the politics of national and communal identity making processes in South Asia. The recreation of Aurangzeb as a liberal

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king who has actually been tainted by Western scholarship is reproduced in the 2004 version of secondary Bengali history text books published by the national education board of Bangladesh; such revision is directly linked with the rise of a Sunni Islamic ruling bloc in Bangladesh in 2001. As the recreation of Mughal emperors and their roles in history have far fetching consequences in contemporary identity making processes and national politics; one may ask, what implications does the absence of such simultaneous female characters have to reveal about the social role and identity of women in contemporary South Asian societies? Popular history remembers Shahjahan as a great and eternal lover, but little is known about Mumtaz Mahal in that respect.

Similarly, popular history may venerate Akbar or Aurangzeb, however, it is not until specialised scholarly research is carried out by historians equipped with a feminist lens, that we come to find out about the extraordinary political role played by Mughal women, Gulbadan Banu for instance. The construction and reconstruction of historical figures in popular imagination is symptomatic of our present day social context. The limited role that has been attributed to modern day Bengali bhadramahila cannot possibly fit into its past a Muslim female predecessor who led a pilgrimage to Mecca almost 500 years ago. Thus, Gulbadan Banu figures nowhere in popular history. Similarly, popular history has remained silent about other significant Mughal women. However, Nurjahan somehow managed to seep herself into the realm of popular imagination, as she figures in Bengali songs, plays, novels and TV dramas. Though in these imaginations Nurjahan is actually represented as nothing more than a sensual lover versed in Persian poetry; nevertheless, the important point to note is: unlike other Mughal women, Nurjahan could not be ignored!

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Why Women in India Should Defend Arundhati Roy

A PATRIOTIC DISSENTER

I was surprised and saddened to turn on the television one day last October and see every channel flagrantly attacking writer-activist Arundhati Roy for a speech she made in favour of Kashmir's independence from India. I have heard Arundhati Roy speak in Berkeley some years ago, downloaded her audio books and frequently watched her interviews on Amy Goodman's Democracy Now TV show. Based on her record of speaking out against various injustices, I felt that she was less likely to put the volatile Kashmiri situation at risk for her own gain than to use her fame to bring attention to the grave atrocities being perpetrated by the Indian

army against ordinary Kashmiris. A few days later, I received a full transcript of her speech through an email forward and thought that it was passionate and well-informed. But the news gurus seemed to be fanning patriotic flames on TV while debating whether the government should arrest her on sedition charges. This had further implications on the free speech of the people of India, frequently touted as 'the world's 'largest' democracy'. Worse still, the tone and language used to criticise Arundhati Roy was offensive and I felt that it was an attempt by the patriarchal establishment to demonise her in the media. Leading male lawyers took turns dismissing Roy as irrelevant and someone who should 'at best, be



JEAN-BAPTISTE LABRUNE

ignored'. The popular newspaper *The Hindu's* National Bureau Chief Siddharth Varadarajan's remarks at a recent debate organised by the Foundation for Media Professionals corroborated my views. He said, "A combination of 'hypernationalistic ventilation and cut-throat competition' among TV channels had fanned the demand for the arrest of Arundhati Roy, when the Home Minister himself was not enthusiastic. A 'pusillanimous political leadership' had played along, fearing to say in public (that it is not keen on prosecuting Roy) what it admitted in private. Illiberalism was on the rise because of this." On the other hand, online comments under news stories about Roy's speech were often obscene, with jingoistic

male users calling her unmentionable curse words. Eventually, the ruling Congress party did not charge Roy with sedition because her speech was not inciting people to violence, a prerequisite for a sedition judgment, according to the Supreme Court. This was a relief, because not long before, authorities sentenced another activist -- Dr Binayak Sen -- to life imprisonment for sedition, even though there were no accusations of incitement to violence. For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on March 7. The writer is a media professional originally from Bombay who now lives in Goa, India. She began her own NGO two years ago which trains women to use information and communication technologies to speak out about social issues and earn through alternative livelihoods.