

Women in Bangladesh

Victims of Tradition

by *Roksana Nazneen*

L'auteure jette un regard sur la place des femmes au Bangladesh. Elle s'attarde entre autres sur la coutume de la dot qui est versée à l'époux et à sa famille. Dès

leur tendre enfance, on enseigne la soumission aux femmes de ce pays afin de les préparer à l'abus émotionnel, physique et légal qu'elles subiront tout au long de leur vie.

My husband's business was not doing well and I was blamed for that. They said I brought bad luck.

Saidur Rahman (22) did not ask for dowry when he married Shefali (16). But he started to ask for money from her father soon after the wedding was over. The father managed to give him 4,000 Taka which he spent in gambling. Now Saidur wanted another 5,000 Taka. Shefali tried to explain her father's poor financial condition and Saidur started to beat her. That night, when Shefali went to sleep after having an argument, Saidur poured a can of kerosene on her body and lit her on fire. While she was screaming from pain, Saidur locked the door from outside and fled from the scene. The neighbours came to her rescue and took her to the hospital immediately. Shefali is fighting for her life with third degree burns all over her body.¹ (*Chitrabangla*, 3 November 1994: 25)

The life of a newborn baby girl in Bangladesh starts with the disappointment that she brings to her family simply by being born. After giving birth to her third daughter, my mother heard my great-grandmother cursing and saying, "I do not want anymore of this." She is not to be blamed for

her sincere reaction. It takes a woman to know a woman's fate.

Bangladesh's social, cultural, and religious traditions emphasize the dependence of women on men and social conditioning glorifies this dependence. Despite a large number of female-headed households—nearly 15 per cent of all rural households and 25 per cent amongst the landless (Rothschild and Mahmud)—male headship of families is still the most widely accepted structure in the Bangladeshi culture (Hossain *et al.*). Jahan found that 70 per cent of rural and 80 per cent of urban men respectively considered women to be inferior to men and motherhood to be the most desirable role for women.

It is tradition to name a newborn son by sacrificing an animal (usually a cow or a goat) and by arranging a big feast for family, friends, and neighbours, because a son is considered a "worker" and carries the family name. But a daughter's birth simply goes unnoticed because she is a symbol of "bad luck"—an economic drain.

A giant tornado hit the coastal line on April 29, 1991 around 10:00p.m. The small island, Kutubdia, was literally under water in no time. Abdul Motaleb, a local school teacher, grabbed his son and one of his daughters and was trying to fight the tidal waves. The rest of his family, his elderly parents, wife, and three other daughters perished under water. After some time Mr. Motaleb got tired and had to let go of one of his children in order to save one. He let go of Kohinur (10), the daughter. Mr. Motaleb is still haunted by Kohinur's last cry, "Daddy, don't leave me! Please, grab me..." Mr. Motaleb was later asked by the journalists why he chose his son over his daughter. His answer was, "It

was easy. He was my 'son'."
(*Bichitra*, 31 May 1991: 7)

The birth of a daughter frightens the parents. Girls have to be fed but they do not earn money. Also, parents have to pay a large amount of dowry when girls get married (Nazneen). Although most people in Bangladesh are Muslim, it is not clear why they do not practice the Islamic tradition which dictates that the groom pays dowry to the bride's family. Instead, they follow the Hindu tradition of dowry paid by the bride's family to the groom, perhaps because it serves their own interests.

A woman in the Bangladeshi society is conditioned to be submissive from early childhood. She is taught two virtues—patience and sacrifice—of ideal Bangalee womanhood (Jahan). She ceases to be an individual the moment she gets married. It is not only her husband, but his entire family who have control over her life. From the first day of her married life, the bride is bound to obey not only her husband, but also his mother, father, sisters, and brothers. They all have the "right" to "discipline" the bride. The bride's family tries their best to keep the groom's family satisfied by fulfilling their financial demands. This is still a reality even when two or three generations of people live under the same roof.

I come from a family in which giving or taking dowry is considered a sin. But because we were rich, my in-laws expected my family to pay a large amount of dowry anyway. The verbal abuse began on my wedding night. I remember I cried through the whole night which should have been a special night. My husband's business was not doing well at that time, and I was blamed for that. They said I brought bad luck to the family.

I still have nightmares about the brief period I spent with my in-laws.

I could not go anywhere without my mother-in-law's permission. Sometimes I was lucky enough to get permission when she thought it was absolutely necessary, but I had to be chaperoned by one of my brothers-in-law. They used to tell me what to wear. I was only allowed to eat what my mother-in-law gave me by her own hand three times a day. Snacking between meals was forbidden (a popular belief is that a good woman eats

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less). I was hungry all the time but I did not have the courage to ask for food. One day my husband bought me a pie and a soda and he hid me under the staircase so nobody could see me eating. Unfortunately my brother-in-law caught us red-handed and my husband had to face a very hostile family led by my mother-in-law. I never dared to eat behind their backs again.

My in-laws took all my wedding gifts, including all the jewellery my mother, sister, and other relatives gave me. Later I found out my mother-in-law sold the jewellery. She did not think to ask me first as she still believes she is the rightful owner of all my belongings. When I finally left and returned to my mother's house to live, I was not even allowed to take my clothes with me.

I allowed this to happen to me, even though I had a bachelors degree in sociology, was completing my masters, and was enjoying a successful career as a writer. Dowry is illegal in Bangladesh, but laws have little impact on social practices.

I finally left my country in secrecy and came to Canada to start a new life. When I consider what is happening to hundreds of Bangladeshi women every day, I think I am lucky.

Akram (26) started to ask Mukta (18) to get a large amount of money from her father soon after the wedding was over. Her father, Minhazuddin Mandal, a

well-known freedom fighter, was a poor man. He spent all his savings on the wedding arrangements and did not have any money to give his son-in-law. Each time Mukta failed to bring money from her father, she was brutally beaten by Akram and his family.

One day her father-in-law ordered all his daughters-in-law to bring 5,000 Taka each from their fathers, so he could buy a piece of land. He told them that those who could not do that, would be thrown out of the house. Mukta started to cry and tried to explain that her father was already in debt as her sister had been married only a few days ago. The father-in-law got angry and started to beat her. Soon her husband and his cousin Hamid joined in the beating. She lost consciousness and was bed-ridden for a few days. As soon as she gained her strength back, she was ordered to go to her father's house to get the money.

It was April 9, 1989. It was the month of Ramadan. Mukta was getting ready to go to her father's house. Hamid, her husband's cousin, suggested that she should carry some kind of beating marks on her body to convince her father to get serious about the money. Akram agreed and started to beat her with a wooden stick. Hamid thought that was not enough. So he brought a rod made of iron and hit her viciously on the head. Mukta died almost instantly. The in-laws took no time to think about what to do. They poured acid on her face and neck and hung her body from a tree to make it look like a suicide. The police report and the autopsy revealed the truth later. (*Bartaman Dinkal*, 26 May 1989: 34)

This is such a common story that people do not seem to care anymore. Nowadays newspapers print this kind of news in one or two lines:

On March 5, 1991, Baby Akhtar (19) was killed by her husband in her home in Uttara for dowry-money. (*Bichitra*, 15 March 1991: 18)

On May 18, 1991, Nurjahan (25) finally died after suffering two months from severe burns all over her body as her mother-in-law set her on fire for dowry-money. (*Bichitra*, 31 May 1991:16)

On June 5, 1991, Rokaya Begum (30) was beaten to death by her in-laws in Feni. (*Bichitra*, 14 June 1991: 18)

On October 2, 1994, Khorsheda Begum was beaten to death by her in-laws in Chittagong. (*Chitrabangla*, 28 October 1994: 28).

Dowry-related crimes only make news when there is a death involved. But the emotional and physical abuse, going on daily in almost every Bangladeshi household, simply goes unnoticed. Women's economic and physical limitations prevent them from taking an individual stand against domination by one male or several allied males. And surprisingly, women are also encouraging this abuse by assisting men. In most families, it

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is the mother-in-law who has the ultimate power over a bride. There is no doubt that the mother-in-law was also abused when she was a bride, and she takes her revenge when the time comes.

Religion has always been used as a tool to dominate women. There is an old saying that a wife's heaven is under her husband's feet. Religious

stories teach women to follow the examples of Fatema, Aisha, and Hazera—wives and daughter of the prophet Muhammad—who were obedient to their father and husband. Women are encouraged to practice *purdah* (though many women have never used the veil or *hijab*). *Purdah* involves the exclusion of women from the public “male” sphere of economic, social, and political life (Chen 59). According to Mernissi, *purdah* divides all social spaces into sex related ones and keeps female sexuality firmly under male control. The whole female population (above 3,000) of a village in Chagalnaia could not vote

in the Parliamentary elections held in 1991, because the religious leader preached that it is anti-Islamic for women to vote as it “violates” the basic rules of *purdah* (*Bichitra*, 15 March 1991: 6).

The influences that seek to strengthen conservative Islamic values in Bangladesh promote the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalist groups and the establishment of Islamic teaching and propagandist institutions. Religious leaders of these political groups, who are concerned with building a “perfect” Islamic society, usually direct their attention to women’s dress and women’s proper Islamic behaviour. Recently, the Bangladesh Government gave instructions to women to clothe themselves properly to preserve their modesty and public morality (Nasreen).

In 1988, the Constitution was amended to declare Islam the official state religion of Bangladesh. Everything people do against women in this country is done in the name of Islam. Laws relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance are regulated by religious laws and men always have greater rights than women. Discrimination against women is not considered abnormal, but is a way of life. People usually do not understand what is wrong about it. As a consequence, research in this particular area remains totally neglected in Bangladesh. State law alone is not enough to prohibit the dowry system, or any of the other forms of discriminations against women. What Bangladesh needs is a social awakening, as well as changes in attitudes and beliefs of both men and women, and an increased sense of individual self-worth for women.

Roksana Nazneen came to Canada from Bangladesh in 1988 and currently lives in Montreal. She is a Ph.D. candidate in Humanities at Concordia University. Recently, one of her papers was included in a graduate-level textbook, Interpersonal Violence: Health and Gender Politics, published by Brown and Benchmark in Iowa. She has written numerous short stories and novels in

Bengali. Seven of her books have been published in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹All excerpts from newspaper articles are translated by the author.

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Shilla, Himachal Pradesh, India 1994
Photo: Brenda Cranney