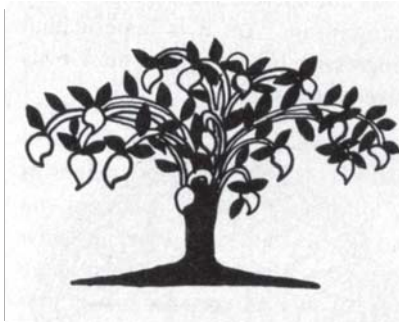


Responses to Manushi

Undeserved Fame?

I have been an admiring reader of your magazine since I received a gift subscription back in the 1980s. I have great respect for your editorial judgement and that's why I was surprised to see an article on Taslima Nasreen (Issue 85). Some people in the West tend to describe Taslima as a media queen, but I and many others like me feel that she has never managed to reach the core of women's problems in her own country.

There are two movements going on in Bangladesh — the women's movement and the movement against fundamentalism (or you can call it religious fanaticism). Taslima is involved in neither of these. She is also not a part of the real field work many women are doing among the majority of women living in villages, outside big cities, or living in the slums of big cities. She has charmed the West, but she is not the only person who has spoken against religious oppression of Muslim women. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932), who pioneered the emancipation and education of women, knew that the true emancipation of women is an intrinsic part of secularism. She believed that the greatest obstacle to the natural development of women is the *purdah* system. Long ago Begum Rokeya said: "...the oppression of women is



the greatest where the shackles of religion are the strongest.... At the end, religion has made our bonds of slavery from strong to stronger, man is now making use of religion to dominate over woman."

The activities of the fundamentalists in Bangladesh have increased alarmingly of late. The most powerful and organised group of fundamentalists is the Jamat-e-Islami, an organisation that opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Today its members are actively and enthusiastically taking part in the politics of independent Bangladesh. The Jamat-e-Islami has never been found to be interested in preaching religion. Its goals are different — to establish a power base to banish progressive, non-communal thoughts from the hearts of people, to destroy good values and to establish the influence of its foreign masters. It is with the help of foreign money and foreign patronage that it is managing to create a solid position in spite of its

despicable role during the 1971 war of liberation in Bangladesh.

The government is not objecting at all. It would be wrong, however, to think that Jamat-e-Islami is being allowed to continue with all its activities without any opposition at all. Popular protest and the movement against Jamat-e-Islami have solidified greatly. Progressive, non-communal, patriotic people have united against Jamat-e-Islami. That is why the seats won by Jamat during the last elections were not at all in proportion to the huge amount of money spent by the party.

In 1991, the hatred and resentment of the common people of Bangladesh against Jamat-e-Islami turned into a fierce protest movement spearheaded by Jahanara Imam, who is very highly respected by all the patriotic people of Bangladesh. Her young son Rumi became a martyr in the war of 1971. Her husband also died prematurely. This great woman — educationist, social reformer, writer — was fighting against cancer for the last several years of her life. At the same time, she had been tirelessly leading this countrywide popular movement. Just to think of the strong determination and endless energy that make such a feat possible makes one bow one's head in awe and wonder. She died last year.

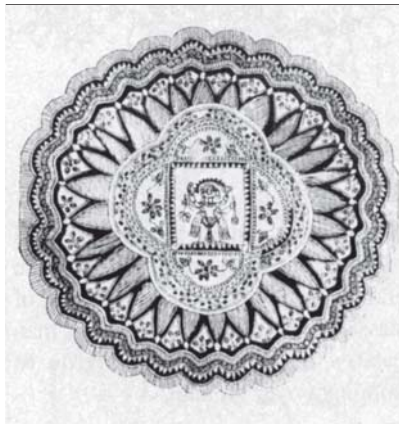
Apart from Jahanara Imam, the

movement also has the active support of the elderly poet and reformer, Begum Sufia Kamal, and of men and women of various ages and professions.

People of Bangladesh, who are Bengalis more than they are Muslims, have never accepted fundamentalism or religious fanaticism. This is true of almost the entire population of the country, excepting a small handful. That does not mean that the people of Bangladesh are not religious. The majority of the people are religious, regardless of their being Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or Christians. The larger land-area known as Bengal — which was divided into two as a result of the manipulations of the British rulers and their political collaborators in the last days of the Raj — received various groups of people over time. All have brought with them their own languages, faiths, cultures, customs and practices. They have left their influences all over the country. The different ways of life of not only Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Christians, but also of the various aboriginal groups of this country, have left their mark. These cultures have influenced each other, and exchanges of customs and practices have taken place. This has not given rise to insoluble disputes or resulted in conflicts in the past. The people of this land have always been unique in their respect for one another's beliefs. But players of political games are trying to change them and the progressive forces are fighting against that.

Though women constitute half the population of the country, the majority of them are still deprived of the light of education. Economic compulsions in post-independence Bangladesh have persuaded many women to come outside their homes and enter various kinds of services and professions.

Although initially there was some opposition to this, society has gradually accepted this new role for women. The male earning members of many families were killed or reported missing in the liberation war. As a result, the women had to take up the task of supporting the household and they have discharged this duty creditably. But even when a woman is engaged in productive work for 12 to 14 hours a day, the value of her work is not considered; she is not given any recognition. Yet it is hopeful that progressive battles against these evils have now started.



Women are now realising that fanaticism is an obstacle to their progress and emancipation. But whatever rights women have gained and whatever awareness has been created are being destroyed by the revival of fundamentalism. To religious fanatics, the place of women is only within the four walls of the house and women are no better than mere commodities for consumption, slaves, and instruments for producing children. They do not recognise women as beings equal to men. They do not accept the fact that women too should have the same rights and opportunities as men.

Even before the Ershad administration passed the State Religion Bill, religion had become a highly sensi-

tive issue for the government, a weapon for the anti-liberation forces. The situation will become clear to you if I mention just a few items published in the newspapers.

- The self-proclaimed Imam of Moulabi Bazar in Sylhet served a *fatwa* against a woman named Noorjahan. In accordance with this edict, Noorjahan was buried up to her chest in the ground and stoned 101 times. The bricks and stones hurled at her did not kill Noorjahan, but she later committed suicide because she could not bear this insult and disgrace.

- A *fatwa* was served against a woman named Firoza of Kaligunj in Satkshira district by the superintendent of the local *madrassa*, and the chairman of the Union Parishad (council) aided and abetted him. Firoza was punished by 101 beatings with a broomstick and she committed suicide later.

- Noorjahan Begum of Madhukhali in Faridpur was tied to a post, kerosene was poured all over her body and she was set on fire.

- The sentence passed on Kadam Banu of Dewantooli in Rangpur was that she be buried in the ground up to her chest and stoned. Kadam Banu, however, managed to escape and no one knows where she is now.

All these incidents were the results of women refusing to sacrifice themselves before the lust of some powerful, influential man or other. The women's organisations of Bangladesh have of course protested against such incidents, launched demonstrations condemning those responsible, and called on the government to take necessary action. But no positive action has been taken by the government.

The unfortunate thing is that the outside world does not seem to be

interested in knowing about these women who do not have money, influential families or powerful friends to stand beside them in their times of trouble. Kadam Banu of Dewantooli in Rangpur had managed to escape from her village. But where could she go? She could not go to Sweden or Germany. She could not hide. Perhaps by now she has become a beggar or a prostitute. These kinds of crimes against humanity are still going on in Bangladesh, while the international humanist groups are silent. Maybe they have exhausted their quota of concern for Bangladesh in lending support to Taslima.

The women's movement and the anti-fundamentalism movement are struggling to change this situation for the people of Bangladesh. Jahanara Imam, making nothing of her ill health, gave leadership to the movement against fundamentalism and women's battle for their rights. Begum Sufia Kamal ignored her advanced age. The women of Bangladesh are finding their way out of the darkness of their lives into the light held up by these inspiring women. Perhaps they have not built up momentum yet, but they are indeed moving forward.

Taslima Nasreen is a fortunate woman who enjoyed the advantages available to educated urban woman. She has given an entirely biased and one-sided picture of the situation in Bangladesh to her readership. That is the reason why the writer of your article confused Bangladesh with his experience in Pakistan. Taslima gave the impression that she does not care about religion. But when her interview in *The Statesman* was published, where she was quoted to have spoke against Islam, she wrote to appeal against the Court's verdict to claim that she did not say those words.

I was born just after the Partition. I was brought up in Pakistan and at that time there was *Islami Josh* (Islamic fanaticism) in most places. I am fortunate that I belong to a progressive, liberal family and my parents brought me up as a Bengali. I started my career in the mid-seventies as a journalist and began to indulge my passion as a writer. The central theme in my writings has always been women's issues. I am married to an Indian Hindu and we do not face any problems in our conjugal life or with our respective families, nor has either of us changed religion. I am writing this letter to describe the real situation of my country to the readers of **Manushi**.

I have a humble request for the writer of that article, Shamsul Islam. Please visit Bangladesh. It is not Pakistan and that is the reason we could not remain a part of Pakistan. No one will try to tie any lucky charm on your arm! No one will be surprised to know that you live in India, "a Hindu country". See for yourself what Bangladesh really is: a country of fanatic, communal people as Taslima has described, or a country of friendly, hospitable, peace loving, ordinary people, religious at heart, but not fanatic.

Urmi Rahman, London, U.K.

We do not understand why you think Taslima Nasreen has misrepresented the reality of Bangladeshi women's lives. You yourself describe the situation as being pretty grim for Bangladeshi women in the examples you have given. She may not be active in women's organisations in Bangladesh,



Taslima Nasreen *Courtesy: India Today*

*but can one deny that she faced severe persecution for merely writing some simple facts about the plight of women and religious minorities in Bangladesh, as for instance, in her book **Lajja**? It is unfortunate that not many secular minded people or feminists came out to openly defend Taslima when Muslim religious fanatics issued a death sentence against her. We feel she should be supported for her courage in maintaining her position while facing up to their death threats.*

-Editor

Male Viewpoint

I have just received **Manushi** No. 80. The articles, as always, are informative and clinically analytical. But the issues are becoming somewhat political in overtones (e.g. the issue on Baba Lal Das) The recent issues in which you got the male viewpoint on dowry were a very good beginning. I think a meaningful dialogue should be initiated between committed people irrespective of barriers in gender, caste, etc.

V. Janaki, Madras

Self Monitoring

The article on self-regulation of voluntary agencies (**Manushi** No. 85) has brought out many points that need a proper debate in the society. As Madhu Kishwar has rightly pointed out, the main problem is the phenomenon of statism which has made people look to the government for solutions to our problems.

What needs to be appreciated is that statism has existed in almost all the countries in the world, right up to the 1970s. In the United States,

former President Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, in the United Kingdom there was nationalisation of many industries, and in Japan they formed Japan Inc. In quite a few cases, there were positive results. However, in almost all cases, the state intervention persisted longer than was necessary.

Kishwar has given a blueprint of what needs to be done, and her prescription is valid not only as far as what the government should do or should not do, but what society should do or not do. An aspect of statism has been that individuals have been made

to feel that they cannot be part of the solution. This is particularly true when it comes to those who are defined as intellectuals. This group seems to think that its job is only to identify the problems, and it is someone else who has to find the solution. When the solutions go haywire, as Kishwar herself has narrated some of her experiences, the group tries to distance itself away. It is to the credit of Kishwar that she has not done so, and has exhibited an openness that comes out of her confidence.

Ashok Chowgule, Bombay

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