

## **WOMEN, ISLAM AND THE STATE IN BANGLADESH SUBORDINATION AND RESISTANCE**

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After a period of political oblivion, the religious right in Bangladesh has not only made electoral gains in the early 1990s but also successfully engaged in political alliances which allowed it to campaign virtually unopposed for an Islamic state where women could step outdoors only at their own peril. Their many-speared campaign included attacks on development organisations which empowered women through offering loans, skills training and employment opportunities. They have argued that female emancipation is not part of God's plan. Therefore, schools for girls have not remained unscathed. Women who dared to challenge existing social codes, alongside those who did not have, are equally victims of violence and moral censure. These activities were at odds with the development objectives of the state. Yet, at times the role of the state was an ambivalent one. Where decisive action could have stemmed the tide, none was forthcoming.

This paper seeks to examine the position and status of women in Bangladesh in relation to the interplay of religion and politics. In order to do so it will first present some relevant background information on the history of the country and recent data on socio-economic indicators of female status. A discussion of the nature of women's subordination and resistance follows : the women's movement, though weak, has achieved some success in negotiating policy changes at the state level. Therefore, its interactions with the state merit some attention. An assumption shared by feminist scholars is that the patriarchal postcolonialist state reinforces gender inequality and

sanctions injustices against women.<sup>1</sup> This view will be examined within a context where political Islam has been an important force to reckon with.

It is argued in the paper that the position of the state was compromised when alliances were forged with the religious right. The Jama'at-i-Islami Party, in particular, is committed to the establishment of its own vision of an Islamic state, wherein the public role of women would be significantly curtailed. An alliance with this party would no doubt limit the capacity of the state to adopt public policies which do not reflect such views. In order to demonstrate the implications of the rise of the Jama'at for female emancipation and gender equality, the paper will examine its responses to the feminist writer Taslima Nasreen. Some of her works will be analyzed in an attempt to put into perspective the nature of her "offence" and expectations of society from women.

## **Background**

Bangladesh emerged in 1971 as an independent state committed to a secular liberal democracy. While its secular politics was compatible with ideas of gender equality, the new government was too busy dealing with the ravages of war to pursue this objective creatively. Nor was there a significant women's movement at the time to influence policy. A major concern of the state was to rehabilitate destitute or raped women. They were thus called *birangana* (brave) in attempt to give them some status. But more often marriage was regarded

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<sup>1</sup> Rajan notes, "In all postcolonial nations the state, envisaged as the guarantor of rights to its citizens, has invariably emerged instead as a major perpetrator of injustices - whether as a function of military power, or, as in India as an aspect of political parties electoral calculations." see Rajeswari Sunder RAJAN, *Real and Imagined Women : Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p.6.

as the only means of social acceptance.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, government and non-government initiatives were focussed on securing gainful employment for such women. As a result, initiatives such as skills-training and encouragement of cottage industries based on traditional crafts which could be marketed abroad were pursued. It was a time when organisations such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Ganoshathya Kendra and Grameen Bank were established, mobilising, educating, organising and conscientising women in an attempt to help them throw off the shackles of subordination and achieve some degree of financial security i.e., control over their own earnings.<sup>3</sup>

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's secular government was overthrown in 1975. After a series of military coups, Ziaur Rahman emerged as the next head of state with strong army backing. Hussein Muhammad Ershad, a repatriated military officer, became president after the assassination of Zia in 1981. Zia and Ershad pursued similar policies : decentralisation through the creation of *gram sarkar* and *Upazila Parishads* to gain new support bases in rural areas and increase the influence of the rural rich; winning the support of the Islamic orthodoxy by institutionalising Islam at the state level, while subscribing to women and development (WID) policies. There was also a shift to the right in international alignment, as Bangladesh moved away from India and the former Soviet Union, to establish closer ties with Pakistan, USA, Saudi Arabia and Libya.

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<sup>2</sup> Kabeer notes that rehabilitation, whether of prostitutes, jail inmates or other fallen women was determined by notions of "purity". Marriage ensured the return of women to a relatively pure state. Other initiatives focussed on gender specific training such as sewing, knitting etc. as acceptable women's work. Naila KABEER, *The Quest for National Identity : Women, Islam and the State*, Institute of Development Studies Discussion Paper, No. 268, Sussex, October 1989, pp.19-21.

<sup>3</sup> On the activities of these organisations, see N.M. WAHID (ed.), *The Grameen Bank : Poverty Relief in Bangladesh*, Boulder, Colorado, 1993, pp. 127-154; Naila KABEER, *Reversed Realities : Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London, 1994, pp. 236-240.

Both under Zia and Ershad, state policy on women pulled in opposite directions. At one level, it supported development initiatives funded by foreign donors which aimed to empower women; at another, it capitulated to the forces of religious extremism which sought to reverse this process. Kabeer has argued that both Zia and Ershad played a "...blatant balancing act between the conflicting gender ideologies implicit in different aid packages...to accommodate the conflicting demands of the Saudis and the Americans by preaching Islam while practising population control."<sup>4</sup> While the principle underlying the argument is valid, the examples cited reflect a bias. The argument assumes the view that birth control is not sanctioned in Islam whereas in fact, this is the interpretation given by some groups, including the Jama'at-i-Islami, while others disagree on the grounds that the Koran makes no explicit statement on the issue.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, some believers would find no contradiction in the twin policies pursued.

With the fall of Ershad and the resumption of the electoral process at the popular level, a civilian government was installed in 1991. But, the party in power, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), founded by General Ziaur Rahman, originated in the army and continued to maintain strong links with it. In addition to this, the acute crisis of governability faced by the state under Khaleda Zia because of a non-functioning parliament and escalating political violence made it unlikely to deviate from the path of Zia and Ershad in its internal and external policies. The approach, rather, was to muster the state machinery in a show of authority, notwithstanding the fact that it was a sign of weak government to muzzle opposition by force, instead of pursuing a path of political conciliation.

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<sup>4</sup> Naila KABEER, "Subordination and Struggle : women in Bangladesh", *New Left Review*, No.168, pp. 114-15.

<sup>5</sup> Tazeen M. MURSHID, *The Sacred and the Secular : Bengal Muslim Discourses. 1871 - 1977*, Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1995, chapter 7.

## **Socio-economic status of women**

Bangladesh is a low income developing country with a population of 114 million growing at the rate of 2% per annum. The female population is approximately 48.6%. 85% of the population is rural. The economy is primarily agrarian : 36% of the gross domestic product (GDP) originates in agriculture. The manufacturing sector accounts for only 10% of the GDP.<sup>6</sup> The country is dependent on aid for a large share of its development expenditure. This was 35% under Mujib, 40% under Zia and 48% under Ershad in the early years, 1981/82 to 1984/85; subsequently, this went down to 42% in the budget of 1986/87 to 1987/88.<sup>7</sup> Under the elected government of Khaled Zia, \$1,8 million in aid met two-third of the country's development expenditure in the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

The socio-economic indicators of female status reveal that women bear a disproportionately high share of the country's underdevelopment compared to men. The literacy rate for women, 15 years and above, is 24.2% compared to 45.5% for men of the same cohort. Their life expectancy is 55.4 years as against 56.4 years for men. The daily per capita calorie intake for women is 1,599 kcal while for men it is considerably higher, 1,927 kcal. The wage rates for women is 58% of men's for the same job, dropping to 43% during the slack season. As much as 43% women and only 8% men earn less than Tk 100 (\$2.5) per week.

Despite this bleak picture, there has been an increase in the levels of female participation in the national economy. Between 1983/84 and 1985/86, the economically active female

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<sup>6</sup> Debapriya BHATTACHARYA, "Women and industrial employment in Bangladesh : challenges and opportunities in the era of new technologies", a paper prepared for the United Nations University Institute for New Technologies, Dhaka, July 1994, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ben CROW, "The state in Bangladesh : the extension of a weak state", in Subrata K. MITRA (ed.), *The Post-Colonial State in Asia : dialectics of politics and culture*, New York, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p.207.

<sup>8</sup> D. BHATTACHARYA, op. cit., p. 10.



enhances dependence. Women are considered inferior by most men, even in professions like journalism.<sup>12</sup> Women's work is undervalued both in terms of pay and status. Women are primarily expected to be wives and mothers engaged in undervalued work like reproducing and rearing children, cooking, cleaning and looking after the household. Otherwise, they are expected to work in areas considered suitable for women: in the agricultural sector, this includes sowing, husking, reaping etc. and in the non-agricultural sector, teaching, sewing, knitting, crafts and embroidery, etc. But, as Bhattacharya points out, it is in the non-traditional sector of manufacturing that women may expect changes in the sexual division of labour, higher incomes and a concomitant change in social attitudes.<sup>13</sup>

State inability to contain poverty, illiteracy and corruption has posed limitations on the civil rights of women and ensured their vulnerability. Their search for a better life frequently leads them to fall prey to unscrupulous men who traffic in women in the international scene.<sup>14</sup> Often, their lack of knowledge about their rights prevents them from exercising these despite the introduction of legal literacy programmes in 1986 to conscientise and empower women.<sup>15</sup> They are not sufficiently protected from domestic violence, including dowry deaths because these are not treated as criminal offences which come under the jurisdiction of secular state laws, but are defined as family quarrels to be resolved under customary laws adjudicated in family courts. But, family laws treat women unequally: marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance,

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<sup>12</sup> Nahid BAKR "Problems faced by women journalists in Bangladesh", in Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman (eds.), *Infinite Variety*, Dhaka, University Press Ltd., 1994, pp. 319-21.

<sup>13</sup> D. BHATTACHARYA, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Kazi Sufia AKHTER, "Shishu o nari pachar prasange", *Edesh Ekal*, No. 2, April 1988, pp.23-26.

<sup>15</sup> Fatema Rashid HASAN "Limits and Possibilities of law and legal literacy: experience of Bangladesh Women", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct. 29, 1994, pp. WS-69-76.





dowry laws through the Dowry Prohibition Act 1983, and amendments to Muslim Family Law Act, 1961. Effectively, the law also sustains and perpetuates the capitalist and patriarchal system that does not facilitate women's empowerment.

In the eighties, the women's movement was only partially successful in obtaining a commitment from the state to eliminate inequality in accordance to the UN Resolution number 180 of 1976.<sup>16</sup> Articles 2, 13(a) and 16(d) were left out on the grounds that these were not in accordance to the *shariah*.<sup>17</sup> Article 2 stipulated that existing institutional structures such as the legal and judicial system as well as social norms and practices, should be modified in conformity with the provisions of the document. Article 13(a) laid down the principle whereby women would have equal opportunities to take out loans and mortgages, negotiate contracts and participate in sports and cultural activities. Article 16 provided for equal rights and responsibilities for women in relation to the family. In striking contrast to Ayub Khan, the military regimes of Zia and Ershad relied on religious sanction for their legitimacy; therefore, they were unable to fully endorse the document and risk the ire of the religious right.

It was thus no surprise that protests by the Oikya Badhya Nari Samaj against the State Religion Bill fell on deaf ears. Subsequently, Naripokkho filed a writ against the state claiming that the Bill was contrary to the fundamental rights of women. Nevertheless, Islam was given the status of state religion through a constitutional amendment in 1988. The state position is that women may achieve equality within the scope of the law

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<sup>16</sup> The resolution underpinned the plan of action for the UN Decade of Women and was submitted in 1980 to national governments to endorse and implement. The military regimes of Zia and Ershad looked to religious sanction for legitimacy and the religious right for support. The men of political Islam do not approve of female emancipation and do not believe in equality. Hence state policy was opposed to signing the document. Faced with tremendous pressure from women's groups, the document was partially approved and endorsed.

<sup>17</sup> Meherunnisa ISLAM, "Narir somanadhikar prosanga", *Edesh Ekal*, No. 4, December 1986 - January 1987, p. 37.

currently in practice, or by bypassing the impact of some of these. For example, under personal laws, sisters inherit half the share of their brother's inheritance. It is argued that the impact of this could be offset by parents through the institution of *heba* or gift. Similarly, although women do not automatically have the right of divorce or the promise of monogamy from husbands, these could be ensured in the marriage contract. However, since the eighties, and in particular, after the Nairobi Conference of 1986, women's groups have campaigned for legal reforms using the discourse of legal rights, assuming that it is possible to achieve equality through the law. Foremost, in their agenda is the introduction of an uniform civil code that would be applicable to all persons regardless of their religious convictions. The strategy involved lobbying the legislatur for legal reforms, questioning constitutional provisions, using the discourse of rights in the courts, emphasizing the need to protect individual rights, and lobbying for "informal" rights. The success of this strategy is likely to depend to an extent on the nature of the state, the political alliances on which it depends and the ideology it espouses.

The post-colonial state of Bangladesh has played a role in re-enforcing gender inequality, the reasons for which are both structural and normative. As a weak state, Bangladesh has had to content with enormous problems. Decisions are frequently not based on dialogue or compromise. The lack of consensus also means that it is unable to enforce decisions, ensure accountability, contain violence or implement the rule of law. As a weak, aid-dependent state, it is unable to stand up to donors and foreign governments.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it is loathe to shake the fragile superstructure of its ideologically fragmented power base.

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<sup>18</sup> In the third Five Year Plan, Tk 870 crore was allocated to Family Planning, Tk 550 crore to Health, Tk 75 crore to Social Welfare and Tk 50 crore to Women's Affairs. It is estimated that another Tk 50 crore was allocated for women through other sectors. See Planning Commission *The Third Five Year Plan, 1985-90*, Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, December 1985, pp. 371, 391, 396, 401.

## Jama'at-i-Islami and feminism

The increasingly important political role played by the Jama'at-i-Islami party in the early 1990s as a third force exercising the balance of power ensured continued tension between the world views of the religious right and feminists. The latter campaigned for state laws, a uniform civil code and abolition of personal laws, whereas the former considered customary laws to be non negotiable. A clash was therefore inevitable. The foundations were laid during the Zia period for the rise of the Islamic right. The entry of the military in politics provoked a legitimacy crisis. In the search for new support bases, the leadership adopted measures of inclusion and exclusion whereby Islamists were ushered in while secularists were being rendered ineffective. The Eighth Amendment to the Constitution was a major gain for the Islamists. Other achievements include a rising influence in the sphere of education manifesting in the number of *madrasahs* and recruitment of teachers and students (see Table 1 below). During the period of Ershad's rule there was more than a hundred fold increase in the number of government and affiliated *madrasahs* and nearly 300% increase in the number of staff and enrolment of students.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Madrasahs with Teachers and Students**  
(1977/78 to 1991/92)

	1977/78	1981/82	1990/91	1991/92
Madrasahs a/	1 976	2 864	5 959	6 025
Students	375 000	388 000	1 028 000	1 735 000
Teachers	21 579	29 608	83 761	94 961

a/ from secondary level and above - government and affiliated

Source : Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh*, various issues, based on information obtained from the Madrasah Board.

Another significant gain for the religious right occurred in the 1991 elections. None of the major parties achieved an absolute majority. A majority was achieved in parliament by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with the support of the Jama'at. Thus, for the first time in the history of the new nation,

the Jama'at achieved formal recognition and was placed in a position to influence government policy.

Although rehabilitated at the state level, the Jama'at was far from popular in the streets. The selection of Golam Azam as the *amir* of the Jama'at provoked a massive protest because he was accused of war crimes against Bengalis in 1971. The feminist writer Taslima Nasreen offered them a pretext to divert attention away from Golam Azam and increase the momentum of their campaign for the establishment of an Islamic state based on *shariah* laws. As a lone woman perceived to have stepped out of acceptable social bounds in a patriarchal society, she became a test-case in their campaign. Taslima was accused of subverting the cultural and religious values of the state and hence was depicted as a traitor to the state and religion, *rashtradrohi* and *dharmadrohi*. A process of "psychological manipulation" of the popular psyche was carefully orchestrated. Extracts from her works were presented out of context to portray her as one who insults Islam, hates men and is a woman of loose moral standards. In a leaflet, she is charged with accusing God to be a liar and of going against the dictates of religion by insinuating that the birth of a son or daughter has nothing to do with God's will but is determined by chromosomes.<sup>19</sup> By challenging existing codes and superstitions, she earned the censure of their upholders. Taslima rightly advocates the freedom of women to determine the size of their families. But, she provocatively describes it as the "freedom of the womb", *jarayur swadhinata*. Therefore, in the campaign of calumny against her she is accused of campaigning for free sex, a charge she vehemently refutes.<sup>20</sup>

Her harshest critiques were levelled against *pirs*, *mullahs* and *razakaars*. In her columns she wrote about their misdeeds and scathingly noted, "the image of a pir is no longer that of a good

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<sup>19</sup> Leaflet, *Dharmadrohi o deshadrohi nastikder rukhe darao*, Dhaka, Oitijhya Sangsad, 26 June 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Taslima NASREEN *Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya*, Dhaka, 1992, 1993, pp. 27-28. All translations of the extracts are by the author.

and pure Muslim - *pir* means evil, worthless and tremendously lustful men".<sup>21</sup> It is thus no wonder that these men of religion put a price on her head. Ostensibly, however, they were indignant at her suggestion that the Koran be revised, despite Taslima disclaimer to this offence, on the grounds that she advocated change *in shariah* laws only.

The Jama'at and its various front organizations took full advantage of the fact that Taslima's provocative message, language and style had alienated large segments of Bengali society, though for very different reasons.<sup>22</sup> Women accused her of "derailing the feminist movement". Politicians held her responsible for the bad press Bangladesh was receiving abroad. Religious bigots insinuated she was pandering to the West, India and the extremist rightwing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Intellectuals implied that she was after cheap publicity. Literary competitors considered her work shallow. Others envied her success, while most men were annoyed at her audacity : in one of her poems she urges women to flee from men in the way that one ran away from dogs which had rabies because men carried syphilis. In daring to confront society at many fronts, the audacious Taslima became isolated; she says in one of her columns : "Like a dot I am alone in the universe."

She was foolish and inconsequential in that her actions betrayed a lack of social responsibility and awareness of possible consequences. Hence, even the Awami League, historically a proponent of secular ideals, gave her no banking, nor even when *fatwas* were thrice declared by *mullahs* sentencing her to death on the ground that she had insulted

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<sup>21</sup> Taslima NASREEN *Nirbachita Column* , Dhaka, Vidyaprakash, 1991, 1992, pp.27-28.

<sup>22</sup> One author has glossed over these differences insinuating that a general dissatisfaction with Taslima marked the actions of secularists and fundamentalists alike, who reacted to her violently. This would be a misreading of the complex reactions aroused by Taslima. See T.I. HASHMI "Women and Islam : Taslima Nasreen, Society and Politics in Bangladesh", *South Asia*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 1995, p. 37.

Islam.<sup>23</sup> It had other political priorities such as its common struggle with the Jama'at to force the BNP government to amend the constitution so that future elections could be held under neutral caretaker governments. The BNP government was compromised because of a strong pro-Jama'at lobby among its supporters. Therefore, it too was hostile. It withdrew the protection she had obtained through a court injunction. Instead, on the 4th of June 1994, the Home Ministry obtained a warrant for her arrest, but took no action against those who violated the law through incitement to murder. This provoked an outcry from foreign governments, which eventually led to her exile to Sweden. Nationally, however, the state had played into the hands of *mullahs*.

Interpreting government and opposition roles as tacit support for their stand, they believed that victory was within reach and intensified their campaign for Islamic rule at various fronts. There were demands for the introduction of blasphemy laws as in Pakistan, for the execution of all atheists and apostates (*nastik* and *murtad*), for the ban on all publications by such people, for Ahmadiyas to be decreed non-Muslims, etc. These were accompanied by massive demonstrations, meetings and the setting up of organizations such as the Sanmilita Sangram Parishad and branch committees with provocative names such as Student Soldiers of Islam or Islami Chhatra Sena to spread the message into villages.<sup>24</sup>

The controversy surrounding Taslima Nasreen makes sense if it is seen in the context of a wider struggle between the forces of religious extremism and secular liberalism, which were both vying for the hearts and minds of the people in Bangladesh. These forces were engaged in symbol manipulation to secure the social and political order they desired. The status and visibility of women formed an important element in the struggle

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<sup>23</sup> Fatwas were pronounced in Sylhet in October 1993 and twice in June 1994 in Bogra and Khulna, Bangladesh. In Sylhet a price of Tk 50,000 (approximately US\$ 1,500) was put on her head.

<sup>24</sup> *Inquilab*, Dhaka, 12th of August, 1994.

as the orthodoxy had always viewed gender issues to lie within their jurisdiction. Feminists posed a threat to such territorial assertions because of their quest for gender equality. But Taslima was only one of the many victims of the vengeance of fanatical forces. She survived because of the publicity, the foreign interest and the support of a few who rose to defend the rule of law.<sup>25</sup> Others were less fortunate: one woman was stoned to death for alleged adultery whereas, in fact, the lustful gaze of a *mullah* had fallen on her.

A series of provocative actions by the religious right virtually led to the establishment of a parallel structure of authority in remote areas far from the reaches of officialdom. Various front organizations of the Jama'at supported by their own armed cadre had begun to impart Islamic justice. They derived their authority from the *fatwas* given by local *mullahs* and not from any court. Not only did thieves lose their limbs and "adulterers" be stoned, but opposition newspapers lost access to various distributors and their clients. Many rural women were divorced by *fatwa* for practicing birth control. Such a situation was novel in the history of the region. Several women also lost their marital status for taking bank loans for their small businesses. It was argued that economic independence for women was undesirable because it could give them a status superior to men, which was not God's design.<sup>26</sup> Non-government organizations like BRAC and their workers were attacked by *madrasah* students for allegedly spreading Christianity. BRAC schools for girls were burnt in protest against "westernized" female education. Here, coercion was a method of neutralising the sources of alternative ideologies. Various women's groups and local bodies have gathered evidence and successfully convicted some of the *fatwabaj mullahs*<sup>27</sup>. But the trend persists unabated

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<sup>25</sup> Taslima went into hiding for she could not even present herself at court in safety. She emerged from hiding on the 4th of August 1994 after assurances and armed protection were secured.

<sup>26</sup> *Inquilab*, 12th and 19th of August, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Ain-o-Shalish KENDRA, "Threats of violence and violations of human rights by imams of mosques and the religious right in Bangladesh" (a collection of cases for the period 1992-94, unpublished) Dhaka, 1994.

while the police find themselves inadequately armed to face the challenge.<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The paper has attempted to examine the interplay of religion and politics in relation to its impact on the position and status of women. It demonstrates that the forces of religious "fundamentalism" do not endorse the concept of female equality and that an alliance between these forces and a weak state is particularly problematic for female emancipation. The patriarchal state is unable to play an effective role as a mediator between these forces and the women who are often their victims, because it effectively becomes a party to the perpetration of injustices against them.

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<sup>28</sup> In Chittagong, the police confessed their inability to control the Shibir-Yuva Command because their own weapons were inferior. There was evidence to suggest that arms were coming to specific Shibir members from Pakistan by post. See *Dainik Sangbad*, Dhaka, Friday, 12 August 1994, p. 6.