

Taslima Nasrin

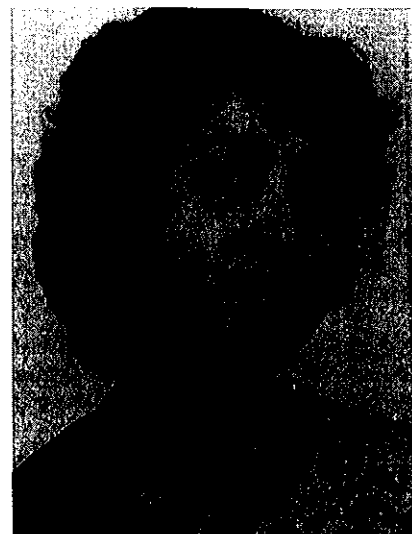
"I will not be silenced"

IN HUGE areas of the world the bitter anger of people marginalised, impoverished and taunted by the workings of capitalism is curdling into reactionary religious-fundamentalist fervour.

As *Workers' Liberty* goes to press, Salamat Masih, a boy of 14, has only just escaped the death penalty in Pakistan — for allegedly scribbling on the wall of a mosque. Manzoor Masih, charged alongside Salamat Masih, was killed last year in an attack outside their lawyer's office which also seriously injured Salamat Masih.

To stand up against this sort of fundamentalist terror takes great courage. The Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin has that courage. Since June 1994 she has been driven into hiding by government legal action against her for "blasphemy", coupled with death threats from Islamic fundamentalists. Hundreds of thousands marched in Dhaka in the summer of 1994 demanding "death to Taslima."

She has not been silenced. In March she will visit Britain to continue her fight for reason and for human rights — a fight without which no one can even start to map out a way for the workers and peasants of countries like Bangladesh to win dignity, freedom and decent living conditions.



Taslima Nasrin

THERE WERE huge demonstrations in Dhaka following the order to arrest me. Every day thousands and thousands marched to demand my death. It was a terrible time and I did not believe that I would live through it. I thought that the fundamentalists would find me, and kill me.

I stayed in 15 different houses when I was in hiding, moving around only at midnight. I owe a lot to the people who helped me, some of whom I did not know, all of whom did so at great risk to themselves.

My family now faces a very difficult situation. My sister has lost her job and my father has been targeted by the fundamentalists. They are isolated and alone.

The Muslim fundamentalists are growing. They represent a terrible threat to Bangladeshi women. If they get big enough they will impose a system based on religious law and destroy the existing society.

They get help from the Bangladeshi government, which panders to them. The government wants to pacify the religious bigots in order to get votes, influence and to retain power.

The fundamentalists get money from other countries — from Iraq and Iran and others, too. They have a lot of rich backers; they are a very wealthy movement.

The young people have lost all trust in the mainstream politicians, and in the political parties who squabble and struggle for power. There is a widespread belief that they are all corrupt.

The young people have no jobs and live in terrible poverty. Bangladesh is so very poor.

The young accept religious ideas because they believe this will bring them better lives on earth, and heaven in the future. The religious leaders offer them a life in heaven that will be better than their life here.

But it is not only the fundamentalists

Taslima Nasrin speaks in London

Wednesday 15 March
at 7.30pm

at Conway Hall, Red Lion
Square, Holborn

Admission is by ticket only. These
are £1 each

Please write to: the organising
committee, c/o PO Box 823, London
SE15 4NA. Cheques payable to
"Taslima Nasrin Meeting"

who pick on women.

In Bangladesh the patriarchal system extends beyond the fundamentalists. In our country women are already so oppressed they are a very easy target.

I have had a lot of very positive support from poorer women. The illiterate women can not reach me so easily. But the more literate of the poorer, working women

support me.

Those who are oppressed by society support me. Those who live a life of suffering, those women oppressed by their husbands — these are the people who support me.

Ironically, it is those women who live a good life in Bangladesh, who privately talk and act like men, who are critical of those who speak out against injustice; they want to keep their positions — and keeping their positions means keeping the support of men.

There is a weak women's movement in Bangladesh which is not yet strong enough to speak out with its own, clear voice. It is still dominated by the government and by the political parties.

Patriarchy is very strong in Bangladesh. By patriarchy I mean that men are able to control every aspect of women's lives. It is men who decide what women must do. Our society does not want female babies. Society and the conservative family do not allow female children to get an education. The conservatives demand that women wear veils.

After marriage the husbands decides what their wives can do — if they can study, and if they can work. The husband decides how many children the wife can have. Everything! It is always the husband, the father or the son who decides.

These traditions partly stem from religion and religious law. But I assert that women are human beings, and are entitled

to be treated like human beings.

Women continue to be persecuted in the name of *tradition*. One thing that feminists in Western countries should learn is to be critical about the traditions of Asia and Africa. I have heard Western women saying we should follow our traditions. Well, I like my food and I like my dress. These are the things I will keep. But why should I accept the tradition of oppression, too? Why should I accept a society that puts women in veils and allows men to dominate them?

*"I am alone, but no
one controls me. I
have my own voice.
And I will not be
silenced."*

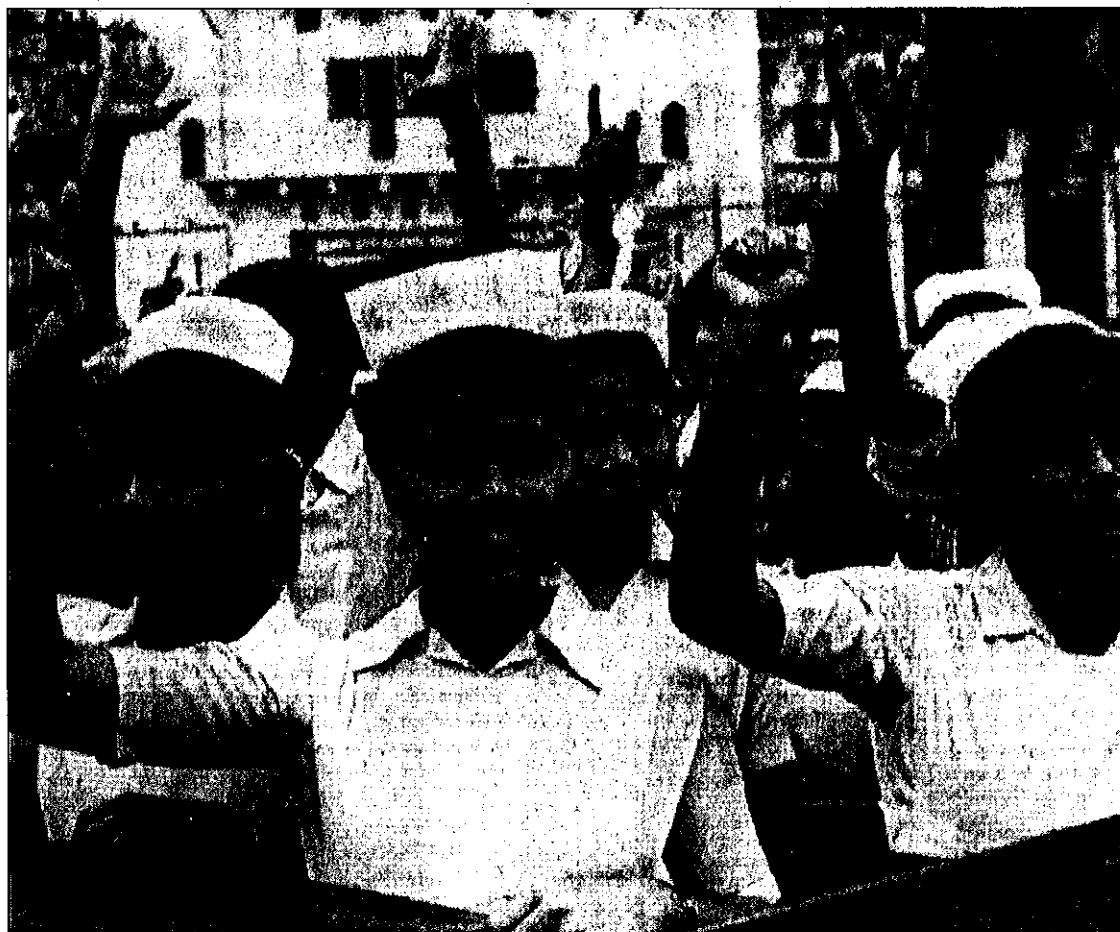
In parts of Africa there is the "tradition" of mutilating female genitalia. Is this tradition? Call it by its proper name: it is *torture!*

Western women must not believe that freedom is only for them. Freedom is not just for you. Freedom is for me, too. I need my freedom. I believe we must all work for a world where everyone is free. This is our duty.

I am not a politician and I am not involved in a political party. But what is necessary now in Bangladesh is a programme of education. We need the separation of religious and political life. We need a society based on modern law, and on equality between men and women.

I am alone, but no one controls me. I have my own voice. And I will not be silenced.

* One of Taslima's books, *Shame*, is published by Penguin and is available in the UK. It tells the story of anti-Hindu chauvinism in Bangladesh, set against the background of the anti-Hindu riots of 1992. Taslima Nasrin was persecuted for writing this book. The Bangladeshi government banned *Shame* in 1993.



Nurses march through Dhaka demanding better pay and working conditions, February 1995