

Home away from home

A lady from Canada becomes Natashar Ma in Gamaria

Therese Blanchet, Director, Drishti Research Centre, who has been working as a social anthropologist in Bangladesh for the last 28 years, shared her feelings with Durdana Ghias

I first came to Bangladesh in 1978 to work as an anthropologist. When I first came to this city it was less populated and contained few cars. It was a city of rickshaws, power-cuts and the only market where women could go freely was New Market.

The first two years I spent in Gamaria, a village in Dewanganj. My husband stayed mostly in Dhaka but my two children were with me. We visited the city but did not stay for long. My main activities were centered in Gamaria. I gave priority to my work in the village. It was not that easy but I was quite determined about it.

I entered village society through women. When I stayed there I lived with a family with five daughters. My daughter found their place in their midst. We occupied one corner of their one room house and shared food with them. They accepted me as one of them.

At first I used to wear salwar kamiz but village women of my age wore saree. One day, my little son came to me and said: 'mama, you should wear a saree, you are too old to wear shawl kamiz'.

I wore saree because it was imperative for a mother of two children. I abided by the rules. I wanted to be accepted and was intent on learning the culture of Bangladesh. The village culture of illiterate people is very rich from the way anthropologists understand culture.

When I go to Gamaria people call me 'Natashar Ma' and children now call me 'Nanu'. I am a murubbi (a respected elder person) in the village. They approach me to solve problems. This village is my home and every year I try to spend Eid there.

Gamaria stands by the river Jamuna and during my first monsoon there, half the village was swallowed up by the river.

When I go to the West, it often takes a few days before I discard saree and salwar kamiz. I enjoy wine, cheese and all the other food one does not get easily here. But after some time, I need to eat rice. It is in my system now

There were a pucca mosque and a huge banyan tree: those also went. Men were powerless to tame the mighty river, no matter how much they tried. Nature could be so treacherous and so generous. I pondered on this thinking it must have shaped the people of this country.

After this catastrophe, the whole community was in disarray. The lost land progressively emerged on the other side of the river. It took at least two years before those who had lost everything could reconstitute their samaj. Employing an imam and building a simple bamboo hut as a mosque were important steps in doing so. Until this was done, people said they were jungli, not civilized.

I have been working on



Therese with her 35-day old son in Gamaria in 1988.

women's cross border migration for the last 6 years. There is no reliable official record on this. We have been following women working in the Middle East and in India and observing how society is accepting them. The money women remit to the village has weakened opposition to their migration. Girls delay marriage to make the best of migration and parents do not oppose since they also benefit. Women have to struggle to keep control over their savings but some have done very well.

My understanding of society is very important in studying migration. Bangladesh is a bubbling society. It is like the ground under which water flows. You will not understand it until the earth on the surface subsides.

I did research on slums, on prostitution, on village midwives and on childbirth. I got interested in beliefs in spirits such as bhut-petni, which inhabit the jungle and play havoc with women during the time of childbearing. I wrote about this in 'Meanings and Rituals of birth in Bangladesh', a book published in 1984 by University Press Limited.

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In the past, there were expatriates who lived in the village for two to three years, learned to speak Bangla fluently and were quite knowledgeable about Bangladesh. Some of

them married in this country but now expatriates are centered in the city.

Links between the village and Dhaka has developed in the last few years. Earlier, there were no phones and it took anything between 8 and 15 hours to reach Gamaria from Dhaka by train. But now the city is much closer. The distance between Bangladesh and abroad has also lessened. TV, telephone and migration have played a role in lessening the gap.

In Dhaka, the freedom of walking is rare without stares. The street is still a male place. But poverty is less visible than it used to be.

Through my research and my living here, I should say that I probably know Bangladesh society better than the country of

my birth. 28 years is a long time. To me, Gamaria is more than a village, it has been my university. It taught me so many things. I feel very fortunate to have had this opportunity to remain connected with a community for so long.

I did not choose Bangladesh to live in comfort. I came here to learn, to share, not to recreate my own world. Now that I know the rules and conventions, it feels at ease. In many ways, I feel like any other Bangladeshi.

I have a powerful emotional link with this country. It became my home. I have had several homes over the years. Presently, my home here and my home in Quebec are the two most important.

Garment Workers

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Exporters Association (BGEMA) signed these agreements with only a fraction of labour organisations.

"We signed only three agreements with the BGMEA over the common demands of these workers and later stopped signing ineffective agreements," Amirul said.

Establishment of basic labour rights in garment factories is rather difficult as mismanagement continues to plague the readymade garment (RMG) sector, he said.

The council and the association further signed a code of conduct and the labour organisations are now terming the code as a 'violation of labour rights.'

The code states that a single worker must work for a minimum of 72 hours a week (60 hours of work and 12 hours of compulsory overtime), whereas international labour law permits only 48 hours a week, and 12 hours of overtime.

Anwara further added that her overtime was never accounted for properly. If she works 16 hours, the records show that she had worked for only 12 hours.

"It's a kind of labour theft," she said.

An investigation into the matter by Star City showed none of these labour organisations were actually interested in fighting for workers' rights and are involved with foreign donors or trade unions, while leaders' personal interest plays a significant role in labour organisations as most workers are ignorant of their rights.

Amirul said personal interest, lack of tolerance and democracy, political influence, in leadership caused rifts in the council three years after its formation, resulting in no-worker unity.

"Labour organisations here are mainly wings of political parties and NGOs," a labour leader said. "They work towards their politics and projects only rather than thinking of the general labourers," he added.

"I was well respected in the village, though I was only a housewife, but in the city there is no value for respect and dignity," said a doleful Anwara.

Martyred intellectual

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as Osman, refused to connect the call.

Architecture department's Chief Architect ASM Ismail said that minor modifications or alterations could be made with consent of the department of architecture, but he was not aware if the PWD consulted the department.

Architect Jami-Al-Shafi, one of two architects who designed the mausoleum, said: "The public toilet just at the entry to the mausoleum is in no way consistent with the original design."

"There was no need to have a toilet at the entrance as the toilets designated to the mausoleum were only 20 yards away," he said.

Even a public demonstration following installation of the toilet could not prevent the authorities from building it.

The monument was built to commemorate the martyred intellectuals who were picked up from their residences by collaborators known as Razakars and Al-Badors at the fag end of the Liberation War and brutally murdered.

Jami also said that they proposed a public graveyard in the

Haikur Khal (canal) area.

They also proposed a green belt beyond the boundary so that private buildings in any direction will not mar the actual landscape of the mausoleum.

Shimul, Palash and Krishnachura, all symbolising blood, were recommended in the original design.

The duo architects, Jami and Farid Uddin Ahmed, won three awards for their design of the monument including Institute of Architects, Bangladesh Award, Berger Young Architects Award and JK Cement Saarc Region architectural competition from Delhi.

The competition for design was held in 1993, the work began in 1997 and completed in 1999 initially on a three-acre land.

It was also alleged that anti social elements carry out their criminal activities putting at the stake even the safety of the security guards.

Locals further said that security and maintenance should be handed over either to the Army or Bangladesh Rifles.

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