

Children of a Lesser God

S. Bari

IMAGINE a child. She cannot speak, or move on her own; she cannot reach out or call you. She never will imagine living and living with this child every day of her life, talking to her and holding her, with no response. Maybe one day she will smile, a far-away, unapproachable smile. That is the closest you will ever get to her.

At Kalyani School for the Mentally Handicapped, teachers and parents wait years for that smile. Says Dr. Shireen Zaman Munir, Principal, "We work for a little bit of eye contact, for some response, however faint. The success of the school is measured by the response of the children. Some fifty students fill the rooms of the three-story school building. They suffer from disabilities ranging from mild mental retardation to brain damage and Down's syndrome. A special unit cares for victims of cerebral palsy.

On any morning, walk into the clean, colourful rooms. The youngest children sit at a round table. One of them unzips an educational toy, her tongue protruding with the effort. Pictures on the wall in the classroom show different coins and change, placed to see in Dhaka, animals. On seeing visions we cannot begin to understand. Another who wants to hear some music, his teacher explains to us that this autistic child is a great music-lover. The teacher shows unflinching patience, the constant crying and noise. This patience is imitated by the older children, who take the younger ones in their laps and try to calm them.

The school, established in 1984, operates under the Bangladesh Probation and Reformation Board. The foundation aims to develop services for the mentally physically handicapped, in a country where such needs have long been neglected. Among the branches of Probation and Reformation Board are a rural centre, a diagnostic clinic, research and training programmes, distance education kits and the school itself.

Students are usually referred to the school by the diagnostic clinic or through hospitals and doctors. Teachers are trained psychologists; many serve voluntarily at the school while preparing their Master's thesis. An agreement with Dhaka University's Psychology department provides teacher training facilities for qualified students. The necessary fields of study are developmental psychology and special education. In the physiotherapy area, where specialisation is necessary to treat children with cerebral palsy, the school has sent three employees for special training to In-



"We think of them as our own children."

dia. "We do not just employ anybody with a Master's in psychology. This job requires enormous patience and compassion," reminds Dr. Munir. That is clear from a glance at a day's work at the school. "This is not a healthy job. You teach an average child A, B, C, and he learns. But we have no such feedback or immediate results. Day in and day out, it is the same thing. A trace of a smile, or maybe one day the child will make eye contact when you call his name - that's all we get. That is why a certain feeling is necessary for the

children." This compassion is not to be confused with pity. Most people react with condescension or revulsion to disabled children. None of that is in evidence as the students gather around the harmonium today. The teachers scold and cajole their charges just like "normal" children.

One girl, about 15, sings "Phool phool", and then all of them join her to sing "Megher kole roj heshchhe". These children love to sing. Music is something they do not need their minds to understand; their hearts suffice.

Students can also take dancing lessons and participate in sporting events. Apart from the recreational appeal, such activities lighten their minds and stimulate them to use the skills they have acquired. If a child runs well, he is encouraged in sports. If another is graceful or has a good voice, dance or music lessons are available. Everyone participates in all these programmes, leading to an important growth in self-confidence.

"We think of them as our own children," says one teacher. "Sometimes, if they

vomit or urinate in the room, we hold them and clean them, and even the mothers are surprised to see us take care of them that way." As we talk, one boy of about 14 smiles at me and pats the carpet next to him. "Sit here," he says shyly. There is a spark of spontaneity in Kalyani that sets it apart from other schools. In his innocence this child sees me, a total stranger, as a friend.

"We teach survival skills. We cannot have an advanced curriculum, each case is so different. What they need first and foremost is to be made independent in society," says Dr. Munir. She points out one girl, about 7, untying her shoelaces in order to join the others singing in the music room. She walks steadily towards the group and soon her thin voice blends with the others'. Only her slanted eyes give away the fact that she has Down's syndrome. "This girl," says the principal, unable to hide her tone of maternal pride, "was brought to us just a bundle of immobile flesh. She was a year old, yet she had no movement control, no speech skills. Look at her now."

Early intervention is the first step to therapy. Another boy of nearly 13 is still stiff, crawling with difficulty, and unable to communicate. He came at a late age, and will probably never improve much.

Not only do children at Kalyani suffer from different problems and illnesses, each child is affected to varying degrees. No two children have exactly the same disabilities. To complicate matters further,

On any morning, walk into the clean, colourful rooms. The youngest children sit at a round table. One of them unzips an educational toy, her tongue protruding with the effort. One child gazes out, seeing visions we can't begin to understand.

about denial syndrome, she says, "We do hold counselling sessions for parents and siblings. Because there is a lot of rejection, parents blaming each other. Mothers are asked to attend the school along with very young children or new students. It's often difficult to cope with parents. Everything becomes the teacher's fault. But then imagine the frustration in this parent, having a child like this life-long." Initial disbelief leads to anger or rejection, and then prolonged suffering, "because you love this child yet you never really see any love in return."

Surprisingly, it is not labouring-class parents who are most frustrated, though it is harder for the barely-educated to grasp the physical and psychological problems involved. "We have more trouble with upper-class parents, who want their kids to be like everyone else's. They can't cope with a child who drools or crawls or grunts." In contrast, "the rickshaw-puller accepts what he has, and I see the disabled child getting as much love as his siblings, perhaps more."

Fees for the school are anywhere between Taka 20 to 200, depending on the parents' income. Children wear a uniform in order to level the disparities in background. On the breast-pocket is stitched the name of the school.

That patch itself is a burden to some children, those few who have progressed to the point of knowing that they are different from others. Some of these students refuse to wear the patch, believing it stigmatises them. "It is painful for them, to know there is something 'wrong' with them," says Dr. Munir. The irony of caring for mentally handicapped children is that one works for them to develop an awareness of their strengths, yet once they are aware of these, they also become aware of their shortcomings.

Is integration possible? "We



Time for recreation.

Photos by Mohsin

did have a girl who got married. In certain segments of society, where it is not expected that the wife be educated or even intelligent, such marriages are feasible. She can cook, she can keep house and look after children. Even if she does encounter a few problems, she probably considers it worth the status that marriage gives her. You see, it's so important to feel like a part of society." This attainment of a certain level of functional independence is often possible with Down's syndrome children.

At the age of 16, the children "graduate" with a school certificate. They join a workshop adjacent to the school, where chunky ethnic rugs and woodwork and handbags are made. The small income this generates gives them an essential dose of self-esteem. "Salaam," says one boy as we walk into the room. The other children display their handiwork with pride. Next door, older pupils lean over their books for "maintenance education." These lessons ensure that they retain the reading and calculating skills they learnt in school. One girl clutches a Class Seven reading

book: she cannot read it, but it makes her feel 'grown up.' Back in the music room, the autistic boy who stood in a corner crying suddenly takes my face in his hands and kisses my forehead. Now I un-

derstand why their teachers carry on this seemingly endless task: that one kiss, and you belong to that child forever. The principal's words echo through the room: "These children are as innocent as flowers, sacred. You see roses of many colours, but they are as rare as blue roses. They never grow up, they never learn of evil." And they remain locked in their own world, closer to their Creator than we will ever be again.

• S. Bari is a Feature Writer of the Daily Star.



A chance to earn money through their own work.

No two children have exactly the same disabilities — each require a particular kind of attention.

a handicapped child has his own, usually strong, personality. Autism (remember "Rain Man?"). Down's syndrome, damage to different parts of the brain, and all types of mental retardation: each requires a particular and unique kind of attention.

"People expect miracles," Dr. Munir smiles. "After a few days, they think we work like some magic drug, and the child will be cured. Especially in speech therapy, which takes a very long time. And even then the child may never speak totally clearly. Parents refuse to accept this." Asked

Travels Into the Soul

Path Thekey Pathy. By Manju Sarker and printed Tk 60.

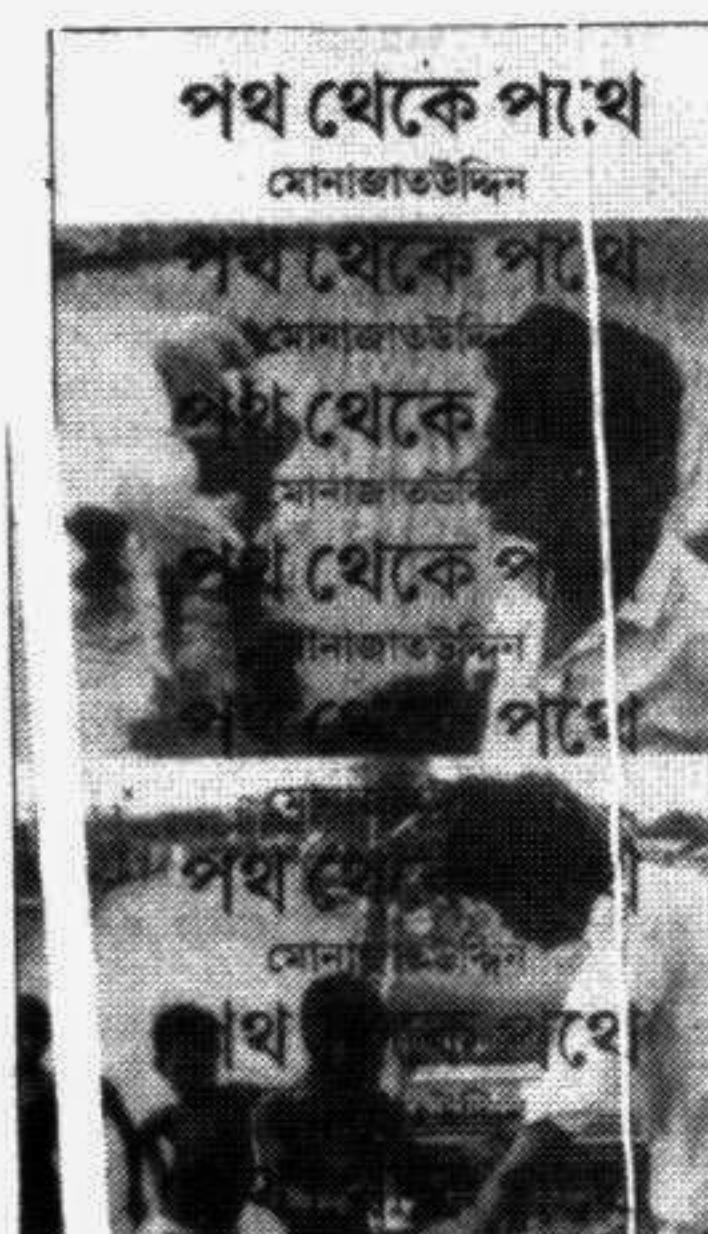
Monajatuddin. Published by at Bikash Mudron. Price Tk 60.

Review by Syed

Badrul Ahsan

MONAJATUDDIN takes the reader down the road to Bangladesh. That is where he is at his best, traversing the highways and the lanes that lead to the little villages and the little people who form the soul of the country. He throws up images, one after another, and sprinkles the mind with thoughts. Rarely does he deal with the grand or the grandiose, even when he speaks of Sheikh Hasina or Begum Khaleda Zia. He brings out, in Tetulia, the woman, the purely human in Sheikh Hasina, who jokes and laughs away from the serious business of politics. In Khaleda Zia, he glimpses the determination, despite the evident pain that accompanies such determination, to understand life as it is lived in the deep Bangladeshi interior.

All this, and much more, is what makes up a piece of good journalistic writing called "Path Thekey Pathy." Monajatuddin has little time to study the landscape from the secure confines of a newsroom, and to come forth with critical analyses of ordinary life. He is there, in undeniable physical presence. He meets Anwar Ali at Ramna Bazar away from Kurigram. In Rangpur, there is the little flicker of a respite, until the whisper is heard that Golam Azam is in town somewhere. Then begins another day, with another sort of intensity. The search for the controversial man goes on, and Monajat injects humour into it. He looks for Azam, and comes squarely up against a sea of white caps, beneath which are faces silent, deferential, waiting for the saviour. And the saviour comes, only to turn away at the fury of Monajatud-



ditions questions. Moments later the questioner is sprawled on the grass, the interview over. It is time to contact the Sangha in Dhaka.

There is style in Monajatuddin's narration of events, little pieces of life, as he would call them. It is simple, the story—or call them tales—is told in a simple style. He does not emphasise intellectuality. Nor does he make any attempt at glorifying, embellishing, the takes of men and women he talks about. Monajatuddin's is a journey, a travelogue that details the bits and boulders of existence in the far reaches of Bangladesh geography. The details then pierce the soul, by the realities they hold forth, and the poignance they cause to come alive in the mind. These are takes that cannot afford to miss. They bring men, in this land, into communion with one another. It is their story.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I am a foreigner married to a Bangladeshi. My husband and I met while both of us were studying law in London. Upon graduation and after being called to the Bar, we returned to Dhaka, both full-fledged lawyers. We have found jobs with reputable local firms and are doing quite well in our respective careers. However, I am not doing as well on the home front. My husband is the eldest and only male in his family and my mother-in-law and two younger sisters-in-law live with us. Unfortunately, his family is ultra-conservative and had opposed our marriage from the beginning — as they had arranged a Bangladeshi bride for him in his absence — and which he had refused.

It seems to me that my in-laws are out to "get me" and "trip me over" every chance they get, in all manner of ways. All this, of course, at the behest of my mother-in-law, the chief engineer of this elaborate plan to break up our marriage. I have discussed this with my husband, and pleaded with him to live just by ourselves. But he said that it would not be looked upon favourably by society as he's the eldest and only male in the family.

I, on my part, have truly tried my best to be accommodating and perform all the duties expected of a daughter-in-law and "bhabi". But I seem to be getting nowhere. At times I have even thought of migrating. What do you think of this solution, dear Mita? Please help!

Distressed Foreign Wife.

Dear Distressed Foreign Wife,

It seems that you have tried everything to accommodate but all your efforts have gone in vain. I truly sympathise and congratulate you for your efforts. The time has come maybe for some drastic measures and the family has to be given certain ultimatum and that includes your husband too. You will have to draw a line somewhere and stop people from walking over you just because you are a foreigner wife. Communicate your feelings first to your husband who should be your ally. Discuss the problem at length with him and together approach your in-laws. Try to find out what they expect of you and where have you failed. If they agree to enter into a dialogue, well and good, if not, then you will have to make a break. Your husband, while carrying out his family obligations, should move out with you. I suggest maintaining two households if it is financially feasible. But please do so after discussing your intentions with your in-laws. Even if they refuse to listen you must give it a try.

Dear Mita,

Since this column started, I have been wanting to discuss my problem (which I think is unique) and finally have overcome my shyness in the hope you may guide me in a difficult situation. I am a college student who gets consistently good grades in my exams. One main reason is probably due to the lack of distractions in our strait-laced society, as well as limited opportunities for entertainment. Lately however, I have been attracted to a female class-

mate who is pretty and highly intelligent. As I come from a very strict Islamic family (where asking girls out is banned), I am at a loss as to how to start a friendship with this particular girl. At the same time, I think of her constantly — to the point of not being able to concentrate on my studies.

Am I going mad? What shall I do? Please advise.

Bewildered.

Dear Bewildered,

Thank you for writing. I am glad that you could overcome your shyness and decided to write. First let me tell you that you get good grades not because of a lack of distractions but because you are a good student. What has happened is perfectly normal and nothing to be ashamed of; it is a part of growing up. Men and women at a certain stage in their lives have always been attracted to each other, whether society approved or not and will continue to do so. Asking a girl out is not the only way to start a friendship and I would advise against it because of your family background. If she is your classmate then approach her in a friendly, casual way, find out what her interests are and try to initiate an interesting conversation. A young woman will rarely shun a relationship which is based on equality and respect.

Dear Mita,

I am a single professional woman of 25. A childhood friend who I have always considered to be a younger brother has declared that he loves me and also proposed marriage. I am very fond of him and he is one of my dearest friends but I

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toybee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.

cannot think of him as a life partner. This has put me in a very awkward position as I do not want to break off the relationship, at the same time I am afraid that keeping his company might give him ideas... Please advise, how do I tell him the truth without hurting him?

Shafinas, Malibagh.

Dear Shafinas,

In a society where casual mixing between young people is not approved of such accident between childhood friends often take place. While you, were showing sisterly affections, he was harbouring romantic ideas about you. Painful as it will be, he has to be told the truth. I do not advise breaking the relationship, but nothing in your behaviour must reinforce any romantic notions in him. Hopefully over time this will pass and someday he will be able to see you in the right perspective. Try to channel the relationship in other directions if possible. Communicate to him how you have grown and changed and that he must do so also. Perhaps he idolizes a person who no longer exists.... Best of Luck.

Dear Mita,

Why are women so critical of one another? They are their worst enemies. When women get together, they invariably criticize another woman who is not present. This has often made me very uncomfortable but for some reason I have not been able to protest as I should. Though I feel very strongly about it, I have seldom done more than protest mildly. I don't know why I have never been able to stop them or leave the room. What do you think I should when this happens next time?

Selina, Mohammadpur.

Dear Selina,

Thank you for your letter, this is a subject very close to my heart. This is a sad reality of our society that women can't stand up for one another. Since centuries there are countless stories of the unkind mother-in-law or the sister-in-law or the fabled step-mother. Women have been known to be cruel to one another.

Attitudes have changed over the years and one sees more camaraderie among women than before. The many feminist groups that have come into existence bear testimony to that. These groups have not been initiated or formed by men but by women who feel that to attain equality women must stand for one another. As for your question? You do not protest strongly enough because you don't want to attract attention or do not want to be a misfit in the crowd. Next time you can politely say that the conversation is not appropriate and you would rather not participate. You can also tactfully change the topic, and if nothing works please feel free to leave the room.

Dear Mita,

May I offer my sincere congratulations to the Daily Star for introducing this "Personal Problems" column to help its readers from all walks of life. Although our extended family system is often supportive in various aspects of life, sometimes it is the objective, friendly stranger (in this case a qualified social worker) who is able to give sound advice — untainted by prejudice or personal interest. Thanks again for yet another useful innovation in Dhaka's journalistic scene.

Avid Star Reader.