

# Status of Women in Bangladesh

by Maleka Begum

APPEARANCE of a young girl added with an interview regarding the environment within which she was born and brought up, the process that embraced her childhood, adolescence and youth life, would speak about the women of our country and there should not be any doubt about it. But her response demands some questions: the position of her mother — where she had been and where she moved gradually, what does she think of present-day children's adolescent compared to her position during the same period, any difference of post-adolescent age that both the mother and daughter had to cross the discussion between the mother and daughter would help to know the advancement of the women community during the past twenty years.

Of course, all the discussion would contain the contest of educational and social condition. Clear reflection of the condition of women community would be revealed if, considering the necessary points we start discussion with the girls of same age covering cities, villages and different states, so to say, working class, peasantry, educated, middle class, lower middle class families. Let us try.

But this attempt must have to take into account the overall reflection of political, cultural, socio-economic condition prevailing in the country. An isolation would keep the women's situation in the dark to understand.

The women community which covers approximately half of the total populace is the victim of inequalities, exploitation, backwardness, deprivation and oppression. Simply the word 'women' is the cause of neglect and deprivation of man's rights.

Women are struggling for equal political, cultural, socio-economic rights and pressing their demands at home to the government and administration who are celebrating the anniversary of democracy but depriving the women of all human rights, and thus the taste of democracy also. Democracy — the award of freedom of a nation could remain unfulfilled so long the women would not have social

recognition with the dignity of man.

With this background, let us now turn our eye to the women community, where the political, cultural and socio-economic conditions would be analyzed.

## Social position

In post-liberation period, the population and other surveys of 1974 counted the population of the country as 760 lakhs while the population growth rate was 2.8 per cent, birth rate per thousand was 45 and mortality rate was 16. A fear for future was signalled that the population will reach 18 crore by the year 2000.

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Later, the census of 1981 put the population figure at 930 lakhs. In 1974 while the city population comprised 8.8 per cent of total population in 1984 the same figure stands at 15.2 per cent of the total population.

At present, the total population of the country is approximately 11 crore, 48.5 per cent of which are women, which means that the women of the country comprises 560 lakhs. In 1974, for each 100 female there were 108 male. Since then, almost the same ratio has continued.

Though an apparently over advancement is made public inequality, oppression of women community remains as it was, with an increase in crises. Even then, frustration and darkness are not everything.

Awareness is being gradually built within the women community. In an attempt to solve social problems during the two decades of pre-and

post-independence period, family law, anti-dowry act, prohibiting verbal divorce, and punitive action to do away with raping, women killing, oppression etc. — etc. were put into action successively.

Detained analysis of all these steps would reveal the perfect and ugly face of despicable situation, oppression and inequalities in the society concerning women. Family tortures, maltreatment and because of dowry, unequal rights over property, and dependence due to unemployment — are curses contributing to the despicable situation of women in the society. Social insecurity has threatened women's lives

in the family and even spread to streets and working place.

The degrading and backwardness of society are reflected wholly in women's lives. Though the constitution of Bangladesh accepted equal rights of men and women.

The world-wide inequality and neglect of women forced the United Nations to appeal to all concerned nations for accepting the convention of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and achieve equal rights of women in respective countries. The last government of Bangladesh, on the ground of family laws which were prepared on the basis of religious customs, did not accept the UN convention completely. The democratic government is expected to take sound steps in this respect.

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The social status of women will take a new shape, provided this step is taken. Family is the small unit of a society. Given the weakness of social and religious prejudices, the values of maternity, femininity, chastity have imposed dictum, women are still treated as commodity. A fact is that poverty made women the commodity, developed trafficking of women, turned into prostitutes, but despicable values and conditions of society are not less important to degenerate the society.

Social inequalities force the women to remain dependent. Social approach to women deprives them of achieving socio-economic empowerment. Early marriage, maternity at early age, high birth rate etc. keep women moving in a circle of malnutrition, death backwardness.

Though the country had three Five Year Plans within 20 years to eradicate illiteracy and backwardness, and achieve equalities, the literacy rate of women is only 16 per cent. Contrary to this, the literacy rate of men is 36 per cent. The women lag far behind to exploit advantages in education, sports and games, health and consciousness-building since their childhood. Many attempts, plans and objectives have defined to widen the opportunities for women, which brought practically no fruits to them.

The only countable achievement and hope of last 20 years is that social consciousness has developed to protest and fight women repression and inequality. And

the women community is also more conscious than before.

## Economic status

Even with the state-level planning for women participation in economic activities, only distress-women project, food for work, cooperative, credit programme, NGOs and garments factories have opened up opportunities for a few to achieve economic empowerment. Out of 10 crore working families, 50 lakhs are women labours, 12 lakhs are maid-servants at different houses, 5 lakh surplus labours of tea industry are women. The account of 1974 says the growth rate of women working class is 8.2 per cent, and of present day, this growth rate is 9.2 per cent.

The government has reserved 15 and 20 per cent quota for working women in administrative set up. But until now 2.3 per cent were possible to be filled in by the women and 8 per cent women are employed in state sectors. Only a few have women among the high government officials. Lack of state and government opportunities to develop a harmonious relationship — has created immense problems which has already influenced this society, family and state. This influence is also accelerated due to inequalities of wage and sub-human living conditions maintained by this class of women.

Economic evaluation of the participation of 43 per cent women in agriculture is virtually absent in survey and census report, and also in society. This is a traditional practice of our society not to account the rural women labour force. The last 20 year could not pull the women out of this vicious circle that the women community are in.

Researchers expect that by the year 2000, the growth rate of women labour and working women will increase from 11 per cent to 25 per cent and another 60 lakh women will

emerge as women labour force.

The last 20 years have witnessed development of tremendous capacity within the women to achieve self-sustainability, the opportunities to fulfil the desire being not the spontaneous outcome of the society. A number of factors contributed with a combined effect. The women's movement, constitutional protection (legal) added to the

communications, working environment, termination, lay-off employment, family protection etc. help realise new domain of present-day women. And this achievement, needless to mention, is not a less significant advancement.

The planners must have to change their approach. Problems regarding women's work, education, and cultural development must have to be

Bangladeshi women are sky-kissing compared to its poverty. The two women leaders must pay due attention to their community, in an attempt to increase all sorts of opportunities, maintain and implement policy and legal protection. The women community within itself should also have strong determination and will power that the successes the two women political leaders achieved must have to be achieved by them also, and within the same socio-religious environment.

During the 50s, the women community of Bengal participated in election directly and returned as member of parliament. The same also assumed political leadership of different political parties during 50s and 60s. But post-liberation period observed diagonally opposite scenario.

With an increase in women's mobility in the parliament, union council, and administration, a complete vacuum from the government and political parties to develop the political consciousness of women exists. But this was, during the last 20 years, the highest expectation. The consciousness of women is gradually increasing through their participation in work. This is the credit of women's movement not of government.

The hope is that the women organizations of the country are active. Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, is constantly trying its best to achieve the political and human rights of women. The inequalities that the state has imposed on the women community is anti-constitutional.

One stream is gradually developing the women as commodity in communication. And the other stream exploits the use of religious prejudices, religious bar etc. and push the women community deeper into darkness of life.

But against these evil faces of the society, a healthy and sound flourishing of the women community is also observed in the advancement of journalists, columnists, writers, dramatists, singers and dancers. Women will get established in the society with their own social and moral dignity.



A smile of hope.

— Photo: IFAD

emergence of women as cheap labour force and development of market to absorb this force contributed to opening-up new horizons for women.

Women are performing their responsibilities are facing problems with maternity leave. Rental housing (hostel), com-

included in the main stream of planning of the national economy.

## Political position

Both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the parliament are women. Political rights of

# Thais Discover the Multi-Purpose Buffalo

by Peyton Johanson

AFTER generations of neglect, Thailand is finally beginning to take a serious look at the potential of its most important, even if usually ignored, farm animal — the ubiquitous water buffalo.

Said Chamlong Mahaphol, Director of the Sisaket Agricultural College: "Unlike other countries, we Thais have taken our buffalos for granted. For centuries they were the mainstay of all farm work, in-

cluding the all-important rice crops, their preparation and harvest.

"The buffalo still is the rural work animal per excellence. But it is much more than that. The buffalo also provides meat and milk. It has a future even where it's working days are numbered."

The short-sighted view that refuses to consider the buffalo

as anything other than a work animal soon to be replaced by machinery has retarded Thailand's appreciation of the animal's potential.

Chamlong calls this outdated "turn of the last century" thinking. He adds: "We have been myopic on this, and other countries have left us in the dust. We can no longer afford that sort of ignorance. It is time to change."

Chamlong and his students have been the driving force behind a small but highly successful pilot project in Sisaket province for smallholder dairying based on buffalo milk.

The project is ideally located. Sisaket is the very heart of northeast Thailand's "buffalo country." Of the country's six million buffalos, about three-quarters, or more than four million, are in the northeast, Issarn and most agricultural of Thailand's four regions.

Sisaket province alone has 305,000 head of buffalo, more than twice its 118,266 cattle.

The animal is particularly important to the Northeast, Chamlong explained, not only because of the poverty of its people, but also because of the region's erratic weather. Drought hits Issarn far more often than it hits any other part of Thailand.

Said he: "The buffalo survives drought easily. They thrive where other livestock perish. We have little good pasture, so this is a big plus for us. The buffalo is a tough animal and Issarn is a tough land. Sometimes, I think they were made for each other."

If the buffalo is raised properly, Chamlong continued, a Northeastern farmer can generate more steady money from its milk than he can trying to scratch out a living from Issarn's poor and badly eroded soil.

"And that way," he added, "we could keep both man and buffalo on the land they have shared for centuries. As it is now, the farmers are being shoved off the land without mercy and the buffalos are being sold off at giveaway prices, usually as cheap 'beef' for the tables of Hong Kong and Singapore. The Northeast loses in both cases."

"Go to any Thai city today and you will find it packed with poor bewildered ex-farmers from the Northeast either out of work or doing the dirtiest and poorest paying jobs. At the same time, our valuable buffalos are slowly disappearing."

The trouble is, he conceded, most Thai farmers know little about buffalo dairying.

Unlike Italy or the Middle East or the nations of the Indian subcontinent, we have no tradition of buffalo dairying. Now we have to learn."

Sisaket Agricultural College gives courses in animal hus-

bandry and has set up a small dairy to process all buffalo milk from its own small herd of some 50, mostly cross-bred, animals and those of farmers who want to get into the business.

Even the best breeds of buffalo give lower daily milk yields than those of comparable quality dairy cattle, but there is a big catch that makes the business worthwhile — buffalo milk has twice the butter fat of cow's milk and can therefore be "toned" to produce more milk.

"We didn't know that until this course came along," said a farmer in one of Chamlong's "buffalo classes."

That buffalos give low milk yields, about 300-400 litres per lactation period, or 2-3 litres a day. Given proper management and feeding, this may rise to 1000-1200 litres a lactation period.

The cure for low local yield, Chamlong says, is to cross-breed Thai buffalos with higher yielding milk buffalos from other countries such as India with long buffalo dairying traditions.

Frozen semen from "river" buffalos is already widely used in artificial insemination to produce female calves who, already in the first generation, are much more satisfactory milk producers.

"Cross-breeding is exactly what we've done here at the College," Chamlong said. "The results have been highly satisfactory. It costs money to import frozen quality semen and even more to procure living quality animals."

Lack of money has been one of the stumbling blocks to the expansion of the College's modest programme.

The Rotary Clubs of Greater Bangkok recently gave the College a grant of \$22,400 for Chamlong's programme. Help has also come in technical assistance from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Labour Organisation.

"The Northeast needs this programme," he said. "Thailand needs it. Here we are with all these millions of animals once considered indispensable and now wrongly viewed as all but useless."

They have economic logic on their side. Thailand is currently undergoing an expansion of its milk market. Yet, as of the end of 1991, Thailand was still forced to import above 80 per cent of all its milk and milk powder. Cheese, a milk product once despised by all but the most widely travelled Thais, is also selling better every year.

"In a nation where so many rural people are still dirt poor, it would be criminal to throw away such a valuable resource."

— Gemini News

Peyton Johnson works for UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation in Bangkok.

# Dhaka's Metropolitan Planning

by Sarwar Jahan

THE recent increase in the population of Dhaka metropolitan area has far exceeded all projections made earlier. The reason for this increase seems to be its growing importance as a centre of administration, education, commerce, trade and industry.

The rate of growth of Dhaka's population during the last few decades has been quite spectacular. The percentage increase in population between 1961 and 1981 was much higher than the increase during the previous census periods. For example, during 1961-1974 census period, the population of the city increased by about 212% compared to only 65% increase during 1951-1961 census period.

The increase in population during 1974-1981 indicates that the rate of growth has increased rather than decreased during recent times. Various estimates now put the population figure of Dhaka metropolitan area at around six millions.

As the populations grows, the demand for different types of urban services and facilities increases. Although some efforts have been made to increase the provision of differ-

ent types of infrastructure and socio-economic facilities, the increase in population has far exceeded the expansion of such facilities.

This has resulted in serious housing shortage, overcrowded transport services, inadequate drainage and water supply and shortage of different types of community facilities.

RAJUK is also empowered to exert development control through zoning, building construction regulations and preparation and enforcement of zonal development plans.

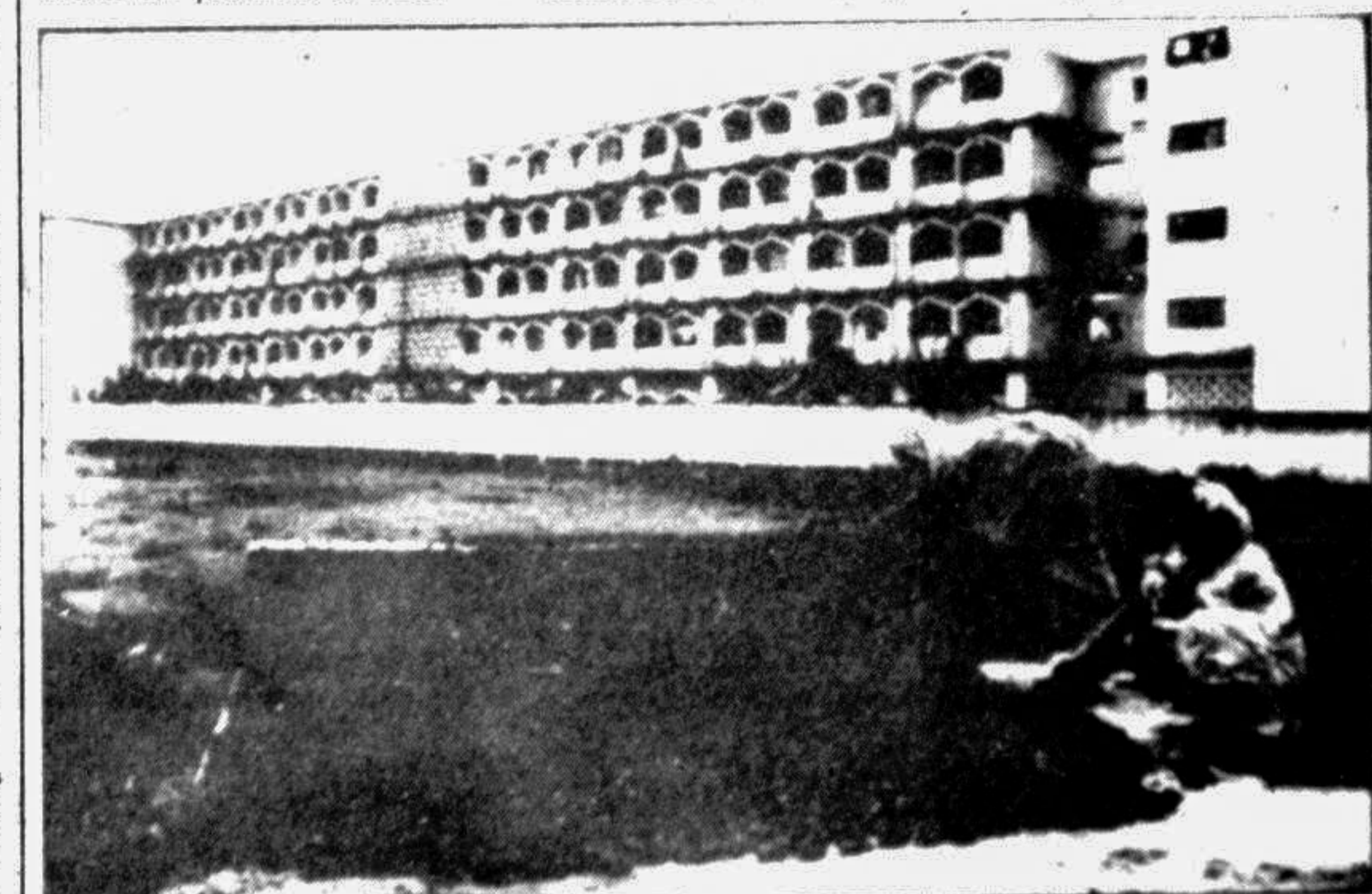
The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha (former DIT) prepared the master plan for Dhaka city in the year 1959 by

a reputed British firm, Minprio, Spencely and PW Macfarlane under the Colombo plan.

Under the provisions of the master plan land was acquired on large scale for urban activities at different locations of the city. Since the promulgation of the master plan in 1959, the RAJUK has acquired about 4260 acres of land and developed these lands for various purposes such as residential, commercial, industrial, parks and open space, etc.

The following are among the residential areas developed by RAJUK: Gulshan, Banani, Uttara (first phase), Uttara (second phase) and Baridhara. In some cases, rehabilitation areas were created to provide plots to the persons affected by land acquisition. These included Joarshara, Shampur-Kadamtali and Gandaria.

The role of RAJUK in planning and development of Dhaka city during the last few decades has not been very impressive. Right from the beginning, emphasis has been given to provide developed plots to the middle and upper income people.



A residential hostel of Dhaka University

and staff quarters.

The concept is to construct flats and develop small plots which are affordable by the low income people. If such a policy is implemented, benefits will go directly to those who need them instead of going to the well-offs who have so far benefited most from RAJUK's activities.

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Water buffalos are a common sight in rural Thailand

FAO photo: Peyton Johnson