

TEENNS and TWENTIES

The Reasons for Becoming a Street Child are Varied and Not Simple

by Raffat Binte Rashid

YOUNG boys shopping in the bazars for vegetables and rice, cooking their own food, while friends stand by and watch. Some helping in the cutting and processing while others wait and chat happily. They have all contributed money for this 'special' meal.

Apparently this description fits fine with any annual funfair organised by boys in a locality or a school picnic. But a tiny though basic difference between their naughty frolic and this particular arrangement brings everyone back to reality.

For the kids preparing this meal, it's a regular feature. They are the street children, earning their living by either collecting and selling waste papers or carrying loads in the local markets. This is a 'picnic' they arrange every day. And the places where they organise such 'meals', are their favourite hideouts. Here they forget the cruel, world outside and engage in fun and merry making. These are actually day care centres or drop in centres of the Dhaka programme of Terre des hommes. As a child welfare organization Tdh started functioning with the slum children of Dhaka city in 1976.

During the last decade, with rapid urbanization and aggravation of poverty, there is a rapid influx of large numbers of homeless and rootless people to urban areas in the hope of getting some sort of job for their survival. Simultaneously there is a rapid increase in the number of street children. There are no unbiased statistics about the number of street children in Dhaka city, but one study claims that there are about 200,000 children on the street and half of them are girls," explains G Istiaque Ahmed, Project Director, Terre des hommes, Dhaka.

The reasons for becoming a street child are varied and not simple. Bangladesh is a very poor country and fifty percent of the families live below poverty level. The children, especially the girls, are neglected and under tremendous pressure to survive. Their position in the family and in the society is hopeless. And when a child's family life is intolerable due to continuous neglect, violence or boredom the



Survival of the fittest, a fight they face everyday.

child's untamed mind revolts and tries to escape.

This is aggravated by the child's peers. Some times a child is, accidentally, lost in the city. Another important factor are women traffickers.

They are dangerous and alarming sexual agents who entice girls out of their family by promising lucrative jobs in the garment industry or elsewhere. The children are then sold to a brothel or sent abroad. They are sexu-

ally abused. When they develop sexual diseases or become pregnant most of them become physically and mentally ill and useless in the brothel.

Ultimately they are thrown on the street. Sometimes they are also rescued by Government officials from the brothel and handed-over to welfare organizations like Tdh. Every human being, especially those in welfare organisations, should react immediately before it is too late. This was reported in Tdh Dhaka programme annual report '93, explains Ahmed. The Street Children's Programme (SCP) consists of one street school, two drop-in-centre, three boys and girls club, four boys hostel and five girls hostel.

The Drop-in Centre was started in 1990 at old Dhaka to provide open house facilities for the street children. The children enjoy facilities like bathing, cooking, medical treatment recreation, informal education etc. The children are divided in two groups for informal education. Emotional support is provided by our staff who contribute greatly to the children well-being. Average attendance is about 50 persons per day during the year, but the number reaches as high as 80 per day as well," reports Ahmed.

This drop-in-centre in Nayabazar is basically a day care centre for the ones who have no parents living with them. The boys hate dominance or discipline of any form, they walk in and out of the centre whenever they feel like, but leave before dusk for their individual destination. These are likely to be either Sadarghat launch terminal, Shishu park or the streets.

"We make deals with the people of these places — we will spend the night but vacate the place 'or our beds' before or around dawn," says Shah Alam a nine year old, who carries loads in the bazars. Cheerful and friendly Alam earns a maximum of Tk 30 a day — an amount which means food and clothing for him. Alam seems to have no regrets that he is alone in this big city and very proudly claims that he is old enough to be living alone on his own. "My father says that I am fifteen now and that I can take care of myself. He doesn't work any more now. He was a truck driver," he reports. Hardly three feet in height and with a huge tummy and emaciated body he is a hard working boy — carrying loads everyday.

"We insist that they buy nutritional food and teach them the food value so that the meal they have here can be a balanced diet," says Nurul Islam, assistant coordinator of this programme. They supply the children with necessary utensils and spices and a stand by cook in cases of emergencies but the shopping and cooking is done by them.

This centre is open only in the day hours, seven days a week except on hartsals. "Here we give them the facility of a nice bath, they can wash and clean themselves with soap and oil their hair," informs

Islam. A luxury they otherwise cannot avail. These boys spend their money in whatever manner they wish; they go to cinemas, and watch both Bangla and Hindi movies. To this query Alam smiles and dances 'Amma Dekh' a hindi number with his best pal Babu. "We even go to different cities, just sit in the launch or train and zoom we go to Khulna, Chittagong, Sylhet," Babu claims. There these boys also collect throw away papers but bring them back to Dhaka to sell 'cause we know the merchants here and moreover Dhaka is expensive, we can make more here," informs Babu with an angelic smile and lovable face. "Babu can be a great singer or even a hero if he has the chance," predicts Alam, teasing the good looks of Babu, who is wearing nothing except a polythene bag around his groin. "We are planning to cross the borders, we heard from boy, who have already dared to do so, that fruits are cheap there and getting odd jobs is no problem either," they both smiles with glee about their secret plan.

Besides these adventures, their independence and their poverty, these boys seem to think nothing of the future except for some tired ones like Babu and Alam, who inspite of their freedom want someone else to take care of them. "I have given my younger brother to someone in Benapole he has adopted him, I think he is fine. That is my home town, that is where we stayed till my parents died," says Babu who is himself not more than nine. "I would live to change and go to Arambagh club, I don't like to sleep in the open any more," he says with a hopeful look on his innocent face.

The Arambagh boys and girls club, which is also an important part of Tdh's street children programme, has two sections — one for the boys and one for the girls. The girls club is also used as a drop-in centre for the ones who need day time support.

Zarna, a tokai by profession came to Dhaka from Naranganj when her mother became sick. "To earn money and buy medicines for my ma I came to this big city," she says recalling that initially she started out by begging and earning Tk 10 a day on the average. "Then one day while roaming around the streets I heard from one of my friends that there is a club which teaches you, feeds you and also lets you sleep. This was interesting and I enquired," she explains.

Zarna and most of her friends a the club collect papers and sells them for Tk 3 per kg. "You have to pay Tk 6 every morning to ensure your meals here, we all contribute and after the days work come back to the club and relax, listen to music, watch TV and sleep by 9 pm," she says quite content with the day's routine.

"We have on average an attendance of 26 girls and 58 boys daily here," reports Nurul Islam also adding that they give these rootless children, non formal education, pre-

school education adolescent family life, health and motivation education. These children stay at the club at subsidised rate. The club has residential treatment facilities and also transfers serious cases to gov-

ernment hospitals. On the hartsals and strike days, they stay at the club and the food is free for that day informs Islam.

These children are from displaced rural families, children of broken families, or



Sorrow behind the smiles: Life is not that bad. —Star photo

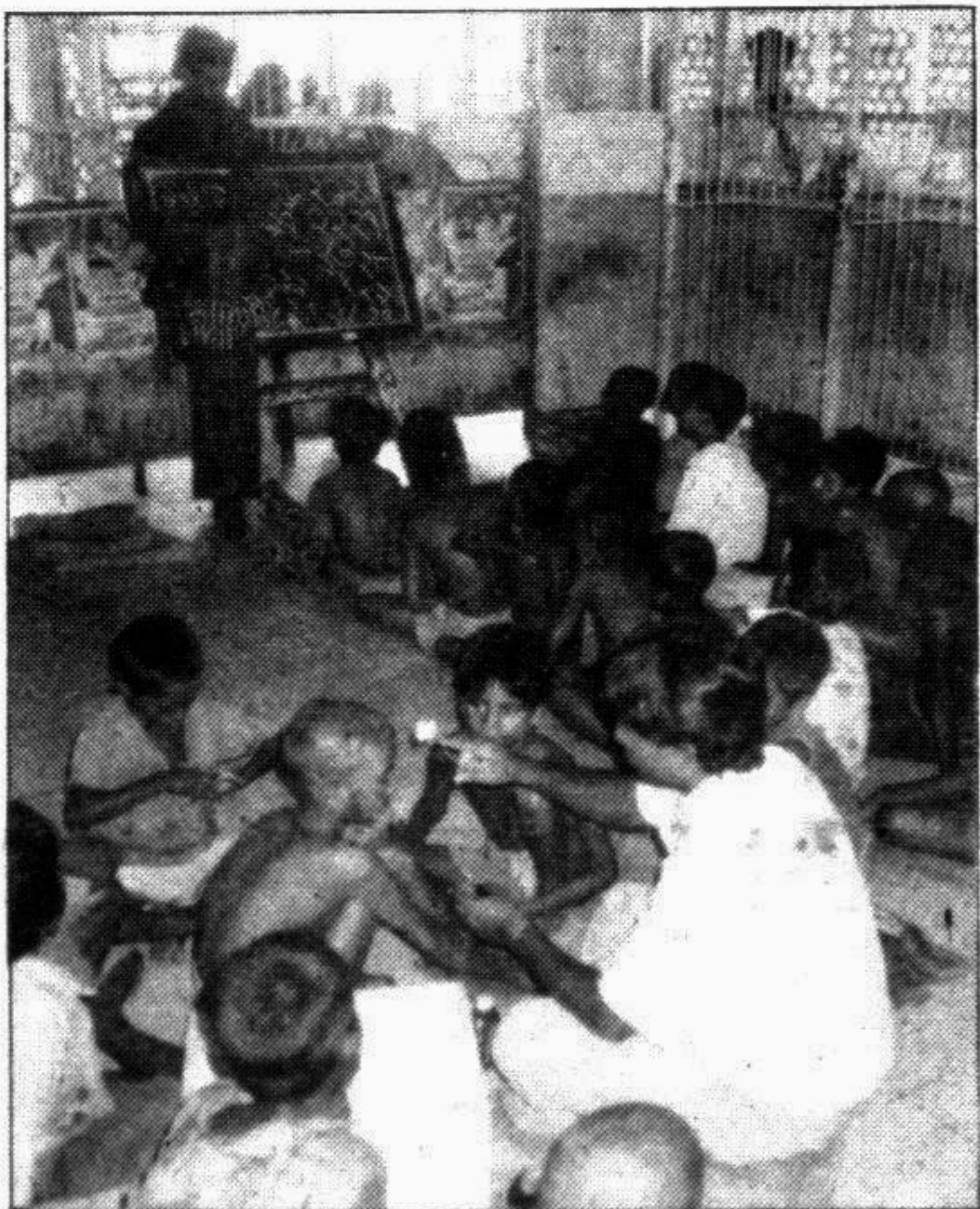
some are just missing. They receive no love and affection, they have no motive in life. On clubs try to give these kids some sort of vocational training, so that they can alter their identity as tokais," Islam says. They are given a bicycle and rickshaw repairing and sewing training. Many such kids are already in the garments industry or doing other stable jobs. "Our first such batch of rickshaw and bicycle repairmen are graduating this November. This is one of our long term plan to set up an income generating job for them and allow them to live alone. On graduation day these students will receive a tool box," Islam informs.

These girls and boys are only a tiny fraction of the mass out there, and may be in some way they are the lucky ones. For Zarna can now save a minimum of Tk 1 a day which when they visit home is something God sent. They can now sign their name and have an opportunity to learn further, they can buy fancy clothes from Fulbaria, Gulistan chora market.

The most important part of this programme is that these uncared for souls earn self dignity by contributing to their stay there. They don't look upon themselves as someone neglected or charity cases. They sleep under a roof alright but just on wooden beds, no mattress, no pillows "we want them to stay close to their present life-style and not uproot them from their real life," confirms Islam.

There are thousands of children on the streets who need better contact and motivation to change their lives, so that they can grow up to be good citizens of our country.

We express our deep gratitude to all donors who extended their hands in support of thousands of deprived children in Bangladesh," concludes Istiaque Ahmed. The Dhaka programme of Tdh, whose main slogan is — "Direct assistance to children in distress without political, religious or ethnic bias" — is a success no doubt. Even if they can motivate one child to join them, he in turn would motivate his friends and like this the flow would begin. And that is the start we are all working towards.



First aid facilities and education courses at Sadarghat street school. Courtesy—Tdh

Undaunting Spirit

A Brief Account of an Ambitious Individual

by Lavina A Ahmed

UNDER-PRIVILEGED children's educational programmes, (UCEP) provides schooling and intensive technical and vocational training to the economically deprived children, mainly street urchins, giving them a chance to stand on their own two feet.

Parveen Begum is a graduate of UCEP, currently working at Rangs Lid factory in Tejgaon — one of the country's mega electronics industries. We made an appointment to meet her at her work place.

In a bright green shalwar kameez, Printed pumps and the mandatory blue apron, the young lady who walked into the room could easily Pass off as a college or university student, "you wanted to talk to me? How can I help?" — she inquired and flashed a beaming smile at us. Unlike many, Parveen didn't show any inhibitions or reservations about giving an interview at first. Slightly though, her cooperative mood dissipated as soon as she was asked to relate her past. People of the low income families having struggled so hard to attain a certain 'status' in the society, are often reluctant to talk about this past.

Parveen isn't any exception either. Her reticence was obvious in the little information she volunteered about her background. She came to Dhaka at a very small age with her mother, brother and sister. Her father's death, had forced her family to leave their village home. He worked as a butcher in the city. "It was a move out of sheer despair," she recalls looking lost in thoughts. "In the beginning things were very difficult, no money, no work, we were totally at a loss. Then, my mother got a job at a garments factory, (where she is still

working) we went to school. Things started to look bright. I studied at a local primary school in Maghbazar, later on went to UCEP school in Mirpur, were they taught up to Class-VIII." A point to be noted is that UCEP only enrolls a working child as their student.

After that she took a one year training in electronics at the same institution. Why electronics? She gave an uncomprehending look to that question, then blurted out "because there are more career opportunities for the technically proficient of course!" But hastened to add, her love for electrical work. At first she worked in a small factory, then got a better job offer at Rangs, where she has started working since this January.

Talking about her work Parveen explains enthusiastically: "It involves assembling TV parts together and is a challenging and demanding job." Yet, she enjoys her 9-5 working hours and likes the environment there. There is good relationship between the employees and the management staff, she says.

Like any other young person, she too, likes hanging around with friends at Sangsad Bhaban, parks or the shops. In her pastime she watches TV or read books. The Bengali drama serials hold her interest and Zahid Hasan and Nader Chowdhury are her favourite actors. When it comes to music, Parveen prefers Tagore songs as well as performed by Runa Lafia and Sabina Yasmeen. She also expressed her dislike for Bengali films. Quite unpeccable taste one must admit.

When asked about her fu-

ture plans she turns pensive and introspective stating that she wants to be very 'big' someday. Trying to be more explicit she says: "I want to utilize my potentials to the fullest and be a success" she is planning to continue with her studies privately, right along with her work. This ambitious lady realizes that education is vital for climbing the social ladder.

And marriage? What are her thoughts on that score? "No," — she firmly declares, (perhaps a bit too vehemently) I haven't given it a single thought," why? she snorts, "it's just a false promise of bliss and security!" The newspapers reveal the dark sides of marriages! But an educated and understanding man of a decent family background might be able to change her mind — Parveen expresses with a sly grin. It could be mentioned that most of other female employees of the factory share the identical opinion regarding 'holy matrimony'. For the time being she rejoices in her independence and is content with the way life is. The mother and daughter double income is sufficient for their small family of three members (her sister is married and lives away from home with her husband) at Maghbazar.

We were talking during the lunch break and the shrilling sound of the bell put an end to our pleasant chat. On her way back to work Parveen mutters absently "I have a long way to go, but I am optimistic what I can fulfil my dreams — then concludes rather philosophically that with hard work, persistence and a little luck, one can achieve beyond one's limits.

With this piece of sound advice she waves goodbye inviting us to her place some day.

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..... But Fate is Not With Them

by Nahid Hussain

IN Dhaka and other cities as well, we see many street urchins engaged in various different works. They are commonly known as 'Tokai' which means one who collects things thrown-away in the streets. They are usually dressed in tattered clothes. A

walking to his place of work within half an hour. His parents do not work and as he is the oldest among their four boys he has to shoulder the responsibility of the family. He works from eight till ten at



Hartal for them, but fun for us. —Star photo

look at them will create a vacuum inside your heart. But even if you wanted to you can not change their fate. I have had the opportunity to speak to a few of them namely Chand, Shameem, Sunon, Babli, Kalachanda, and Shumi.

Chand is a nine years old boy who works at a garage in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. He came with his elder brother to Dhaka from a village to try out his luck. His parents have become old and are not doing any work. He has another brother and a couple of sisters. His brother is a small mechanic and at the same work place he has a job to clear the vehicles. He works daily from early six in the morning till ten at night. He earns Tk fifteen to twenty everyday. He has been working for two years now and is enjoying his work. He is trying to learn the trade and hopes to become a mechanic with his own garage.

Shameem is one of boys who accosts you at the bazar with the fervent hope that you will allow him to carry all the groceries and vegetables you buy. He lives in a slum beyond west Dhanmondi. He comes

night. He earns about taka fifty to forty to a day, he claims that on weekends he earns upto taka seventy. His nature did not hide the fact that he does not enjoy his work but can not help the situation either. He wants to go school and then become a respectable gentleman but fate is not with him.

Sumon is a small child working as a vendor selling cigarettes and betel leaves. His father is a 'thela gar' pull cart puller and his mother an ayah waiting maids at a school. He has two brothers and four sisters two of them work at a garments factory near by. He lives in a slum near Lalmitia and attends afternoon school though. He mentioned that his father had forced him into this work because of their financial position. He is currently working at the Dhanmondi Cricket stadium where the Damal Summer cricket tournament is being held. Though he earns about taka forty to fifty here but knows that he has no hope for his future.

Babli is the daughter of a chaawalla (tea-vender). Her mother does part-time house-

hold work at different homes. Luckily she attends class one in a school. She loves her mother a lot as her mother wants them to go school like everyone else. Everyday with a large bag she collects paper which they use as a fuel to cook their food. This she does before and after school. She has two younger siblings. Sometimes they go to houses, clean plates or to throw the garbage. In return they get castoffs and often a meal. At the slum where they live, they have to pay 'taka hundred as rent.

Kala Chanda is the daughter of a rickshaw puller and comes from the same slum in Narayanganj like Babli. But she collects leaves and plastic materials thrown away like her compatriot, only difference is that the former uses it to cook food while the latter sells it to get money. Her mother also works at different houses.

Sometimes her mother gets food for her and her brother from where she works, she also helps her mother at times with her job. She enjoys her work and attends school. She added smiling that she was called Kala Chanda because of her dark complexion.

If you are ever lucky then one day you might meet Shumi on the roads offering you a garland. She has the bitterest luck of all as people rarely buy her garland. She walks from long distances from her home to her place of work. As she is the youngest of the five children, she doesn't feel that bad and is usually in a carefree spirit. Her father is a 'Chatpati seller while her mother breaks bricks at a construction site.

She says that one should have a taste of her father's 'chatpati' as it is very best in town. She is happy that she is not sent to a school because she doesn't like to be cooped up in a room.

If you meet anyone of them or anyone else offering you something, give it a second thought; don't just end it there and then.



Boys at Arambagh Club, learning the rickshaw, bicycle repairing trade. Courtesy—Tdh