

WOMEN ON THE MOVE

A Tale of Centuries : Myths and Realities

by Muhammad Abdul Mannan

ORIGINALLY, Bangladesh is named and famed after her language Bangla or Bengali. Ironically, she was fated to become voiceless, remained only within her limbic gestures, as East Bengal changed into East Pakistan, in 1947. Eventually, murmurs of her soft bubbled up in Language movement in 1952, and consequently, regained her voice in the war of independence in 1971; as thousands of throats rejoiced "Amar Shonar Bangla", the 'national anthem' of Bangladesh.

"Language is as old as consciousness". And the earliest Bengali conscience traced back to the beliefs and practices of one of the 'tantric Buddhists', the *Sahitya* sect — in an ampre-twelfth century collection of love songs entitled 'Carya Carya Vitis Caya' — expressing, in a put shell, the ultimate union of mankind by man and woman. This male-female relationship, from time immemorial, have had provided the very basic ingredient for various sects and cults in Bengal. In the *Vaisnava Sahitya* sect, all male and female are viewed as the physical reincarnation of the principles of *Radha* (female) and *Krishna* (male) tracing its origin even to the *Vedic* age. Yet, in some sects, devotees ritually assume the roles of *Radha-Krishna* and engage in ordinary sexual exploits. But then, in the early 16th century, teaching of a Bengali saint *Caitanya* changed its character, converting human love songs into fervent religious hymns; and through *Caitanya* chanting 'Hare Radha Hare Krishna', human relationship became divine. Whether these relationships are humane or divine, whether *Radha* is the ideal of Bengali womanhood or goddess, a female or a feminine quality of god, the sigh of the oppressed creature fumed on the furnace oil as *Krishna's* energy and eternal consort.

In the medieval Bengali literature, there were many compositions and verses, based on stories connected with popular religious cults of which *Krittivas Ojha's* 'Ramayan' seems to be the earliest great epic in Bengal. The Epic is named after its hero Ram, a portrait of Bengali man, while his wife the heroine *Sita* idealized Bengali wife. But, *Sita's* condition, here, is far more awkward than of *Radha*; as *Sita* had to exile in jungle ('Sitar Banabash'), an ordeal imposed by her husband Ram, to prove her chastity. (And till now Bengali *Sitas* are bounded within the wilderness of sangar or family; and twentieth century Hindus glor-

fied *Rama-Krishna* on the debris and silts of *Sita-Radha*). Moreover, besides these literary mirror, the most brutal and heinous Hindu performance of *Sati*, the tragic death of *Sita* on the funeral pyres of their husbands, outnumbered all to bear comparison with Christopher Marlow's cynicism: One is no number; noids are nothing, then, without the sweet society of men.

Since the tenth century a large number of Muslim *pirs*, *darvishes*, *aulias* monotheized Bengal through 'Sal-al-Ganga' (recent Chittagong), preaching Islam with the fervent glory of Sufism (an Indo-Persian delight), which attracted the low-caste Hindus and other sectarians of Bengal. The mosques invaded Bengal long before the

prevention of child marriage and thereby, marked the milestone of Hindu women emancipation movement.

But the Muslims of Bengal, under the British rule, were the worst sufferers. Even the government report of 1871 supported it, focusing Muslims 'backwardness in education' as the 'roots of all evils'. Under the 'check and balance' preventive measures the British ruler changed their English education policy and imparted education in Arabic and Persian. From this remarkable change, Muslims of Bengal gradually discarded their negative attitudes towards English education. And, in 1926, some English educated Muslims founded 'Dhaka Muslim Sahitya Samaj'. They were inclined to European cul-

Pakistan); and governments' Islamization-Pakistani policy interrupted preceding 'Bengali Muslim Women Emancipation Movement'. Even few devotees of Muslim philosophy urged the dramatists of East Pakistan to compose drama without any female character. But, in 1971, after the nine month long war against West Pakistan, the Liberative Bengal proclaimed herself as Bangladesh. The major Bangladeshi Islamic fundamentalist forces were against liberation and supported West Pakistanis, enjoying themselves as 'Rajakar' or the patriots. But their defeat signalized the rosy dawn of new women emancipation movement.

After long battle of internal power struggle, the democratic parliamentary form of government was established in Bangladesh in 1991. And this is for the first time, feminine voice echoed and ornamented our parliament, as the government and the main opposition parties are led by two women. Again, the founder and the chief of the most pervasive present movement (the anti-fundamentalist movement) was a woman (recently died) and the torch is carried away also by a woman. Even country's most disputed and internationally well-known figurine, is a woman feminist. So, the political sky of present Bangladesh is shining in the radiation of women's participation for their own emancipation. And the recent 'education policy' of Begum Zia certainly claims as the hallmark of the future; the recent budget of 1994-5 shows ADP of Tk. 110 billion of which 17% (Tk. 15.3 billion) would be spent in the education sector, while 'universal primary education' and 'mass literacy' gained apriority with 57% of Tk. 15.3 billion, which would obviously benefit the girls of Bengal who never saw the 'light of letters' within their misty dark.

But, near it, there are many political and cultural storm-clouds, that may only be overcome by more personification of women and more awareness to fight for their rights. As nymph Echo (who cannot speak first, yet cannot remain silent when others speak) vibrates within the 'reggae rhythm' of Jamaican Legend, Bob Marley: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind". Echo wasted away with love, until finally her voice remained. And now she hides in the woods and cannot be seen, but her voice is alive and can be heard by anyone.

Dance : Influenced by Classics



warriors on the horse back' in 1199. Meanwhile, Muslim preachers were not 'out of tune' of Bengali folk culture, and soon enough, the creation story of Adam-Hawa became popular. As the story goes on : Allah created Adam in the garden of Eden as the 'crown of creation' and as well the first man. Then, for Adam's service and accomplishment Allah created *Hawa*, Eve from the bone of Adam. No restraint was placed upon them except the prohibition of eating a fruit of a particular tree, the 'Gondom'. But, *Satan* seduced *Hawa* to eat that fruit and *Hawa* seduced Adam to do that, and finally they ate the fruit. And for this inobedience, Adam-Hawa's expulsion from Eden to Earth came upon mankind as the eternal punishment. The sum and substance of this creation story illustrates that woman was created for man, and so she is inferior; it also shows that *Satan* first seduced woman to sin, and therefore woman is nearer to *Satan* than man. Besides, the story also revealed

who swam by night to wed across the sea; and of his dark marriage upon which no dawn ever shown'.

Then, came the Robert Clive; and since his conquest in 1757. Among the British rule, governor-general Lord William Bentinck (1828-1835) made 'Sati' illegal and suppressed it firmly. Though it was a war cry for the orthodox Hindus, it brought women the 'golden fruit'. Furthermore, in Bentinck's period English education was established, officially, in Bengal instead of the 'persian-arabic'.

At the beginning, it was painful for most Muslims and also for some Hindus, but as time passed on, it became the main source of inspirations and stimulations for women's emancipation. Along with British educators and their secular writers, some English educated Hindus pioneered by Raja Ram Mohan Ray (founder of the Brahmo Samaj in 1828) encouraged woman education, campaigned for remarriage of Hindu widows and legislative

ture and wanted to make a breakthrough in the Bengali Muslim society, as was done by the Hindu Brahmo Samaj of 19th century. But, they failed due to adverse socio-political atmosphere in the pre-partition days. However, during this time, Bengal Muslim women also started a movement for their emancipation, and Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) torched the lamp as the first Bengali woman novelist and the founder of a girl's high school.

The last half century of British rule was disastrous for Bengal. The conspiracy of British government under the 'divide and rule' policy and of the power-hungry central politicians, finally in 1947, divided Bengal on religious ground. East Bengal with Muslim majority becomes the part of Pakistan, while West Bengal with Hindu majority becomes the part of India. Then, East Bengal came into being as East Pakistan (making a mockery of some politicians efforts to name her 'Bangistan' echoing

to name of Comilla in the south. She obtained some Test Relief work on a Government scheme a few weeks ago. Now the family have sold most of their meagre assets (such as roofing sheets) which they and brought with them in 1991. Their 5 year old boy scavenges for odd grains of paddy in the newly harvested fields.

Her neighbours, 65-year old Walehuddin and his wife Meher Bano cannot hide their despair when we look inside their simple hut. Their is a sad story. Before the river ate their land, they had a productive plot of 3 bighas (almost one acre) on one of the river chars. Their three children have all died. Now, they have not had a meal for two days.

Most of the members of this impoverished little community in Kalmati DC Road, only 8 kilometres west of Lalmonirhat town have suffered a similar fate. All are victims of the mighty Teesta River which regularly devours the land along its banks, forced its victims to leave their house and land. Some came in 1986, others in 1988, 1991, 1992, and 1993. Some were relatively better off, with land and some assets. Now they are all in a similar plight and feel this most acutely during the traditional lean season when work is scarce. Housing

conditions are poor but no worse than the urban slums of Dhaka. Where the situation is worse is that there is no means of earning a living here.

When drought strikes, further undermining the local economy, these environmental refugees become 'double victims'. Some Government Relief schemes such as Test Relief or Vulnerable Group Development Cards enable a few to earn some cash temporarily. The RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project also brought relief and short-term work for others.

For some of the families here in Kalmati DC Road, and some of the 630 river-erosion victims in Moheshkhoda in neighbouring Aditmari Thana, funds donated by the United Nation's Women's Association in Dhaka will provide much needed relief to the most desperate members of these communities. Having used local community organisations, in conjunction with local Government authorities, NGO Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) RDRS has identified the most vulnerable in these communities, the women-headed households, the elderly and the disabled to receive some food and some much-needed winter clothing to help them through the cold winter common in these parts. Thanks to the generosity of UNWA, around 200 families are now receiving around 12 kgs of rice or wheat and two chadars (warm winter wraps) — distributed by the local Deputy Commissioner.

Womanhood: Balancing Our Roles

by Shahpar Selim

NE the Miss Universe contest, contestants were asked what their ideas of womanhood were. Most answers sounded like slogans from a perfume advertisement. In reality, if there were a perfume called, quite simply, 'Woman', (than its advertisements would most likely show different women doing different things: from painting a kitchen door to going out to dinner. The truth is, you cannot truly define what it is to be a woman and what it expected of us, without sounding insincere and incomplete. It would be like trying to define 'love'.

If the question was, 'What is man-hood?' the answer would probably be a quick shrug and a 'You know... taking care of things'. The point is, that we women do the taking care bit, and a whole lot more. And no, I'm not talking about our prolific superiority. Essentially, something is defined by its function and necessity. In that case, defining womanhood is a Leviathan task. And I don't know enough to even try. Thus what follows is how we live within the rules, bend them a little and even create our own choices or at least try to.

As in the case of most responsibilities, womanhood should have its few perks, and it does. Those new shoes, that favourite peafowl, your baby is first toothless grin, the adrenaline kick of your own paycheck, your child's graduation photograph, an old birthday card from your brother, a special smile from a special beau, a Tom Cruise poster, a long chat with your best friend. All these make you feel that it's worth it all; all that you've done right, all that you've handled well of your opportunities and responsibilities as a mother, sister, daughter, colleague etc etc; that you have overcome the sex barrier where necessary and, in the greater sense, you have fulfilled your life; that you are glad that you are a woman. That brief gloom before your next meeting with the chauvinistic pigs makes you realise that love is not all in life; that they don't make men like Alan Alda anymore, and that nothing succeeds like depression. It makes you want to give up. But you don't. Because survival is the key to the 90's, and how we do it is up to us. Sometimes we fall, we are wrong and we pick up from there and keep going, with our strengths and insecurities. We deal with men and get better at it. And somewhere along the way, you have realised what it womanhood and your have lived the great responsibility. And some of us will be lucky enough to have enjoyed it, off the most part. We will have laughed and even cried under the pressure, and been glad of our womanhood.

It is indeed sand that we have to live in a society where the rules were written by men and are executed by men. Outside the home, more often than not, we have to deal with immature, shallow, insecure men who have an inflamed libido to go with their condescending egos. Don't get me wrong, I don't hate men and I know that charting a list of their faults would defeat its own purpose. The only way out of this is by earning their respect. It sounds easier to fly to Mars and it probably is. Everyday we must battle the latent sexual domination of men. But there is one way of stopping it: teach your son that his sister is his equal, and one day, maybe we will be able to treat them so and respect the burden of womanhood.

Along with the great balancing act of being one's self, a mother, a sister, a wife, a confidante, a provider, a self-sacrificing angel, a glamour

Where Women Terrify the Men who Get Tipsy

Rahul Bedi writes from New Delhi

Drinking can be extremely dangerous in Manipur state in north eastern India. In their nightly patrol volunteers from the militant Women's War Association look out for drunken men and hand them over to the police. Alcohol is a major social problem in Manipur, as in other hill areas of India. The campaigns of Manipuri women, reports Gemini News Service, are encouraging women in other states to fight alcohol abuse.

to drink.

One terrified culprit, realising the Paibis were trailing him, ducked into a friend's house and emerged dressed as a woman, temporarily fooling his pursuers. But his drunken gait gave him away, said a documentary cameraman who filmed the incident.

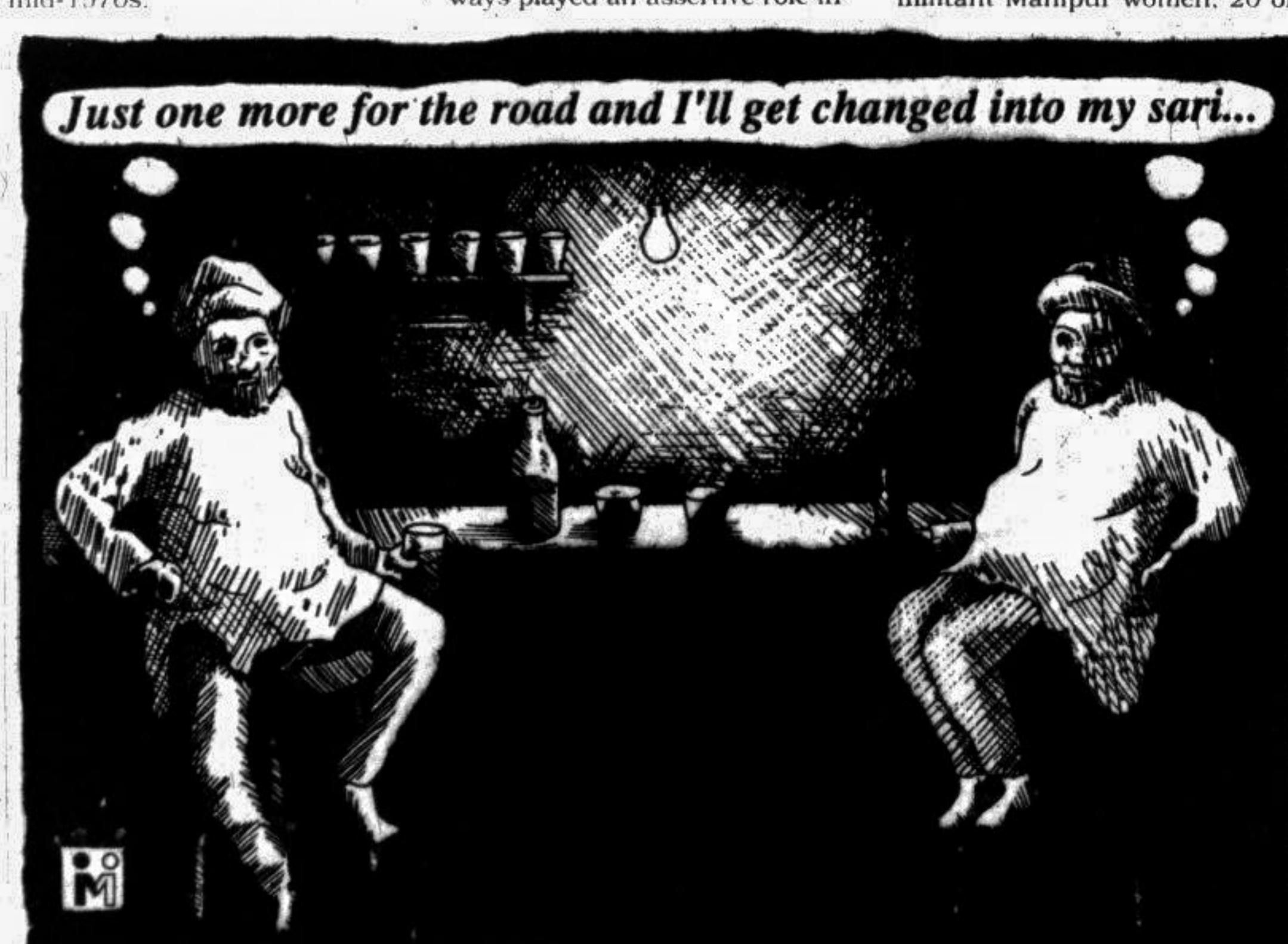
The Meira Paibi movement began as the All Manipur Prohibition Association in the mid-1970s when male alcoholism led to wife-beating, the break-up of homes and spiralling unemployment in the mid-1970s.

Manipur women have always played an assertive role in

keeping the family together and normally work harder than the men, running most daily fish, meat and vegetable markets in the state.

They are big-boned and muscular from doing manual labour in a relatively primitive environment and have long been renowned for their militancy. Manipuri women forced the British government in 1939 to rescind a tax imposed on rice production.

Five hundred British troops were required to curb 3,000 militant Manipur women, 20 of



Manipur's shares a 215-mile border with the thickly forested Soma Tract in Burma, which is ruled by private armies operating drug manufacturing units. This makes it easy for international syndicates to divert huge quantities of heroin into the state and assures a smooth flow to international markets via an addicted population.

An official said : "They will have to work harder. Heroin addiction is less visible than alcohol."

— Gemini News

The writer is a correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and June's Defence weekly.



Striving for Survival

by A M Ahmad

THE narrow road embankment leading into the village of Kalmati Sadar Thana of northern Bangladesh is lined with tiny bamboo houses clinging precariously to the roadside. The 354 families who live in cramped conditions are not here from choice, they are 'environmental refugees' — their lands and homes destroyed by the shifting of the Teesta River, visible about half a mile in the distance.

Shira Khatun, a woman of around 30, is one of members of these families here. Until 1991, she lived with her family on one of the river chars (small islands) in the Teesta. The family owned a small plot of land (35 decimals, one third of an acre) and managed simple living. Their land and the whole island was swept away in the flood of 1991 so they sought refuge here on the 'mainland'. Since then, the lives of Shira Khatun and her 5 children have all died. Now, they have not had a meal for two days.

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