

# TEENS and TWENTIES

## Child Labour in Bangladesh

by Ratna Black

**T**HE dismal Bangladeshi marketplace was nearly empty as twelve years old Tuli waved goodbye to her friends at work. Then, as the young girl walked alone to her thatched hut in the humid night air, she took out the money which she had earned for the day by carrying people's groceries. She had made Tk 37 — a good amount for a shopkeeper's helper like herself, but barely enough money to feed her mother and three little sisters.

When Tuli arrived home, thoroughly exhausted and extremely hungry, she handed her pay to her half-paralysed mother. After eating a small portion of rice, she went to sleep. The next day the poor child walked back to the market, ready to complete another long day of labour. Even though the girl's lifestyle was not a desirable one, she wanted to work. For if she didn't, she knew that she and her family would be in a much worse condition.

Child labour is a reality of our time. The number of children working and the scale of their suffering increases each year. According to Census data, the children in Bangladesh

Another reason why child labour is bad is because it can be hazardous to the child's health. Like in many other countries, work places in Bangladesh are not all that safe. Incidents of a worker losing his fingers, losing his eyesight, suffering from bronchial diseases or being smashed with machinery have been reported in the press. Workers in general, and especially children are not always protected with security gadgets like gloves, hats or goggles. Some children strain themselves too much by carrying heavy loads on their heads — up to 45 kg — or by handling a spade.

A fourth reason, why child labour should be severely reduced is because children who work often do not have a desirable lifestyle. They should be able to play and go to school and enjoy their life like other children and let their parents work. Instead, too many kids in Bangladesh must also do hard labour for many hours a day to earn money for their family.

On the other hand, we must recognize that some of these children are surviving because of child labour. This is how they earn money which enables them and possibly their family to afford a hut, eat and buy a few rags of clothing. If you suddenly take these jobs away, they and their family will be in a much worse condition. When interviewing a former child labourer, I asked her if she had wanted to work. Her reply was, "Yes, because, if I hadn't, my family and I would have suffered more than we did."

A second positive aspect of child labour is that sometimes it can be an alternative education for children. Just because kids do not go to school doesn't mean that they don't learn anything at all. If a child works as an apprentice, they may become very skilful and get good employment in the future. They may also start their own businesses. This will not only give them a stable job, but it will keep money flowing into the family.

A third positive thing about child labour is that it keeps the children occupied during the day. If the kids work, they will stay busy and won't turn into some sort of delinquent who steals, or turns to less desirable pursuits such as prostitution or begging. Therefore, their work keeps the children engaged and gives them something more positive to do.

Child labour is a problem which must be dealt with. To abolish it, however, one cannot just simply say that they want to get rid of child labour. They must come up with a plan of action — for getting rid of child labour is not something that can just happen overnight. It's basic cause is poverty. Eliminating the cause will have to be a gradual process. It will take lot of effort and time. One contribution to abolishing child labour would be to teach parents the value of education for their children — especially for the neglected girls. If they realize that education is very important for everybody, then they will be more likely to send their kids to school. A second contribution would be to have the government provide more education opportunities and subsidies for children — especially in the rural areas.

This way kids will have a better chance of going to school so that they can get a good education and get a higher level job. Another plan to eliminate child labour is to encourage firms in the non-agricultural sector to provide in-house educational opportunities for kids or to provide them the chance to go to formal schools before or after work. Then, children will not only get an education, but they will be able to earn money as well.

A fourth solution may be to train the children's parents. This way they can get better employment and with loans, perhaps, even be able to open up their own businesses. In doing this, they will be able to afford to care for their children by themselves and their children won't have to work.

A fifth contribution to a solution would be to have donor organizations, such as ILO and USAID, to provide support for programmes on all of the above.

A poor solution to the huge problem facing countries like Bangladesh, however, would be to demand that they eliminate child labour or face the economic retribution from the developed world.

Children should not have to work. They have the right to growth and development. They have the right to a peaceful childhood. Unfortunately, life is not as simple as this. Some children must work because their family and their life is at stake — and if their family is at stake then they must lend a hand. However, this is not how it should be. People who are more fortunate, as we are, must take action to help these families and to help these children.

- 1 Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to education.
- 2 Article four of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one shall be held in servitude. Article five states that no one should be subjected to degrading treatment or punishment.
- 3 Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to social protection.

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Collecting water but adding fun to it also. Photo — AKM Mohsin

constitute nearly 12 per cent of the labour force. This is quite high compared to the figures of the world (3.8 per cent), the more developed regions (0.5 per cent) and the less developed regions (4.6 per cent).

In a recent study more than 300 types of economic activities have been found to involve children. In Bangladesh, over 80 per cent of the child labour is in agriculture and thus in rural areas. In the urban areas most of the children work in the informal sector doing jobs such as breaking rocks, pedalling rickshaws and collecting garbage. It is only a small percentage that work in factories. Some children work because there is little else to do — schools are unavailable, of poor quality or too expensive — or as a means of learning a livelihood.

But the main reason for child labour is poverty. If parents cannot feed themselves and their children, then who will? Support from the society and the government for these poor kids and their families are woefully inadequate — therefore the children work.

On the whole child labour is a sad thing which should not have to exist. Children should be able to do things that we think of them doing — playing and going to school, not labouring for ten of fifteen hours in a horrid environment. However, until we can correct the basic underlying causes, there may be occasions when it is better for a child to work.

This report discusses a few of the main negative and positive points of child labour. It is about why child labour is harmful, but, at the same time, sometimes necessary. It also discusses some plans which must be followed to eliminate the problem so that this world can become a better place.

One reason why child labour should be eliminated is because it robs children of a formal education. Statistics show that a smaller percentage of Bangladeshi rural youngsters go to school than urban ones. Nearly 40 per cent of school-aged children in the country are never enrolled in school. Only 14 per cent of those enrolled in primary school reach the fifth grade. Three-fourths of the enrolled students never complete primary education. Fewer girls are reported to go to school than boys.

This is because many families do not think that girls are as valuable as boys. These children without education — girls and boys — do not, therefore, usually have the opportunity for high level employment in the future, which could lead to their earning more money for their family. They are also unable to prepare themselves for adulthood and will not be able to deal with their problems as well as children who do go to school. Children should have the right to education! But, since many cannot even eat without working, what are they to do?

A second reason why child labour should be abolished is because children are easily exploited. Since they are much weaker than adults, physically and mentally, they often do not have the resources to resist being forced to work for long hours without any rest. In many situations these children are underpaid or even not paid at all for their hard labour. They are sometimes abused, tortured and it has been known for them to be worked to death. The exploitation of children, at and through work, is perhaps the single most common form of child abuse and neglect in Bangladesh — as well as in much of the rest of the world today.

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He is smiling because he has a work. Photo — AKM Mohsin

**T**HE average Bangladeshi tends to think he is a clever and intelligent person, but little does he realise that every day of his life he is being taken for a ride by other more than average Bangladeshis. Our Mr Average is cheated, bamboozled, hood-winked, deceived, victimised until he becomes a living monument of indifference able to withstand even the harshest fraudulence. He becomes a gullible simple — ton, a sacrificial lamb to the whims and fancies of the conmen that surround us.

Imagine, you're out shopping for essentials and the shopkeeper is a man with an aesthetic face and the most benevolent of smiles. "Oh, this man couldn't cheat a person" you think. You ask if the milk is fresh? With the innocence of a new born child he replies, "Just brought in this morning". But unmask and you will find the devil incarnation, because the words have not left his mouth before he is thinking, "Hah! I was going to throw it away yesterday but I knew a sucker like him was bound to come along".

And people, don't be taken for the "OK I'm not going to make a profit on this sale" line. The connotative meaning here is: "I'm going to be able to marry my daughter off sooner than I thought". Then there's the old classic Inflated-Price Sales-Sham. In this sham the shopkeepers double the price one day and the following day declare a sale cutting down prices to the original price. And stay clear of warranties, a one year warranty usually means that the item will self destruct on the 366th day. Another important tip is always keep Murray's Law in mind never ask a salesman if his is a good price.

Our revered government officials are not lagging behind either. When the panjabi clerk Maulana sitting at his desk (barely visible from among mountains of files) says to you rubbing his hands in glee, "I seemed to have misplaced your

## Bamboozled Bangladeshis

by Fyyaz Shahnoor

file" it's time to be alarmed. A veteran of government offices could easily interpret this as, "This is a stick up, let me relieve you of that bulge in your wallet". No wonder they call money liquid assets. For amusement, the officials sometimes play The-File-Is-In-The-Other-Table game. And just as you were going to identify the table where your file is they change the whole arrangement of the office just to add another dimension to the whole charade. I'm sure while visiting a government office you've all noticed that the man doing the least amount of work

are not doing. Stability is achieved when they spend all of their time reporting on nothing they are doing. My advice to readers is always remember two principles when dealing with government officials.

1. No matter what they're telling you, they're not telling you the whole truth.

2. No matter what they're talking about, they're talking about money.

My late grandfather had a malicious disposition towards doctors. "Beware of doctors", were his immortal words. I'm beginning to understand why.

from 'His' pharmacy, get admitted to 'His' clinic etc. In about a year or two you'll be able to bury the patient at 'His' graveyard. Where is the world going to I ask you? Patients, don't be fooled by the soothing words like "Come see me in about a week or two". He isn't thinking about your wellbeing, oh no, what it usually means is that the instalment payment on his new car is due about that time. Confidentially let me tell you that a doctor once confided in me that the attitude he took with patients was one of "Ask no questions and you shall be told no lies". But don't believe everything you hear, or read as the case might be.

The police are another threatening aspect to public wellbeing. They give the phrase "Money talks" a whole new dimension. The average Bangladeshi fears the average police more than they fear the average dacoit. This is a accepted phenomenon because unlike the average dacoit the average police come back for more, again and gain and again.

But I'm sure you'll all agree that the greatest phonies to plague the country nowadays is the 'Fakrs and Darbeshes'. These people claim they can change the future. Why they're not competent enough to change a babies nappy even. Frankly speaking though I don't despise these traders in human misery. I mean look at it this way, without them this world would be a boring, colourless, stale place to live in. The excitement alone of trying to see through the guiles and trickery of everyday life gives one the energy to live. Also being cheated brings us down to earth that however clever you might be there is always a person a bit more cleverer than you are. So the con-men of Bangladesh, thank you! Where could we be without you.



has the most files on his desk. The logical explanation is that in any bureaucracy paperwork the load increases as people spend more and more time reporting on things they

Some doctors are the greatest con-artists this holy land has ever produced. Or, sham evolves his telling you to get your blood tested in 'His' diagnostic centre, buy drugs

## Those Were The Days, My Friend!

# For Teens & Twenty-ers of Today and Yesteryears — III

by Asrarul Islam Chowdhury

**We thought they'd never end — Mary Hopkin**

Today is the third leg of our "Journey through space and time" in our quest in analysing teens and twentiers of Bangladesh over the last three decades. This week we'll be focusing on an interesting topic. Maybe, you yourself become a "victim" of it during the recent Eid festival. Oh! you've guessed right, I see. Yes, this week we'll try to focus on fashion. Our usual warning before we start. There may be generalisations due to lack of space and time. Oh well, I guess, it's time I tell you that our series is drawing to a close. We'll either draw the curtains next week or the week after. Topics to be focused upon, as usual, lie in the memory bank of the Author.

**Your sons and your daughters Are beyond your command Your order is rapidly fading — Bob Dylan**

The single most decisive factor in distinguishing youngsters — not only in Bangladesh, but throughout the world — are their clothes and hairdo. We will first attempt to discuss clothes and then hairdo. Teens and twentiers have a tendency to make themselves visible, especially to elderly people. They will wear, "strange" clothes and make their "hair" stir up rage among their seniors. Youngsters from all times of the last three decades have shown this type of a tendency. However, the method of expressing themselves may have changed over the years, although their basic logic of making themselves visible may not have.

Young boys during 1965-75 developed a tendency to wear Denim Jeans, while Denim Jackets in the winter. The Jeans had bell-bottoms. It is not difficult to picture youngsters like this, especially when one watches old dramas of BTV. There one may see Raisul Islam Asad or Asaduzzaman Nur wearing those bell-bottom pants. There was, however, another tendency among boys. This was to wear Teddy (skin tight) pants. Another interesting feature among young boys was wearing Punjabis with Jeans. This trend survives to this day, and is still popular

among young and middle-aged people.

Young girls, however, had a different outlook to their clothes. Before liberation, the style of most of their clothes was influenced by Pakistani fashion and film stars. After liberation, travelling to India became relatively easier than before. Most of these trips were mainly for pleasure purposes and the destination was either Calcutta and/or Delhi. Fashion in India was to pronounce a profound impact on women. They started wearing Indian Kurta, Sarees and Salwar Kameez.

In the mid seventies, young boys used to wear shirts with big collars. Along with these, they used to wear shoes with heels and wide belts. In the 1975-85 period, the bell bottom pants started to lose their appeal. Pants started to become thinner in the bottom. Today, baggy pants — a fashion that was noticed in the fifties — have come back. However, the intervention of satellite TV has made its impact. Jeans are tending to be tighter than before. Nevertheless, the bell bottom pants have started to surface, albeit, on a very small scale in the sense that the bottom is not that much wide as it used to be in the seventies. Whether they will turn back to their seventies style, is a feature yet to be seen.

One thing should be said about the markets from where clothes are used to be bought. In the seventies, and also eighties, young people — especially boys — used to buy second hand imported clothes. The market saw a tendency in being named after the erstwhile American President, the main country from where these clothes used to (and still do) come from. Thus, the second hand clothes market was called, the Nixon market, Carter market and the Reagan market. Today, however, patriotism seems to be the order of the day. It's not that we don't have a second hand clothes market in Dhaka, but Bangabazar has, without doubt, replaced this market. Who knows, was this market named after our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman!

Something in the way, she looks

**Attracts me like, no other lover — George Harrison**

Now let's try to focus on hair-dos. Youngsters have always been influenced by hair-dos of popular film stars. It may be the glamour that attracts them in the process. However, the Nation from where these film stars come from have just changed. Nevertheless, the basis essence is still there — to emulate one's hero.

**You're strange girl I don't understand your vanity — Al Stewart**

In the Pakistan period, and also after liberation to a certain extent, Pakistani film heroes and their hair-dos influenced those of young people in Bangladesh. Wahid Murad was one star whose hair-do was portrayed by youngsters here. Among the Indian stars, Uttam Kumar's hair-do was popular. Young girls, however, were influenced by our Bobbita. Their hair seemed to reach skyscraping heights, dominant in the hair-do of erstwhile Pakistani film actresses. In those days, there were not many beauty parlours. Girls usually had to depend on their own hands to make out their own hair. In the early eighties, pop-cut hair-do was popular among girls. Pilu Momtaz played a pivotal role in popularising this style.

Today, due to the advent of modern beauty parlours, the scope for changing hair in any way a young girl wants, have widened. There is, however, no definite style. But, one thing is for sure. Young girls have a strong demand for beauty parlours. This has been pronounced in the ever increasing prices these parlours charge and the number in which they are increasing. Lord knows, what pain parents have to go through to meet expenses (no offense to the Mademoiselles, off course!)

There was another tendency that was noticed among the boys. This was the influence of western culture — keeping long hair with sideburns (jullis). This style was popularised by Elvis Presley — the white King of Rock music — another megastar. Boys also used to keep beards or did not

shave regularly. The latter have been — and still are — synonymised with Sharat Chandra's "Dev Das"! It's nearly impossible for a young boy to keep an unshaved face, because he will be dubbed either as "Dev Das" or a "Maznu".

After liberation, the influence of Indian cinema has increased. Today, it has reached sky-high limits due to the influence of Satellite TV. Popular Indian cinema stars are the people who are influencing the hair-dos of our teens and twentiers. Rahul Roy's name ought to ring bells in the minds of young boys, an I not correct? Bracelets, lockets, earrings have also become popular among today's boys. One trend of fashion our boys and girls have not adopted is the skin head style, i.e., shaved heads.

**We may not be the Young ones, very long — Cliff Richard**

Today's youngsters may find yesterday's fashion rather silly or out-dated. Yesterday's people will tell you one thing, that yesterday's fashion was better. This debate can carry on and on and never end. What ever the argument, it's better to keep up with the times and follow fashion that is the order of the day. For "we may not be the young ones, very long". Why don't you do one thing today. Go to, popular outlets where you can get better exposed to today's fashion and get yourself into the groove of it.

After all, today is Friday and your educational institute should be closed. So dear reader, happy marketing. Oh by the way, don't go alone. Take your mate with you. She/he will be able to give a better judgement on how to look beautiful and be better dressed.

**Corrigendum-Part II (pop music), of the present series, had some unnoticed inconsistencies in historical facts. The Author is now busy with an academic priority and shall pay his dues full, hopefully, with an exclusive series on pop music in Bangladesh in the near future. Sorry again to all music personalities.**