

# FOCUS

## Conservatism Still Thwarts Family Planning Practices in Chittagong

by Raffat Binte Rashid, back from Chittagong

**S**IKALBAHA, a small village, consisting of the most of 20 huts, is undoubtedly overpopulated. Just as you cross the Karnaphuli bridge, pass through Anwara and turn left towards Potia, you will find this place quietly hidden behind all the greenery along the roadside.

The moment you decide to visit this apparently peaceful village, which looks more serene in the evening light, you are greeted by a swarm of children. Skinny boys and girls, with huge tummies, wearing only shorts are seen playing in the nearby paddy fields. Their muddy faces, with surprised big eyes and fixed grins, make you feel frustrated by your own helplessness at not being able to reach out to them (in every sense of the word).

Ful Begum has the least number of children in Sikalbaha, i.e. besides the newly married women, who are just starting their families and have only a couple of kids so far, Ful's eldest son is now

10 years old, he is followed by another four children and five month old Razia. If, just for the sake of data or numbers, we calculate her years of marriage, we find that she was pregnant after every six months or so and the gap between each child is no less than one and a half years.

"I never thought of family planning, it is a sin and I heard that you feel sick because you are cursed," she says thoughtfully.

But she smiles nervously to the answer of wanting (rather, affording) another child or not. "My mother-in-law is firmly against these modern ideas and has never let me indulge in such things. There is no way I can defy her or my husband," she explains, pointing to her mother-in-law sitting nearby and monitoring the conversation. These are Ful's barriers, and at the same time she herself shows no willingness to break free of such impositions on her.

Apa, what is a better contraception — taking injections or pills? Why do I feel dizzy whenever I try pills? I forget to take them, what happens then? What would you prescribe this woman who has no child for the last ten years? Why don't we breastfeed our new-born with the first milk, our elders say it is dirty? The bolder women in Sikalbaha ask these questions, mistaking me for one of the family planning workers. But all the time, they keep an eye on the men. This big list of queries go unanswered as family planning officers rarely visit these illiterate women, desperately in need of suggestions and action.

Almost all the women in this village were either carrying a child in their arms or were pregnant. Every man in this village was followed by little ones to the shop, field or to their regular spot for evening chitchat. There was an equal number of adoles-

cent youngsters too. An old man sitting with other men in a shop says that he has no answer to why there are so many kids in his village. "They are God's gift and just happen. I have two bachas, meaning sons, and three daughters".

The attitudes of the other men towards high population and its consequences are the same — careless and uninterested.

Contraception use among husbands is higher in urban than rural areas (63 vs 54 per cent). It is highest among husbands in Khulna and Rajshahi divisions, and lowest in Chittagong and Dhaka divisions. Use of family planning increases sharply with education level, as the Demographic and Health Survey 1993-94 report on Bangladesh shows.

Urban women begin to want to limit family size at lower parities than rural women. For example, 71 per cent of urban women with

two children say that they do not want another child, compared to only 56 per cent of rural women. However, virtually identical proportions want to stop childbearing among both urban and rural women with five or more children, according to the report.

Regionally, women in Chittagong division appear to be less educated in these matters than those in the other divisions. Only 43 per cent of women with two children in Chittagong division want to stop childbearing, while the corresponding rates for women in other divisions are on average more than 58 per cent.

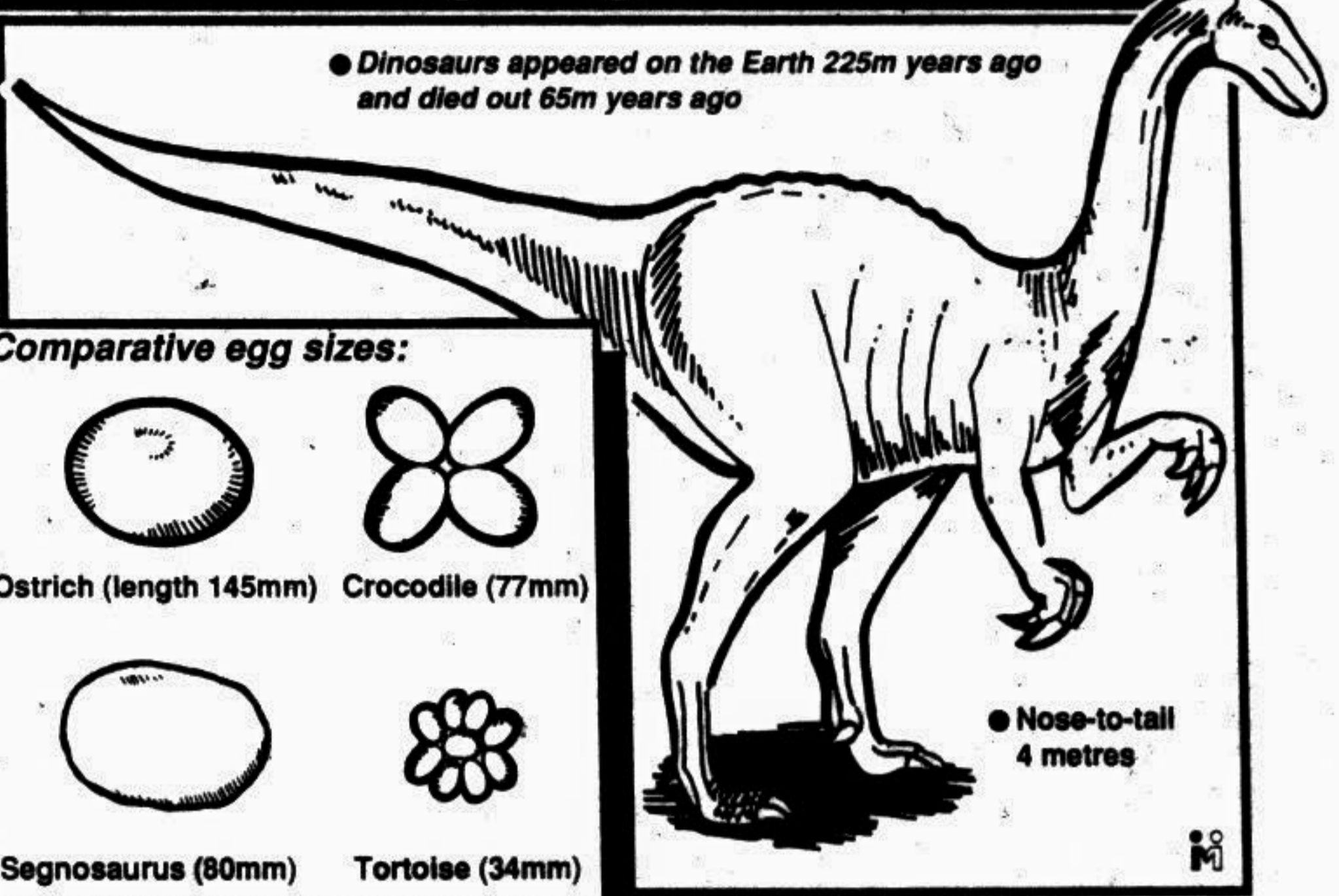
The fact that the people living in Chittagong are more traditional, and have a fundamentalist approach toward family planning, only brings misfortune and troubles to young couples. At the same time it offers these innocent kids an uneducated, half life, and ensures that they too, in time, repeat this vicious cycle of birth.

It reads like *Jurassic Park* come to life: a fossil expert breaks open dinosaur eggs from China and discovers the embryo of a four-foot tall extinct reptile. Gemini News Service reports on an amazing find.

## Shell-shock for the Dinosaur Embryos

Pamela Cowan writes from Cambridge, England

### Resurrecting Segnosaurus



**F**OSSIL technician Terry Manning and three colleagues have spent thousands of pounds importing eggs from China in the last three years — in order to break them open.

They are looking for dinosaurs. Or to be more precise, dinosaur embryos.

The 75-million-year-old eggs are not particularly rare. They have been found in North America, France, Mongolia and China, and cost \$43,000 for about 10 dozen.

But they are special enough to be kept under lock and key because Manning has developed new techniques for identifying eggs containing dinosaur embryos which x-rays and ultrasound cannot detect.

Having identified an embryo, he makes an educated prediction about the species of dinosaur which laid the egg.

Dr Neil Clark, curator of paleontology at the Hunterian Museum in Scotland, describes the specimens as "absolutely magnificent".

"These are the only dinosaur eggs in the world that have the embryo so well preserved. They are absolutely unique and Terry has done a simply marvellous job of preserving them."

The search requires enormous patience: only one egg in 500 might contain a recognisable embryo remains — and there is no guarantee it will be a dinosaur.

Manning's first discovery of embryos in eggs from China — after years of scrutiny — turned out not to be dinosaurs but pond-turtles.

Nevertheless, he was pleased.

The turtle egg was probably the most perfectly preserved embryo ever found

from the Cretaceous period — an era lasting from about 140 million to 65 million years ago. The egg is 40 million years older than the previous earliest remains of this group of reptiles.

Manning, from the British city of Leicester, does not crack the eggs open but painstakingly uses a pneumatic pen to chisel a square two-to-five centimetres in size, enabling him to loosen the shell.

The embryos are so delicate they cannot be touched by human hands. So then he submerges the egg in very dilute acetic acid for repeated eight-hour intervals.

The acid affects the bones only minimally, but breaks down silt or calcite crystals which may be present.

The specimen is washed carefully to remove salts and acids, and dried in an oven. Any exposed bone is stabilised with a plastic to prevent damage by further immersion in acid.

The procedure is repeated again and again, over many weeks.

"You have to persevere," Manning says. "Progress is very slow. One etching in the acid will dissolve two-and-a-half thousandth of an inch — that's the erosion rate."

Despite the painstaking process, his perseverance has paid off.

He has found several embryo dinosaurs in various stages of development from the period when only soft tissues (such as cartilage) are present, to the almost-hatched stage where bone and skin are preserved.

One specimen has been identified by the structure of its teeth as a segnosaurus dinosaur.

The long-necked dinosaur, which stood three

metres high and four metres long, is believed to have been a plant-eater.

Their skulls possessed a well-developed toothless beak at the front end of the jaws, and many small, leaf-shaped, serrated teeth further back. The hands and feet seem to have had large, sharp claws.

Experts, however, are still not sure whether the segnosaurus walked on two feet or four. Only further research can answer this question.

"See that white speck, that's cartilage," says Manning enthusiastically as he points to a specimen.

His eyes sparkle when he tells how he may have found samples of skin and muscle in the segnosaurus embryo.

Although this is not the first time bones of developing dinosaurs have been found within fossil eggs, Manning's find is exceptional because of the completeness of the dinosaur's skull, the detail in its five front-limb claws, and the discovery of preserved soft-tissues, such as cartilage and perhaps muscle and skin.

After his tireless efforts to crack the secret of the dinosaurs, Manning is looking for sponsors to fund a study programme of up to 10 years. He plans that most of the eggs will be sent to a university for more detailed analysis.

"I haven't had pay in two years," he says. "Tomorrow I'll try to re-mortgage my house if I can, but I have faith a sponsor will come up with money. I haven't had the opportunity to pass on my information to anyone, so some of the money could be used to hire a research assistant."

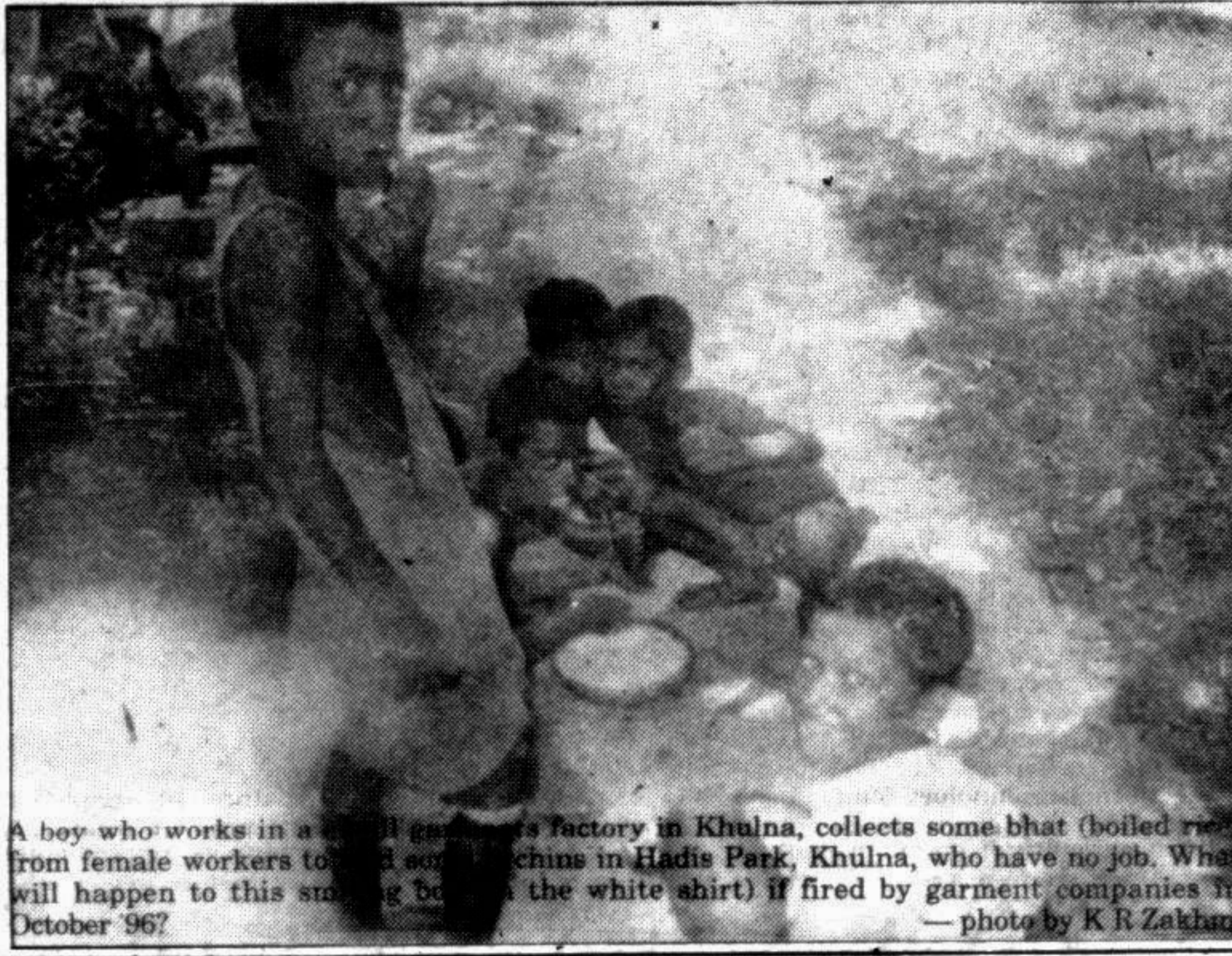
PAMELA COWAN is a Canadian journalist on a fellowship at Gemini News Service.

## The Bane and the Boon of Child Labour

by KR Zakhmi

**H**ORRIBLE indeed. Reportedly all the garments companies have decided to kick out child-labourers by October next, presumably under pressure from the USA and a few other western countries, who have threatened suspension of import of readymade garments from Bangladesh since underaged boys and girls are employed by our garment manufacturers. Apparently this policy of the so-called champions of humanity and love for children deserves kudos, but in reality looms large as bane rather a boon.

In Dhaka alone the number of destitute children is estimated at over fifty thousand. They are homeless, parentless, shelterless. They are found on railway platforms, steamer jetties, around cinema houses, bus terminals, parks, footpaths, verandahs of big buildings, shops and on open grounds. They have been forced by circumstances to beg even a piece of bread, a handful of bhat (boiled rice) or some



A boy who works in a garment factory in Khulna, collects some bhat (boiled rice) from female workers to eat. Children in Hadis Park, Khulna, who have no job. What will happen to this starving boy if fired by garment companies in October 1997? — photo by KR Zakhmi

piece of fruit from people eating at footpath shops or roving vendors. Some of them even pick up their food from dustbins.

In the said situation to ban child labour without any exception will prove a deadly blow for thousands of children who depend for subsistence on some sort of job in garment factories or other establishments.

It is sheer nonsense to judge the children of underdeveloped or poorest countries with those children of the USA or other highly developed countries with a single yardstick. The government of Bangladesh should make the USA and like countries understand this difference. However, some strict measures may be taken to provide maximum care and benefits for the child labourers. The employers should be forced not to over-burden them with heavy work and they should also provide them education, instead of throwing them on the streets.

## The Doordarshan-CNN Tie-up : Will it Help Them, Anyway?

by I K Gujral

**G**OING by the number of phone calls and media references, it seems my comment regarding the CNN-DD tie up has evoked some thinking and may be a mini debate. What did I say? I did not evaluate the professional efficacy or performance record of the CNN. These are, credible realities. The purport of my objection — if I may call it so — pertains to the Government mystifying the arrangement.

One would like to understand as to why the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting used the Director General of Doordarshan as its catspaw to sign an agreement that is a major departure from established policy. Not that a policy of age makes it sacrosanct but surely such a vital shift needs to be publicly endorsed by a high level political functionary who is responsible to the Parliament.

One is puzzled to notice that a suave and articulate Minister of Information and Broadcasting has chosen to keep his own counsel though he had taken the unusual step of informally discussing the issue with some Members of the Rajya Sabha (myself included) during last session of the Parliament. He had promised to come back with a detailed paper before finalising any such tie-up. I hold Mr Singh Deo in high esteem and that is a reason for me to ask as to why he had chosen to back out of this commitment? It was equally cryptic to notice that the Minister and the Secretary of Information and Broadcasting were conspicuous by their absence for a high profile agreement signing ceremony. As if to distance themselves further they chose not to attend the CNN hosted dinner same evening when some other Ministers were there to applaud the agreement. What does all this imply? Is it an expression of displeasure with the deal or a subtle subterfuge?

It was only recently that the Government had denied the London Financial Times-Business Standard tie up for valid reasons. "Is it the Government's view that publication of a high-brow Financial Times with very limited circulation is more dangerous than lending of the DD frequencies to the CNN?"

Some, like me, who were around at the dawn of freedom would recall that one of the first acts of Sardar Patel led Information and Broadcasting Ministry was to stop the BBC's access to the AIR channels — a practice that had lasted since inception of the AIR in the colonial era. The rationale was neither chauvinistic nor narrow-minded parochialism. This was an expression of the nation's newly acquired sovereignty.

The country's media policy, all these years, has taken a view that editorial control of any India-based publication must rest with the Indian nationals — be they officials or non-officials. The same logic was extended to the news agencies too. During my tenure as Minister of Information and Broadcasting in the 70's the Government of India had resisted any change in this policy and insisted that every foreign news agency must continue to channel through the PTI or the UNI. Their direct access to the print or electronic media was not acceptable. This outlook is not novel. The media emperor Mr Madiroch — an Australian citizen, has not been allowed to acquire an American channel for similar reasons. He is now — it seems, changing his passport.

The tie-up has serious foreign policy implications too. It may not be a far-fetched assumption to visualise a conflict of interest between the USA and an India-friendly country. Use of Indian frequencies for projection of American interests can cause serious embarrassment to our Government. It is a naive belief that any media, in the midst of a national crisis, can be neutral. If it were so, the British Foreign Office would not heavily finance the External Services of the BBC. That Government rightly believed that even peace time

broadcasts involve foreign policy projections.

It is worth recalling the Government of India's persistent objection to Sri Lanka lending its broadcasting facilities to the VOA.

The misfortune regarding prevailing situation emanates from the fact that the Information and Broadcasting is derailed from its socio-political objectives as visualised by Nehru. He had viewed broadcasting as a public service. But the set up has pushed it reverse direction. On one hand it acts as a

mouthpiece of the ruling party and on the other it is driven by the market forces that distorts the value orientations.

The Ministry while extending its hardware budget has done little in adding to its software. As a result, we witness it's increasingly catering to those who yearn for perverted sex and ugly violence. This Bombay film culture is being pushed across the family thresholds. Even while spending millions in acquiring the satellites and transponders the Ministry is failing to purposefully utilise them.

While the Vishva Bharti Bill, duly approved by both Houses of the Parliament, lies buried in Government's cellars, it does not know how to respond to the recent Supreme Court judgement either.

We also witness an enigmatic scene. While the Indian telecasters are denied access to our own satellites forcing them to go to Moscow or Hong Kong the Doordarshan feels itself more comfortable with the outsiders.

The author occasionally contributes to their newspaper.

**S**CIENTISTS have broken nature's barrier by manipulating genes that now make it possible to grow tomatoes that don't go bad or breed super cows that produce more milk.

Now they hope to use the same knowhow in the search for ways to detect, prevent or cure genetically-caused diseases, by studying and looking for clues from the whole genetic systems of various peoples around the world.

To do so, scientists need to record the diverse genetic makeups of endangered indigenous groups, who they say have more informative gene makeups than urbanites and may carry genes immune to modern-day illnesses. But experts worry these groups may die out and bring their genetic secrets with them.

Thus, international scientists of the Human Genome Organisation (HUGO) have been trying to collect and preserve rare human cell types and genes from more than 700 indigenous groups under the US-based Human Genome Diversity Project.

Targeted groups in the mega project, estimated to cost up to US\$ 3 billion, include Indians in Central and South America, Aetas of the Philippines, Penan's of Malaysia and the peoples of the Sahara and Africa.

Project backers call the venture a big step for science and human health. But others say it leads to an ethical minefield, where a surfeit of pure science has little respect for indigenous culture.

"Our land, our culture, our subsoul, our ideology and traditions have all been exploited. This could be an

## Biotechnology Here Come the Gene Hunters

by Johanna Son

Scientists are trying to collect and preserve rare human cell types and genes from 'endangered' indigenous groups in a bid to conquer genetically-linked illnesses.



other form of exploitation. Only this time are using us as raw materials," said Leonora Zalabata of northern Colombia's Arhuaco people.

"We don't want to be guinea pigs for their experiments," added Zalabata, who was interviewed for a documentary on the HUGO project called "The Gene Hunters". The film, shown on British television in February, was produced independently by Luke Holland and Zef Productions.

The dilemmas in the human genome project, which aims to analyse and sequence DNA in their chromosomes, are complicated by the fact that scientists who take blood, tissue or hair root samples from indigenous folk do not always explain the purpose behind these collections.

"We don't tell every community that we are immortalising their cells," said Dr Alberto Lopez, a geneticist with the Colombia-based Genetics Institute who has drawn blood from Asario Indians with help from the drug firm Hoffman-La Roche.

The documentary adds that Indians are often persuaded to give blood because they are given medical treatment.

"We're taking from them their DNA, which we now consider like gold. It's even worse than standard colonialism and exploitation, because we are taking the one thing that we value," George Annas, professor of medical ethics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, argues in the film.

Recommendations of the Open Discussion on Streets of Dhaka scheduled to be published today will be published on Friday in our Weekend Magazine section.