

The Bloody Tale of Baburabad Plight of Victims Knows No Bounds

by Morshed Ali Khan, back from Satkhira

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THE interior of the Satkhira Sadar Hospital stinks with a pungent smell. The dirty floors are stained too. Children fiddle with a broken cardphone booth on the corridor nearby. Few yards from the main entrance, on the left hand side, access to the female ward is almost blocked by a dozen patients lying on the filthy floor.

The women, mostly between the age 20 and 30, bear marks of various injuries. Inside, Nasima 25, a landless peasant from Baburabad groans in pain. During the police firing on July 27 she was hit in the waist. The 303 bullet that had lodged in her bone was removed a week ago. But the pain persists. Her two-year old son cries ceaselessly and occasionally suckles the mother's breast in a vain attempt to feed himself. Her eyes half open Nasima does not even bother to comfort her child.

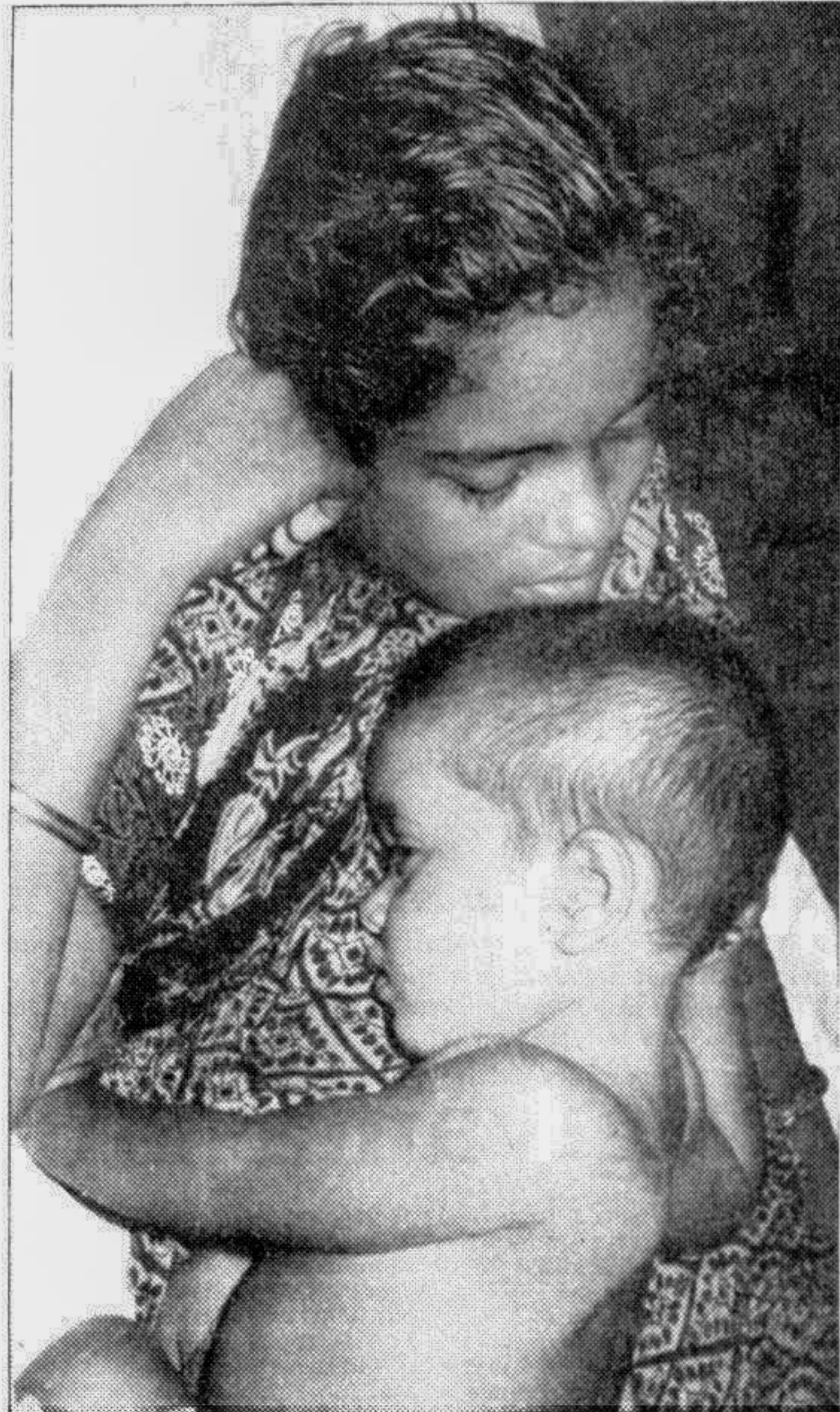
Nasima's friends are not so lucky. Since they were hospitalised eleven days ago they have been placed on the dirty floor in the corridor. Some with broken bones, some with bullet injuries. The women said they had received no help from anybody except Wazed Ali Biswas *sahab*, who offered the injured TK 610 in three 'installments'. They said, to make things worse their husbands refused to look after the children and dumped them with the injured mothers in the hospital.

Upstairs in the male ward, several young men, some with critical injuries lie on the hospital beds. They said many patients had been transferred to Khulna Sadar Hospital.

All these patients are the victims of police action in Baburabad about 30 kilometers away from Satkhira town. On the day a large contingent of police from Satkhira tried to secure 1,760 acres of land from the landless peasants. When the police arrived at Baburabad, about 3,000 peasants, led by women, protested the eviction move. At one point police indiscriminately fired on the protesters killing four persons and injuring more than hundred. Satkhira's DC later admitted that the police fired more than 150 rifle shots and lobbed 22 tear gas cells on the people.

Following the incident hundreds of people took to the streets in support of the landless peasants in the district town. The angry protesters blamed the local administration and attacked the Deputy Commissioner's office ransacking the building. They also attacked the house of one Moni Thakur, a local shrimp businessman and one of the influential men trying to grab the shrimp-rich *jalmahals* (waterbodies highly potential for shrimp culture) ignoring the plight of the 1,200 landless families settled in the area for years.

According to the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of



Nasima and her child: The former groans in pain, while the latter cries for food. — Star photo



The shrimp — they call it white gold! — Star photo



At the hospital, an injured man tries to nurse his injured wife. Both were fired upon by the police on July 27. — Star photo

Satkhira, Devdatta Khisha, all was done in accordance with the existing law of the land.

"I was implementing the orders of the government," said Khisha. "Moreover, the land was leased out after a court order," he said. The DC said that the police forces did not go to Baburabad to evict the peasants from their dwellings but only to secure the *jalmahals* for the lease holders who had paid Tk 38.4 lakh to buy the seven-month lease. He also said he had received written instructions from the Ministry of Land's Senior Secretary Ahmed Ullah on July 16 to hand over

the land to the lease holders and ensure shrimp cultivation in the area.

"Accordingly I sent a magistrate and the police force to implement the government order," Khisha said.

In fact, the matter has never been as simple as the local administration would have liked it to be. Thousands of acres of arable land in Satkhira became precious in the late seventies as the area discovered its potential for lucrative shrimp cultivation.

Due to a significantly high natural tide from the saline rivers of the nearby Sundarban

areas (about 3.8 meters), became a perfect ground for the shrimp cultivation. Amid a formidable network of natural canals the huge stretches of arable lands were turned into compartments for the culture. Along with business came some of the richest and the most influential men in the country. And soon, for the local people shrimp was white gold. Bangladesh earns more than Tk 1,000 crore from frozen shrimp export and a bulk of it comes from Khulna division that includes Satkhira.

The landless peasants who had long been surviving on

agriculture now turned to the *ghers* (designated water compartments for shrimp cultivation) for employment. Some were employed but many moved away from the area towards the borders and were forced to indulge in illegal border trade for survival.

Thousands of acres of land earlier belonged to the Hindu *jamindars* (landlords) many of whom either left the country or were forced by local factions to give up their lands. As much as 3,178 acres of land in Baburabad and eight other villages, belonged to two families. The Sarnakar family owned

2,238 acres and Manotosh Bra had 940 acres. But in 1982, following a court verdict, the entire land was declared *khas* (public). The government then started to distribute some of the land to the landless families in the area.

Since then many landless families from the neighboring areas started to make their homes in the area with the hope that they would come under the government scheme. Some were lucky but the 1,200 families of the nine villages under Kaliganj and Dewhata thanas never got a chance. Rich and influential businessmen and ruling party

leaders — all cherished to possess a piece of the cake. They had easy access into Dhaka's fortified secretariat where it was no matter for them to exercise their influence and the local administration, as it could be dubbed 'was in their pocket'. They obtained the lease for an insignificant sum of Tk 38.4 lakh in 1998. The lease of the same *ghers*, in 1992 was sold for Tk 1.7 crore for the same period of seven months.

Soon after obtaining the lease the local police chief and the DC became desperate to hand over the lease. In Satkhira local businessmen

openly talk about the deal which made the local administration take prompt action on behalf of the lease holders totally ignoring the existence of the landless. The DC and the ADC Revenue strictly maintained that there was no landless people in that particular area. They even convinced the government with their own 'reports' and launched the eviction operation in which more than five hundred shots were fired on innocent men, women and children for whom the land meant their very existence.

Soon after the incidents in Satkhira, political parties did not hesitate to capitulate on the situation. BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia's arrival attracted thousands of aggrieved people. It was estimated that about hundred thousand people gathered to listen to her at a place called Devisahar, about five miles away from Baburabad. But many left the venue saying the opposition leader only delivered a speech appropriate in Dhaka where she has been insisting on a 'oust government' movement. They said they were expecting to hear from her what her party's policy was as regards millions of landless in this country.

In the evening in Satkhira town loudspeakers mounted on rickshaws announced the arrival of *Palli Bandhu* General Ershad of Jatiya Party soon. The Awami League also announced its schedule of public meeting.

In Satkhira the split between Awami League's leadership and its activists was visible. The activists supported the landless while its leaders were busy securing the lands for the lease holders. Many party members were threatened by the leaders that they would be expelled from the party for their stand.

After Satkhira incident the government ordered a judicial probe into the matter. The one member committee was given one month's time to report. At Baburabad, eleven days after the bloody incident the local people said nobody came to visit them. The DC said the probe committee was yet to start the investigation. Many questioned the time period allocated for the probe and said it was too long.

Men, women and children at Baburabad remembered Zaheda who was killed in police firing. They said they heard that three more people including two children were killed but did not see the dead bodies. They said many people were still at different hospitals and when they return a head count would reveal how many were missing from the locality.

Meanwhile for the landless people of nine villages life continues with the rigorous routine that has always existed for them. All members of the family toil from sunrise to sunset in the endless waterbodies to make a living.



Dozens of injured still lie on dirty hospital floor eleven days after they were injured in police action. — Star photo



The landless peasants of Baburabad: The women and children who participated in the July 27 protest. — Star photo

Of Buffaloes, Cranes and Weeds

by Anju Sharma

Many feral Asian water buffaloes were 'removed' from northern Australian wetlands (primarily the coastal floodplains to the east of Darwin and including Kakadu national park). This was done for disease control (tuberculosis and brucellosis) as feral unmanaged herds of buffaloes were a threat to the country's export of beef to the US burger markets.

FINALLY, a part of the mystery of the disappearing Siberian cranes in the Keoladeo Ghana National Park, Bharatpur, Rajasthan, has been solved. The birds have stayed out over the last several winters because of the no-entry sign for domesticated buffaloes put up by the park management. No buffaloes led to a proliferation of the weed *Paspalum distichum*. More weed in the wetland led to less food. Less food meant no cranes.

Krishan Kumar, secretary general of the Keoladeo Ghana Natural History Society, has now recommended the reintroduction of buffaloes to control the weeds.

The ban on buffaloes in Bharatpur was a particularly bloody chapter in the history of human-wildlife conflicts in India. On the strong recommendation of scientists of the Bombay Natural History Society, which included eminent ornithologist Salim Ali, people living around the park were forbidden from grazing their buffaloes in the marshes of Bharatpur in 1982.

The ensuing protest by the villagers led to a shoot-out where many were injured.

However, it now turns out that not only were the scientists wrong but that they were out of touch with research in other parts of the world, where the role of buffaloes in controlling the spread of weeds in wetlands has long been acknowledged by wetland specialists.

India is a signatory to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (better known as the Ramsar Convention) in Geneva, whose basic premise is the 'wise use' of wetlands to ensure that they continue to be of value to communities.

And Bharatpur is one of India's six Ramsar sites, though it is currently on a list of sites needing special protection — a kind of a black list called the *Montreux Record* — as Siberian Cranes have stopped coming. The principles of wise use were obviously never applied in Bharatpur, nor were

any lessons learnt from other countries who were party to the convention.

As Hans Meltofte of the Danish Polar Centre writes, "It was an awful mistake to ban grazing by buffaloes in the Bharatpur sanctuary" and that in European countries, it is a high priority in nature management to organise well regulated grazing in semi-natural habitats.

According to Earle W Cummings, Wetlands Coordination California Department of Water Resources, there was a similar problem in Azraq where the final decision to reintroduce the buffaloes was based on the opinion that the wetland would potentially be of greater 'value' with them than without them, both in biological and social terms.

The complete lack of grazing here had led to total dominance of the wetland by *Phragmites*.

There was also the virtual elimination of law marsh, open pools and exposed mud areas from the reserve and, hence, a tremendous reduction in species and community diversity.

One of the immediate management objectives was to restore and maintain a characteristic range of habitats within the reserve. The most cost-effective way of doing this on a large scale was by reintroducing grazing. Unfortunately, all of the native grazing ungulates that once inhabited the Azraq region are now extinct, and the reserve was not big enough to contain viable populations for reintroduction.

Thus, it was decided that the domesticated Water Buffalo was the best beast to do the job, and if it proves successful it will become a keystone species within the system (and hence of partic-

ular biological value).

Biology aside, it was considered that the reintroduction of the buffalo would potentially increase the education, interpretation and economic values of the reserve. There are clear education and interpretation values of the buffalo's with relation to, for example, ecological links and domestication of wetland species.

Des Callaghan, Wetland management advisor Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, Amman, Jordan, says there is more to the buffalo story than narrow interpretation of the concepts of wise and multiple use.

Many feral Asian water buffaloes were 'removed' from northern Australian wetlands (primarily the coastal floodplains to the east of Darwin and including Kakadu national park). This was done for disease

control (tuberculosis and brucellosis) as feral unmanaged herds of buffaloes were a threat to the country's export of beef to the US burger markets.

The other reasons given were that the annually drying floodplain-wetlands were denuded of grass and herb cover during the dry season; low natural barriers that separate the fresh and saline wetlands were destroyed, and the freshwater was drained away prematurely and tidal water entered.

So, the buffaloes were removed. Approximately 100,000 from Kakadu alone. There was little thought given to post-buffalo management needs. The incredulous prevailing attitude of the day was that once the buffalo were removed our lovely 'natural' floodplains would return — just like that. One scientist who suggested otherwise (rather strongly perhaps) was

not welcomed back.

What is there now in the conservation reserves? Virtually no feral buffaloes. Lots of grass across the plains and more dry season fires. Lots of lilies, vines and herbs around the previously clear waterholes. Lots of annoyed fishermen who cannot access these areas as readily as they did previously.

Lots of fire as the grass burns or is burnt most years. Lots of argument about weed species and fire regimes, including the role of traditional aboriginal burning patterns. Lots of argument with nearby graziers who want the introduced pasture species. In short, one problem has been replaced with others.

Max Finlayson, Head, Wetland Protection and Management Institute of the Supervising Scientist, Jabiru, Australia, highlights a similar problem in Tangaru Haor — a wetland of international importance in north-eastern Bangladesh.

Large wetlands were taken over on lease by rich people for fisheries. Because of the lease,

traditional activities like grazing and reed/grass collection were stopped forcibly. But ultimately, nature took its own turn and most of the wetlands were overgrown with weeds, causing damage to fisheries and other wetland products. The lease holders have now been given limited access to the local people for grazing cattle, duckery and subsistence fishing.

The question is: why have the Indian scientists not learnt from these experiences? Why has it taken them so long to admit that the buffalo ban did more harm than good? Why has there been no introspection on their part?

Is it because they suffer from a pristine park hangover and automatically assume that all human intervention is bad? Or because they have failed to keep abreast of research elsewhere in the world and thus waste time trying to reinvent the wheel every time?

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