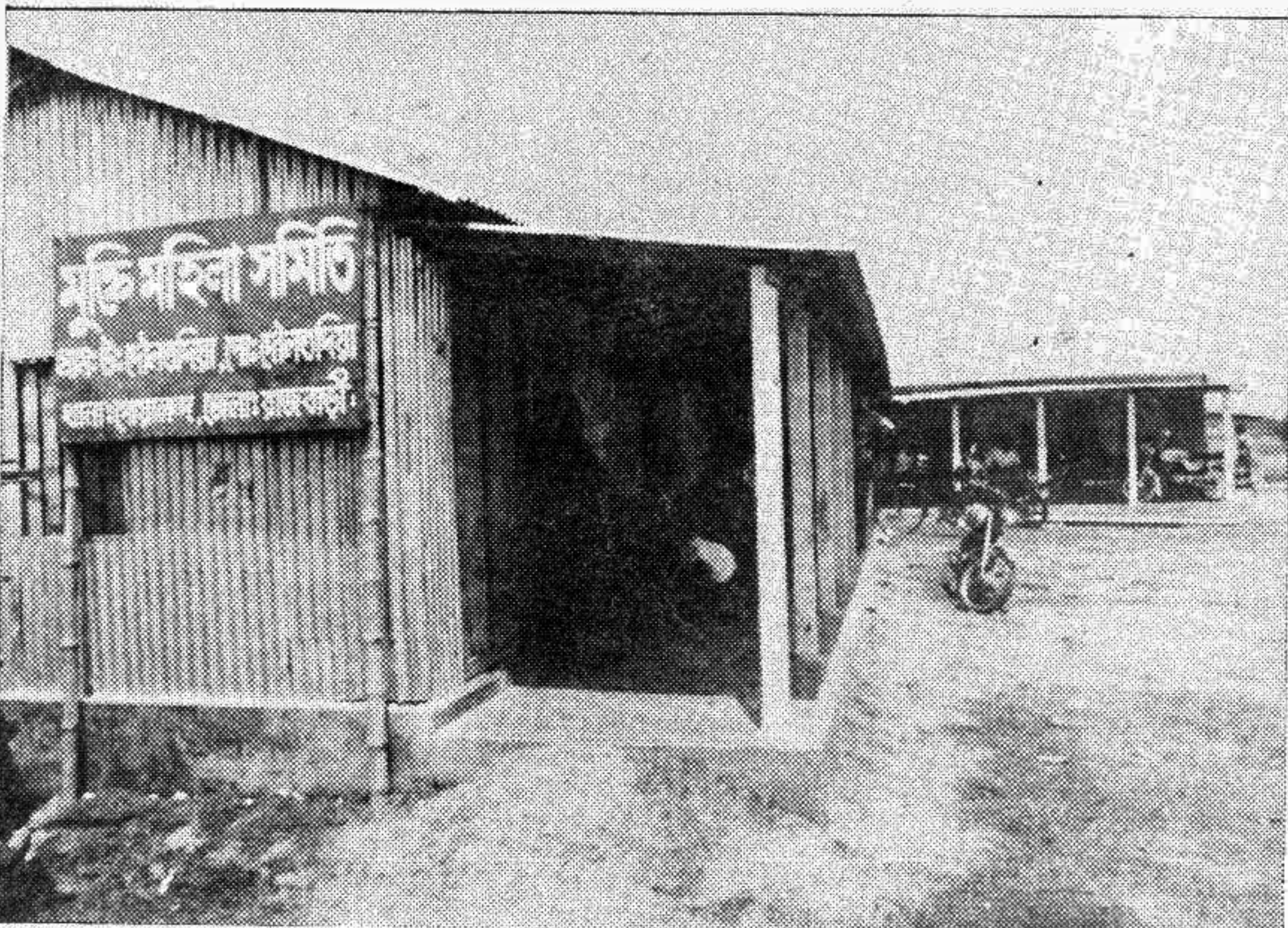


Pleading for Recognition

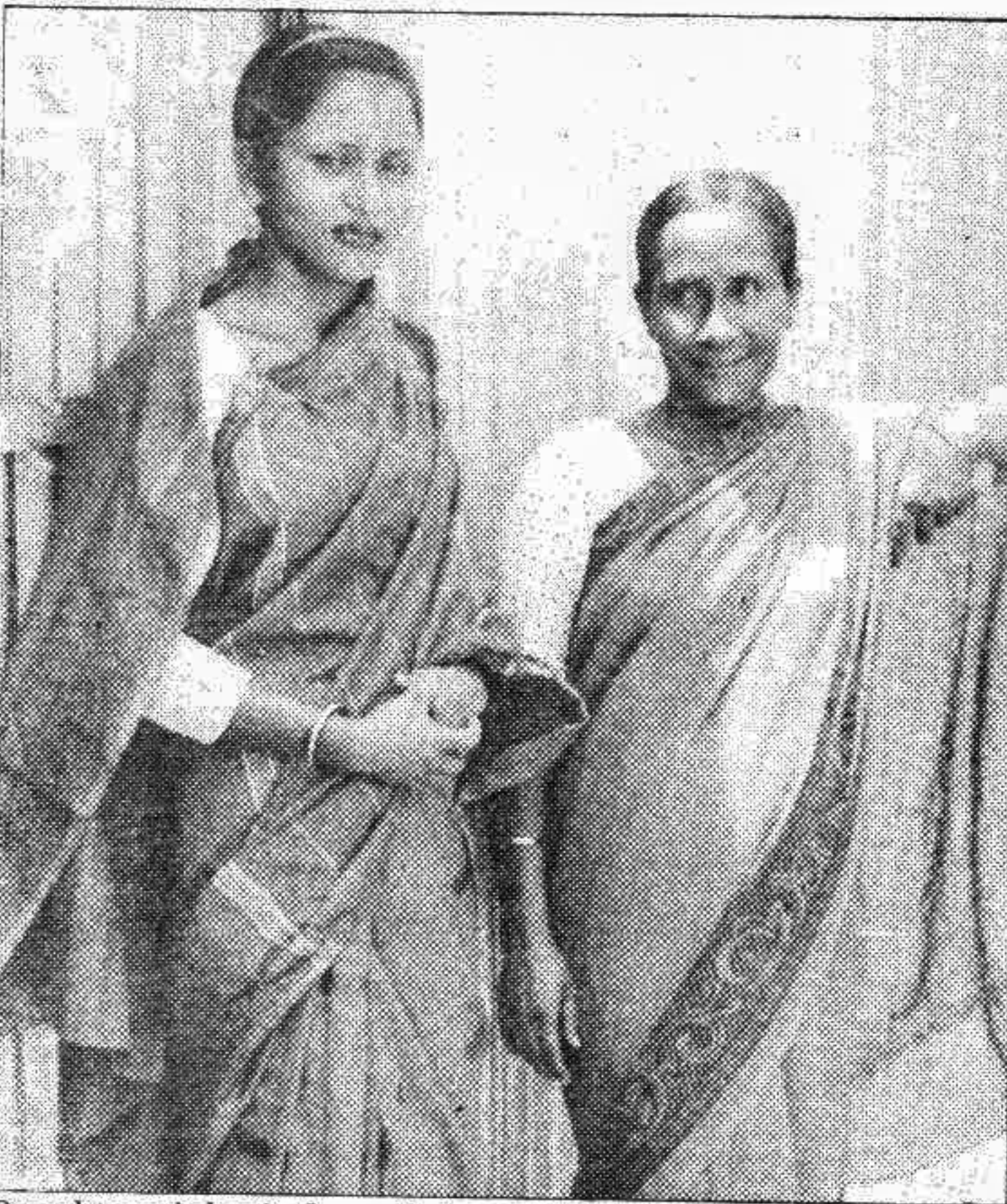


Rallying for their rights

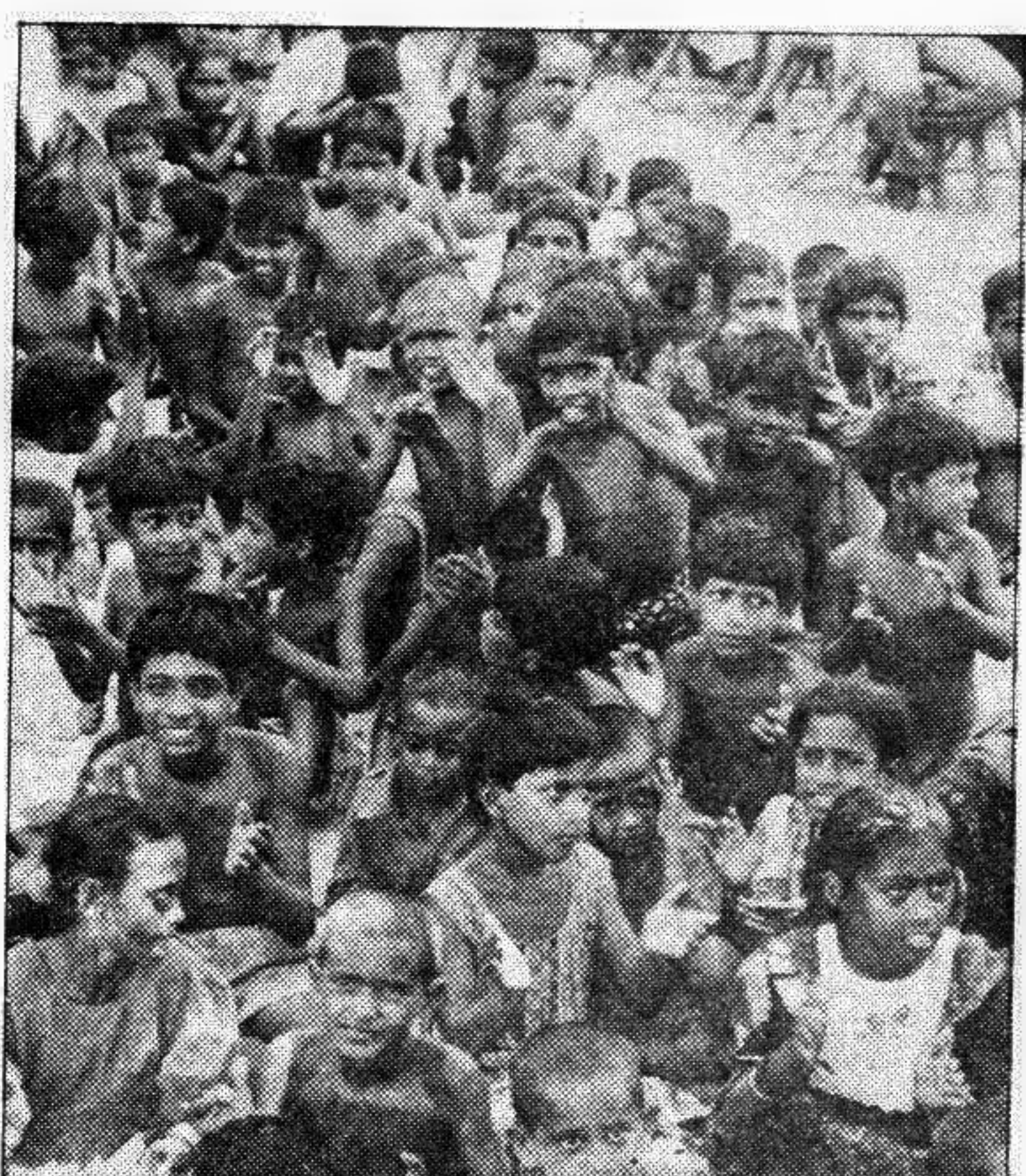
Poverty has forced them into prostitution. To the civil society, they are outcasts. They are not even entitled to a proper burial. Inside the brothel, they have a world of their own. Just like any other human being, they have their hopes, their dreams. Very recently, some 1,500 sex workers of the Daulatdia brothel participated in the second Conference of Sex Workers, organised jointly by Karmajibi Kallyan Sangstha and Save the Children Australia. The Daily Star's AKM Mohsin was there. His camera arrested glimpses of their lives, their dreams and their hopes.



Epitome of their collective aspirations



Daughters inherit from their mothers ...



... but the trend has to stop



With hope in the right direction

Jute Laid Low by Low Prices

From Monojit K Das

MAGURA: Low price of raw jute, scarcity of high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, lack of water for decomposition of green jute plants and absence of an effective marketing management system look set to hamper jute production in the district.

According to the Agriculture Extension Department (AED) the best fibre is obtained from two species of jute, *tossa* and *deshi*. *Tossa* jute is grown only on high lands. On the other hand, *deshi* or white jute can withstand up to 1.5 metres of flooding. Both species grow best on sandy loam soil. The average yield of fibre is 726 kilograms from an acre. Three different zones are recognised on the basis of quality and quantity of fibre at Jat, northern and district. The Jat zone, comprising Mymensingh, Dhaka and Comilla, produces the best quality of jute. The northern zone, comprising Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra and Rajshahi averages 635 and 544 kilograms per acre respectively for *tossa* and white jute. The District zone includes greater Jessore districts, Khulna, Kushtia, Faridpur and Barisal. The average yields there for *tossa* and white jute are 726 and 635 kilograms respectively.

Ten south-western districts of Magura, Jhenidah, Narail, Jessore, Khulna, Bagerhat, Sakhira, Kushtia, Chuadanga and Meherpur are under the District zone variety.

Farmers in this region have lost interest in jute cultivation for low prices in the market, which are often less than the cost of production. Available estimates put the production cost of one maund of jute at nearly 350 taka, whereas the market prices, on average, for same amount was 215 taka in the 1997-98 season.

Some established and semi-established landowners cultivate jute for the jute sticks that are used as fuel for cooking and also manufacturing of construction materials. In many cases, the demand of jute sticks is higher than jute. Jute sticks are also used to make fences as a substitute to bamboo, which is costlier.

Crisis of HYV seeds has prevailed in the south-western region for many years now. Growers produce seeds on their own. However, due to last year's prolonged flood and rain, production of seeds was heavily hampered. On the other hand, BADC supply of HYV seeds is not enough. New varieties of seeds such as C-320 and C-322 of white jute, and O-632 and O-753 of *tossa* jute ensure high yield. Besides, there are other high-yielding varieties locally developed.

Unfortunately, the supply is often not smooth. As a result, farmers like Mohamad Akbar Siddik in Kushabaria village under Dhalahara Union of Jhenidah district, are not even aware of the high-breed seeds. Most of the jute growers now depend on the smuggled Indian seeds, which are found aplenty in local markets. In colourful package and under different brand names like Mahamaya, Chaka, Krishayan, Indian seeds sell well although



Golden fibre no longer promises golden future.

— Star photo by Abdul Wadood

yield is relatively poor.

According to agri-experts, farmers are suffering for the Agriculture Department's poor management of HYV seeds. As a result, cultivation of jute is being hampered.

There are more problems. After harvesting the jute plants are tied up in a bundle and kept under banana stalks, hyacinth and even mud in stagnant water to rot. Once decomposed, the fibre is separated from the sap sticks. Farmers in the region don't have adequate access to natural water bodies for this purpose because most of them are now used for fisheries.

Absence of effective marketing facilities also contributes to heavy losses for the jute growers and traders. There are some jute markets in Bunagati, Nutan Bazaar, Muhammadpur, Satrijupur, Langalbandh, Sachilapur in Magura; Salkupa, Katlagari, Garagonj, Kotchandpur, Harinadunda in Jhenidah; Churamonkathi, Barobazaar, Khajura, Noapara, Rupdia in Jessore; Daulatpur, Fultala in Khulna. There have been allegations that the state-owned mills do not buy jute directly from the farmers. The licence-holder jute traders do that instead before selling the

jute to authorities of the state-owned mills on credit. A group of licensed jute traders in Magura told this correspondent that they still owe a huge amount of money from the jute mills. Many jute traders have stocked jute for selling it to the mills and private shippers. But due to lack of demand they have failed to sell it. As a result, their capital has been blocked, they added.

Some established jute farmers did not sell their jute before, hoping for a better price, but now they are compelled to incur loss, as there is actually no demand for jute.

Dry Spell Hits Mango Production Hard

From Our Correspondent

RAJSHAH: Prolonged dry spell looks set to hit mango production hard. Mango fruit-stones are wilting in scorching heat. Prospect of bumper production has already evaporated.

The trees got adequate saps following heavy rain in November last year, leading to growth of huge amount of flower-buds on almost each and every tree in Rajshahi, raising hopes of bumper production. Experts and the farmers were expecting a bumper production of mango this season following a heavy setback in production of mango last season. Mango trees were seriously damaged during last year's prolonged floods. Many trees were uprooted by the heavy current of flood water. This year, signs had been there of good production before the dry spell struck. Except a few drops, there has not been much rain so far.

Rapid decline of ground water level has left the trees without sufficient sap. On the other hand, scorching sun and dry wind have dried up flower-buds, especially the ones that came late. The fruit-stones are also falling off as the stalks have become weaker for the lack of sufficient sap. Tops of most of the trees now look like brooms.

Production of mango has already decreased by about 50 per cent. If heavy rains are not experienced immediately, another 20 per cent mango fruit-stones will fall off from the stalks, experts of the Extension Department of Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) fear.

In Rajshahi district, there are about 3,75,000 mango trees in about 5,000 hectares of lands. Bagha, Poba and Charghat are the main thanas famous for mangoes.

According to the BADC extension department, about

59,749 metric tonnes of mango were produced in 1998. The production was about 70,248 metric tonnes in 1997. Experts were expecting better production this year.

Meanwhile, outbreak of some diseases in mango gardens in different areas of the district also threatens production. Diseases have been diagnosed mostly as ganosis and anthracnose.

In the meantime, traders and their agents have started to pay frequent visits to the areas where mangoes grow aplenty. Some mango gardens have already changed hands, two to three times. Everybody concerned in mango trade directly or indirectly is taking preparations.

Plucking of mango will start from early May. Among the most famous varieties, *Gopabdh*, *Khirshapat*, *Ranipachand* etc. will come first to the market.

Ban is there, Number of Child Marriage Still on Rise

From Delwar Kabir

JHENIDAH: Three years back, when Golapi Khatun of Bhabanipur, a village in the Nityanandapur union of Salkupa thana, was married off, she was only eight and the bride-groom, Pikul Biswas of Dighalgram village, 13.

Golapi's father Zahir was more eager than either the bride or the bride-groom for the marriage to take place, for it meant more control over village politics and a strong foothold in terms of social status.

Golapi is 11 now and she still does not know what a marriage is all about. She is not the only one, though. Her cousin, Shapla Khatun, has been married off to a farmer just a month back.

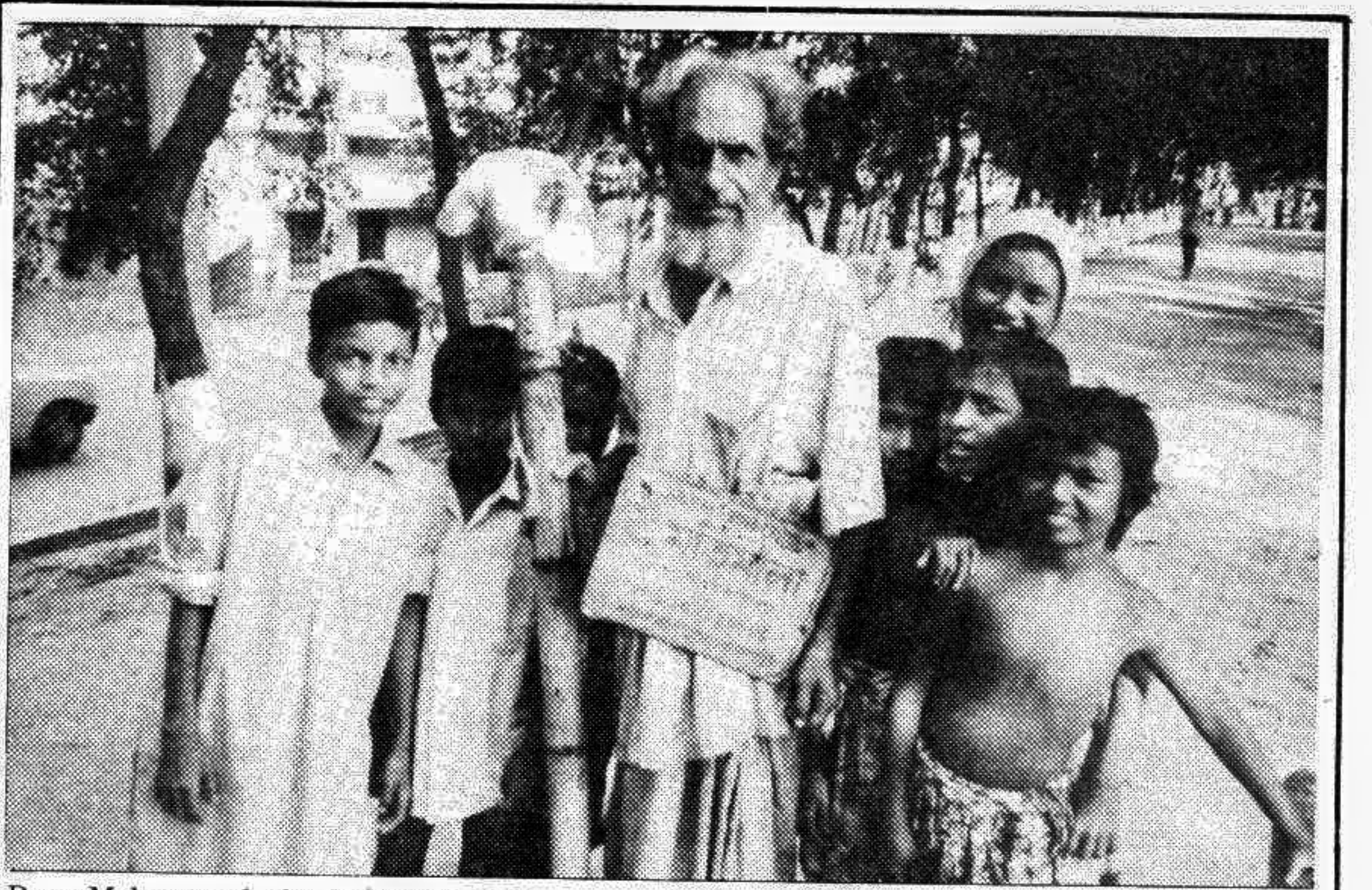
The 13-year-old was a student of class six at a local school. Marriage has put an end to education for her. While she feels deprived of her rights to education, her uncle, who arranged the marriage, is happy because it has served his interest.

Family members of Golapi and Shapla said that the marriages had not been registered. The reason is obvious: there is a government ban on child marriage. On the other hand, the marriage registrars are also deceived by the people involved in child marriages. Often always, ages of the couples are false.

This correspondent has been to some wedding ceremony in the area and found the brides and bridegrooms are under the age limit set by the government. Yet, the parents and people who actually arrange these weddings get away through loopholes of the law.

During marriage registration it was also found that most of the marriages were recorded on loose sheets instead of prescribed marriage registers.

When contacted District Register (DR) Jhenidah told that to remove irregularities and stop child marriage, people have to be made aware of not only the existing government rules but also the problems, both physical and psychological, under-aged couples may face in future.



Deen Mohammad, the Motimala-man, surrounded by children.

— Star photo by Abdul Wadood

Sad Tale of Motimala-man

From Abdul Wadood

RAJSHAH: "Ha ha Motimala," cries out the man with a big nose and broad forehead, as he chants. He bangs the bamboo in his on the ground, creating a jingling sound, as he walks through residential areas of Rajshahi town. His non-stop chanting and jingling sound of the bamboo is his unique marketing strategy.

It works. Children, his main customers, rush to him whenever they hear his chants and the jingle for Motimala.

Motimala is not the real pearl necklace. It is a necklace all right, made of soft and flexible candy. The candy is kept in upper most internodal barrel of the bamboo he carries works as the container. A bright red piece of cloth works as the cover.

Sometimes, the Motimala-man sells the candy in the shapes of boat, carts, cars, buses, etc., but his favourite is the necklace and children love them, too. Added attraction is his sweet talks, witty jokes and funny gestures. He is very popular among children.

The Motimala-man is a familiar feature in the Rajshahi metropolitan area. He has been around for decades. People do not even know what is actual

name is. He is popular as Motimala. He is identified with the candy necklace he sells. But, he has a name and very few people know that.

"My name is Deen Mohammad," said the 65-year-old.

Born in Bihar, Deen Mohammad lost his family in the communal riot and fled to the then East Pakistan. He was a little boy of 13 then.

"I was a floating man. No work, no money, no place to stay," the Motimala-man recollects those uncertain days. "I starved for many days. Thanks to some fellow Biharis, I did not die of starvation. With their help, I started this business."

One can readily recognise him. He carries a board with the word Motimala prominent in Bengali alphabets. There are a few more lines — From the year 1948 at the top, Bombay Special Chocolate on the left, and the age-old Bengali adage *Paralekha korey je, gari ghora chorey shey* (Education begets ease). The board looks like a big locket suspended by a rope round his neck.

Since 1948, he goes out on the streets every morning and walks miles after miles on bare foot chanting, "Motimala, Motimala" to earn living for his family. He lives in a rented hut in Hazrapukur in the city with his wife and two children.

"I cannot walk much these days. I have grown old," he said. "Motimala does not attract today's children. They are now more interested in factory-made chocolate and candy, and fast food. So, my income is on the decline."

Motimala costs one to five taka. Deen Mohammad now earns only Taka 80-100 a day. He has to spend at least 30 taka to prepare the candy and 300 taka per month as house rent. "Value of Taka has decreased and prices of commodities have risen but my income is decreasing. My family is passing days in hardship," he said.

He has contacted many ministers, chairmen, mayors, MPs and wealthy people but nobody helped him.

"I do not want alms, rather I want a job suitable for my age and physical condition," Deen Mohammad said.

His children had to give up studying after primary schools. Their father cannot bear the expenses anymore. The elder of the two, aged about 16 years, is now seeking employment. "I want my children get employment to replace me for earning. But who will give them employment jobs?" asked the old man as he looked into a future that held no promise neither for him and his wife, nor his children.