

User Fee Makes a Huge Difference

"IT'S just a matter of two or three taka," says Kulsum with a smile. "but it has made such a difference. Today I easily got the medicines required for my little Selim. Before, we were often told that the stock had run out and then we'd have to buy the medicines from outside at a higher price."

Kulsum's words were met with a murmur of assent at the

out-patient department of the Burichang Thana Health Complex. Other patients waiting on the wooden bench recalled times when they had failed to receive the service or medicines they required at the health complex.

Suraiya Begum, carrying her one-year-old daughter Monira, echoed similar sentiment.

"It's true. When I came last

year with my old father, he needed an X-Ray but couldn't get one here as they had run out of films or something. But now whenever I come, we get what we need. Before everything was free, but we really don't mind paying a small fee if we get such quality service."

The doctor on duty came forward, a smile on his face.

"Of course you all have made a great difference. This is your health complex after all, isn't it? How many times have you had to return home without the tests you needed, or without the medicine you required?"

The doctor went on to explain matters to those present.

"If you have at times been unable to receive quality service here, it is not due to the lack of our sincerity. We sincerely want to help all of you, that is why we became doctors. But remember, this is not a rich country. We cannot always have supplies of medicines and other essentials ready on hand. This is your hospital. If you pay just a nominal sum for some of the services, it will help you get the service you need. Like today we could buy a chemical for blood-testing with the money taken from previous patients. They paid only one taka each, but it has saved a child's life. If we waited for government funds, it could have taken months for the chemical to arrive. Who would have saved the baby then?"

They had just been given a brief on users' fees, a new concept introduced in a pilot project of the health sector. User fees is a fee paid by the service users, the patients, for the sake of improving the quality of services in the sector.

The concept of user fees was introduced by the Thana Functional Improvement Pilot Project, a project being implemented in 55 thanas by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under funding from the European Commission. The objective behind user fees, a very nominal amount to be paid by the people for certain services, was to help improve quality of services for the overall improvement of the health complexes.

"The user fee is a very nominal amount of money, maybe one taka, two taka or four or five taka. This is agreed and decided upon by the people of the locality represented at the thana level team comprising the local representative and other elite of the area as well as representatives from the common people and the thana health complexes," explains the Thana Health and Family Planning Officer of the

Burichang Thana Health Complex.

What is done with this fee? This revenue collected is used to create a fund for use when required. It can be used for the purchase of reagents in the laboratory, for the purchase of X-Ray plates, drugs or any other essential item which may not be in stock. Thus when that particular item runs out, instead of waiting interminably for the government allocation to come through, these funds generated by the user fees can be used to purchase the required item.

User fees naturally generated opposition at first. However, when the matter was discussed by the local committees and given approval by the local MPs, it was implanted in a number of thanas and the results have been encouraging. After an initial fall in patients, reluctant to pay for services they deemed should be free, gradually the people realised the benefits of paying user fees. The results have been tangible in an increase of genuine patients and quality service and a fall in 'fake' patients.

Says the nurse in the out-patient department of the Nangalkot Thana Health Complex: "Before, people would simply walk in casually to pick up a few packets of oral saline or Vitamin A tablets whether they needed it or not. Since things were going for free, they just took them for no reason at all. So the genuine patients suffered when the stock ran out. Now though our out-patient registration charge is nominal, people think twice before paying four taka for something they don't need."

This additional revenue has also helped the health complex staff keep the premises more hygienic. Antiseptics and cleaning detergents can be readily purchased without having to wait months for a packet of soap powder or a bottle of antiseptic.

The user fee is still only a part of the pilot project. However, the statistics show that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and the concept may well be gradually introduced to the non-project health complexes as well. This of course will require certain policy changes and approval from the higher authorities as it deals with government income. But with the wave of reforms sweeping the country, this should not prove to be a problem. The people have a right to health and they have a right to ensure they get the services they require. User fees are one of the means to do so.

Probe News Agency

From Our Correspondent



Rabindranath Tagore with Jagadindranath Roy of Natore.
Star photo: Awal Ali

Tagore in Natore

From Our Correspondent

NATORE: Poet Rabindranath Tagore has etched his mark in the town of Natore. This was probably due to his friendship with the Maharaja of Natore Jagadindranath Roy which saw

make quite a number of visits to this town of antiquity.

The Maharaja was a versatile writer. Some of his publications were the *Manoshi O Marmohumi*, *Sruti Smriti*, *Sandhya Tara* and *Nurjahan*. The two met at a time when the Maharaja decided to settle in Natore permanently and the poet was a *zemindar*. This developed a close relationship within a short time because they had several things in common. Both had a strong inclination towards literature, had sharp political senses and equally held the common people dear.

Late Sarat Kumar Roy, the Rajkumar of Dayarampur and president of Barind Research Committee of Rajshahi, in his book of *Rabindra Smriti*, wrote: "I have heard from Axmoy Babu (Maitray) that he (the poet) and the Natore Moharaj (Jagadindranath) were the two *bhut*s (ghosts) of Rabindranath's *Panchabhuter Diary*."

Panchabhut was published in the Bengali year of 1304 and

dedicated to Moharaj Jagadindranath Roy Bahadur.

Rabindranath Tagore visited Natore once in December 1892 to deliver a lecture on education at a discussion meeting organised by the Rajshahi Association. The Maharaja chaired the meeting. After the Rajshahi programme the poet, on an invitation from the Maharaja, arrived in Natore in a horse-drawn carriage. Unfortunately he caught a chill, and Kabiraj Adi Lahidi was appointed by the king to cure the poet. During this time Rabindranath's *Pratiksha* was finished on December 4, 1892.

In 1897, Tagore again came to Natore, this time to attend the three-day session of the Provincial Congress of Bengal. His elder brother, Satyendranath Tagore was the chairman of the Congress and the Maharaja was the chairman of the reception Committee. It is known that Tagore inaugurated the session with the national anthem of Bangladesh. He also, to the opposition of the English-speaking politicians, declared that the Congress would be Bengali. The king read the translated Bengali version of his English Speech and Tagore's brother had his speech translated by the poet into Bengali.

Unsung, Unheard

From Anwar Ali

NATORE: Shafuddin Sardar is a resident of Natore. He is also a novelist, dramatist, historian, and scholar in Islamic studies. But the sad thing is, on his 65th birthday, he is still unknown in his own country. This versatile man did his MA in English and history, and BE from Bangladesh and diploma in education from London.

During his early years as an aspiring writer Shafuddin was involved in drama and stage plays. A significant contribution to the media was his work on fairy tales, comics and short stories. This has no doubt has an invisible effect on the moulds of young minds in Bangladesh. And ironically the people's, if not the Government's, acknowledgement has also been invisible. This point is also important because many of those who followed his works and literature have said that Shafuddin Sardar was instrumental in projecting history and promoting awareness among Muslims.

Shafuddin was more a novelist. He wrote both historical and social novels which as

many of his readers would point out, struck into the very core of the conscience. What this historian did was to dig about until he found the true roots of Bengal and Bangladesh to enlighten and make his people proud. Some of today's established literateurs like the poet Al-Mahmud, Dewan Mohammad Ajraf and Professor Abdul Gofur have given credence to this saying Shafuddin's novels would move the nation forward.

Some of his historical novels published in a number of national dailies as a series include *Bakhtiarer Talwar*, *Gouri Thekey Sonargaon*, *Jat Bela Obelai*, *Bidrohi Jatak*, *Baro Pakkar Durga*, *Raj Bihanga*, *Shes Prokori*, *Prem O Purnima*, *Bipanna Prahar*, *Surjasta*, *Pathhara Pakhi Boir Basanta* and *Ontare Prantare*.

Shafuddin has researched extensively on Muslim history in Bengal. The energetic scholar has a plan to publish another 17 novels on Muslim history right up to the modern period. Now he stills works away in his hometown of Garikhana, Natore to earn a livelihood and recognition not for himself but for his works.



Shafuddin Sardar ... unheard, unsung.

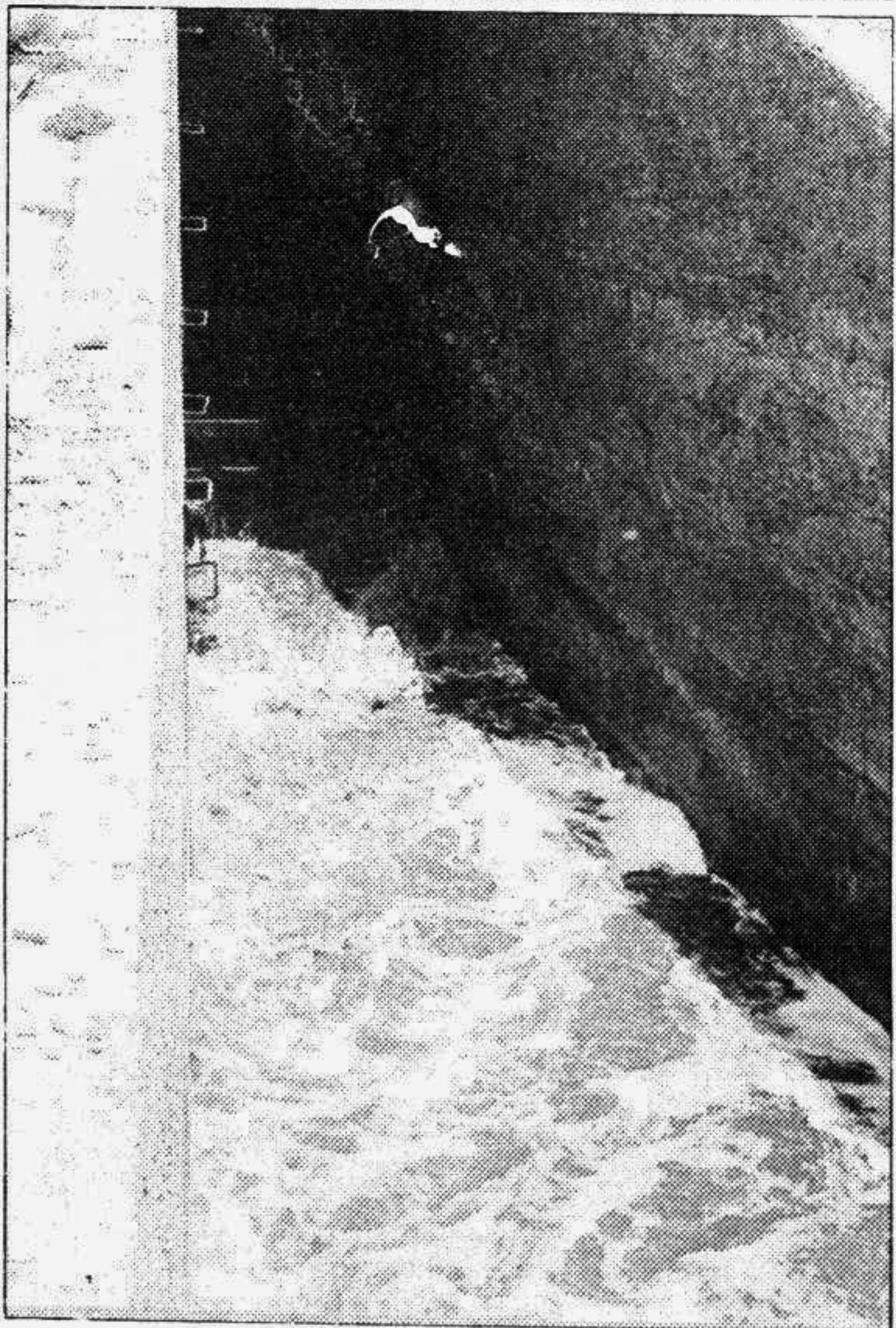
Star photo: Awal Ali



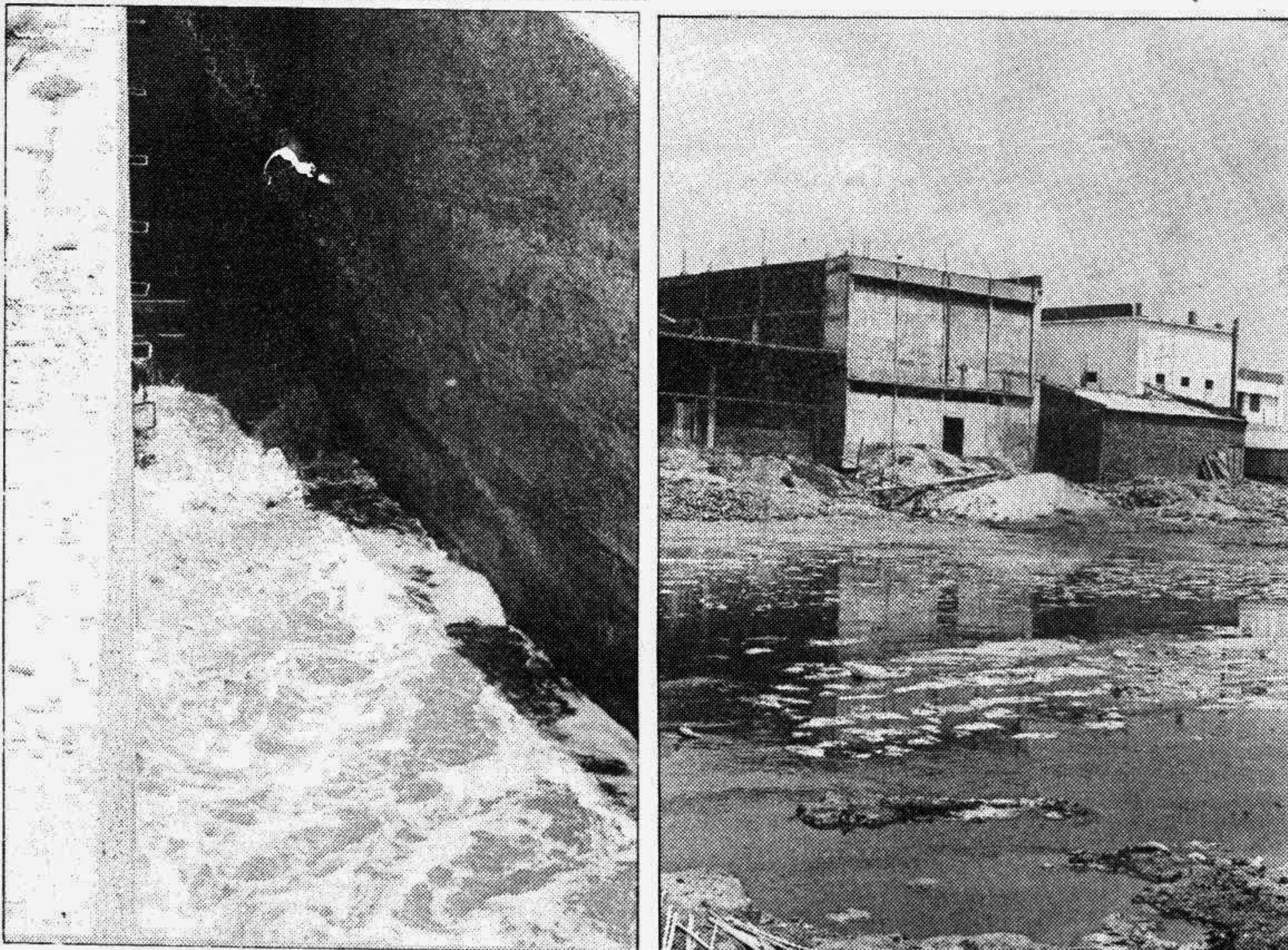
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Endangered environment ... toxic waste flows into the river



Sinister spate ... toxic fluid gushing out



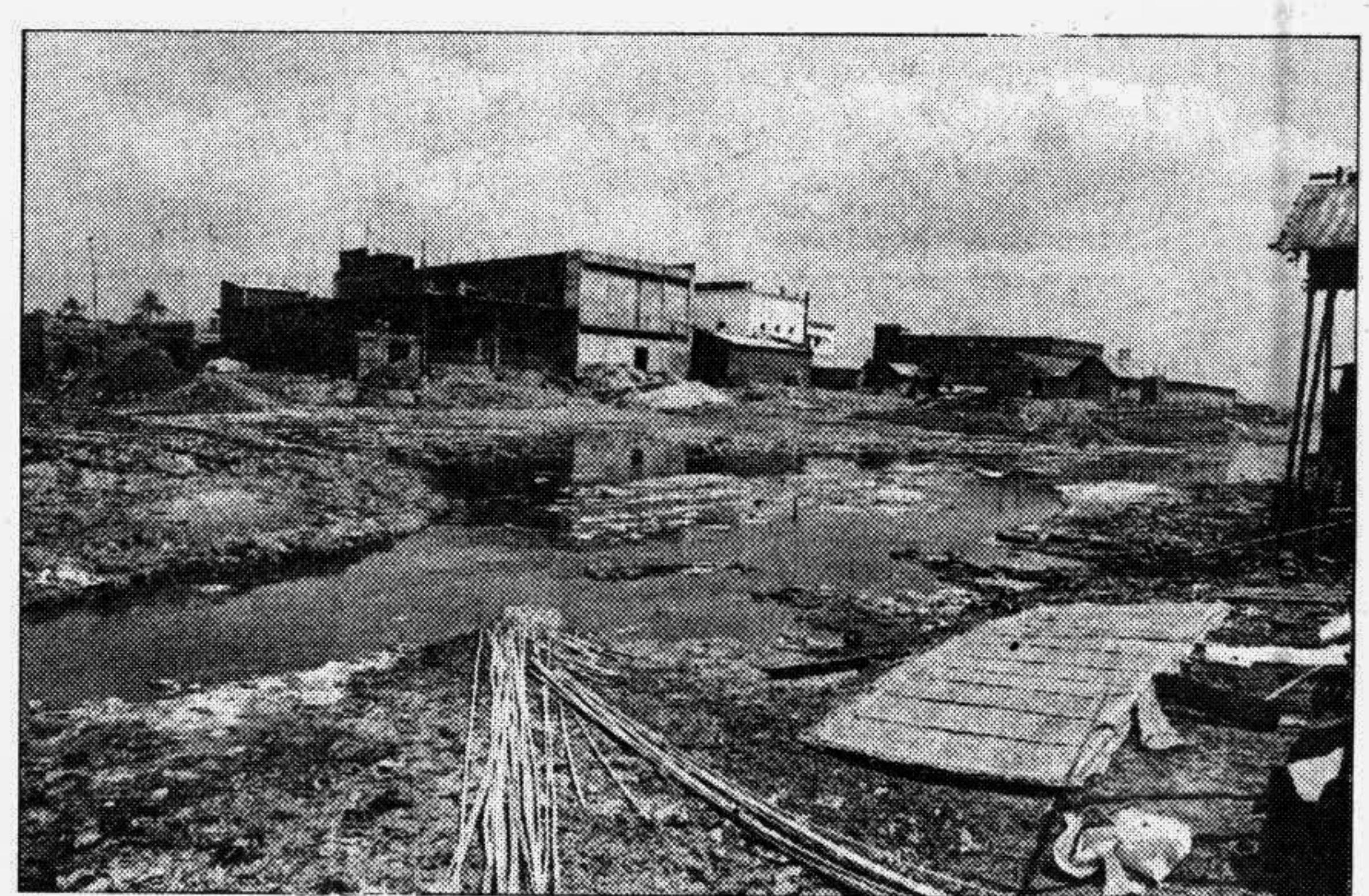
Waste and wasted

Photo Feature

Tannery Trouble

by Zahedul I Khan

Over the years toxic waste from the tanneries has been indiscriminately discharged into rivers, ponds, etc., causing serious environmental hazards. The Buriganga has not been spared, either. Repeated plea from the environmentalists has fallen on deaf ears. While authorities remain indifferent, the mindless act continues.



Exposed to the menace



Testimony to our indifference