

## River takes, river gives



Gaibandha: A hundred-year-old mosque in Kaiyaganj under Gobindaganj thana on the bank of the Katakhal is on the verge of total collapse by severe erosion of the river.

— Star photo



Gaibandha: An embankment along the Karotia under Gobindaganj thana is seriously threatened by the erosion of the river.

— Star photo



Chandpur: With the monsoon in full vigour, trawlers and country boats are seen busy in trade of hilsa fish at the Chandpur jetty.

— Star photo

## Putting cart before horse

When the job opportunities are in Dhaka, plans to rehabilitate evicted slum-dwellers in far flung areas. At the very least, a phase-wise approach should be taken for their rehabilitation, writes Nasreen Khundker

RECENTLY, some slums in Dhaka have been demolished and the slum-dwellers evicted. According to newspaper reports, similar drive is planned to clear slums in Chittagong. This has created panic amongst slum-dwellers and led to organised protests by various groups. The prime minister has allocated five crore taka from her relief fund for rehabilitation of the evicted and urged that the issue should be addressed on humanitarian consideration. She also cited the example of Sri Lanka.

As a citizen, one cannot but be concerned about these incidents. Admittedly, Dhaka city is now facing a variety of problems with traffic congestion, pollution, and a proliferation of slums. As the megapolis continues to grow, the provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, garbage disposal, has become a daunting task. It is worth mentioning that if the present situation is unmanageable, it is a result of past neglect and inaction.

One of the main arguments used for demolishing the shanty towns is that they nurture criminals. However, it should be pointed out that the residents of slums are also those who engage in various productive activities and provide a range of essential services to the city. They are the majority and are rickshaw-pullers, garment workers, domestic servants, petty traders, among others. In the absence of low-cost housing or other arrangements, these people have no alternative but to reside in

slums, where they themselves are often victims of musclemen and criminals. Many are migrants from rural areas, where they have lost their lands due to river bank erosion, distress sales, etc. and have come to Dhaka to look for work opportunities.

If the city-dwellers, particularly the rich and middle class, are concerned about this continuous migration to cities, they should be concerned about more long-term and rational policies. The same applies to the government. Incidentally, the rich and the middle class, including business, stand to benefit from this rural-urban migration. For instance, most garment workers are migrants, and it is their cheap labour which allows the growth of our main export industry.

The problem arises when those who benefit from the services of these workers in the formal and informal sectors, do not take responsibility for them. The various government departments are similarly to be blamed. As for example, permission was given to set up garment factories everywhere in the city, in premises which are not functionally built, and without adequate safety provisions. This has led to fires and deaths of girls. No housing is ever provided to these poor workers, and most reside in slums, under difficult conditions. If the garment industries were located in industrial estates and city outskirts, worker hostels could have been constructed by employers, and perhaps with contribution from the government.

## Of prostitutes and prostitution

Rehabilitation of prostitutes requires a deeper look at the socio-economic disposition of women, writes Zarina Rahman Khan

DEU TO a recent state-supported eviction action on the inmates of two well-known brothels in Narayanganj, the issue of prostitution and prostitutes has once again hit the headlines. The latest state attack on the women in this profession has been for their "rehabilitation from a fallen, immoral and degraded way of life to that of a social life of dignity."

There are two discernible assumptions to justify such a social and state action. First, it is assumed that these women have fallen into "immoral, anti-social and unclean" practices from a socially respectable and moral life; second, that they need to be retrieved from such a life and rehabilitated in the mainstream society. However, several relevant questions can be raised on these assumptions. For instance, what does this "immoral, degraded and exploited life" mean and how did the women come to such a situation? What are the existing realities of their circumstances and how far is it possible, given their particular immoral/anti-social/polluted existence to rehabilitate them in society? Are these women with a stigmatised background willing to trust such schemes for their integration with the "good" and the "pure" of the society? And, above all, is the society willing to accept them? Have the initiators of the action on the brothel considered these issues?

Prostitution is a socially-sanctioned profession. Central to it are women; but it also involves a large number of clients seeking and paying for the services offered. Besides, large groups of men and women also earn a living by providing the auxiliary services required in the business. It has a complex economics, indeed.

What are the causes of women's entry into this exploitative, stigmatised profession? One study (Khan & Arefeen, *Potita Nari: a Study of Prostitution in Bangladesh*) has shown that a large majority of women in prostitution are not sold or forced by others into it. Rather

their circumstances, both economic and social, initiate a process that leads them to a situation in which they are left with no other option. The study shows that they come into the profession through a long process of poverty and social dislocation. Economic deprivation and social calamities gradually push them from a socially acceptable life of dependence on male guardians to a self-funding one that exposes them to physical insecurity and sexual vulnerability. Most of the women studied were found to be victims of poverty and severe social dislocation that forced them to seek jobs in a public sphere that does not offer them protection from abuse and exploitation. These women were subjected to physical and sexual exploitation in the workplaces, as domestic help, low-paid garment factory worker, as market place vendors. The process of being a social and sexual "deviant" starts during this period of their lives and they gradually move towards prostitution on the simple calculation of earning better than what they did in the socially acceptable "jobs" where they were forced to submit to sexual abuse in any case.

Thus, the root cause of women ultimately opting for prostitution is not dire economic need alone. It is also due to social dislocation from a secured life in the family to a vulnerable one in the workplace that fails to offer protection but, on the contrary, is governed by all pervasive norms of a patriarchal society. These are traditional norms and values that consider women within their expected roles as daughters, wives and mothers as good and one outside these as deviation. Thus, women who deviate or are forced to do so become ex-

tremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Each one of the respondents in the said study underwent a series of personal experiences, whereby they were physically abused, exploited and taken advantage of sexually. In the process they came to be socially branded as bad, polluted, a state of impurity the women themselves come to internalise and believe. Thus is created the basis of the stigma of prostitutes as outcasts. Many a prostitute in this study attempted to return to normal life through marriage or through attempts at other income-generating activities. But this indelible stigma has led only to rejection by the society. The stigma of impurity of a woman engaged in such promiscuous sexuality is at the core of societal condemnation of prostitutes. So, thoughts for rehabilitation of sex-workers should accommodate social values and ideals about women's sexuality.

Another important issue in this connection is the basis of this profession and the role society and the state play in its existence and perpetuation. A knowledge about the history of prostitution, its sub-culture, its mode of operation in this country will show that the state itself plays the most important role in maintaining and perpetuating prostitution. How does society and state create, sustain and perpetuate this institution? Society sanctions the business as a social institution. It is based on social norms of male-female roles from which is derived the notion of male-female sexuality. Female sexuality is considered to be restrictive and have to be conducted within the social institution of marriage. Female sexuality is allowed only within wedlock because of the requirement of maintenance of purity of the

male lineage in a patriarchal society. Male sexuality, on the other hand, is allowed outside wedlock. In fact, it is assumed that men have urges and needs of sexuality which require more than one avenue of satiation. Hence, the society does not impose strict sanctions on male sexuality and allow them to fulfil such "natural" needs and desires outside wedlock. Large numbers of clients who seek and pay for sexual and other services by these women indicate social acceptance of such needs of men. Also, total absence of the role of clients or their condemnation in any discussion of prostitution bears evidence to that effect. The history of establishment of brothels and their social accommodation in this and other countries is indicative of the fact that they are accepted as institutions to serve this purpose.

With the development and expansion, the state came to play an important role in maintaining and perpetuating this institution as well. The municipalities are responsible for looking after the health and sanitation in the brothels. The district health department in the office of the Civil Surgeon is in charge of controlling diseases of the women in the brothels. The police maintain law and order in and around the brothels. Inmates of the brothels have to register with the local police station for conducting business there. The courts provide the legal document in the form of an affidavit stating that the women have no other avenue of earning a living for survival and have on their own decided to join prostitution. It is in this process that the state plays the role of institutionalising this business in Bangladesh. A large chunk of

the huge amounts of money that exchange hands in this business is extorted by the State agencies namely the municipality, the health department, the police, the courts, etc. In the process, the women, being considered to be social outcasts are victimised, exploited, physically assaulted and taken advantage of sexually.

Given such dynamics of operation of the institution of prostitution in this country can one believe that this profession can be weeded out simply by closing down brothels and forcibly putting the women into state-run "concentration camp-like rehabilitation centres"? Have these reasons for women's presence in prostitution been considered and addressed in the state scheme for their rehabilitation? Can the society and the state wipe away the permanently imprinted stigma of social and physical pollution that these women have come to bear in providing sexual services to the clients — the good and the pure components of the society? And, finally, what proposal do the state have for rehabilitation of the large numbers of clients (five to 10 clients a day per prostitute and representing all strata of the society), the pimps, the managers, and hundreds of other men and women who provide auxiliary services required in this business?

Most women in prostitution long for a normal life in society, but refuse to return to it. This is because they have the bitter experience of being victims of social rejection due to the stigma. Thus, rehabilitation of prostitutes is not a simple matter and cannot happen on the will of them alone. The entire society and the state need to own up their roles and address the core issues such as women's perceived social roles and sexuality. Only then can one 'dream' of a society with women free from the oppression of prostitution.

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## Unabated arsenic onslaught

While experts struggle to determine the actual cause of arsenic poisoning, affected people in their thousands helplessly await death, writes Bakhtiar Rana

ISHAQ Biswas raised hands in prayer and distributed sweets to neighbours to celebrate the first hand-pump tube-well he sank in his house eight years ago. Six years later, his family raised hands in prayers for salvation of his soul after his burial. The tube-well proved a tragedy for him, his family and the neighbours who drank arsenic-contaminated water from it. Ishaq, a worker at Crescent Jute Mills in Khulna, died of arsenic-related diseases.

"It was only after my husband's death we were told that he died of prolonged exposure to arsenic we had pumped through the tube-well," said Ishaq's wife Salma Begum. The discovery led local and foreign experts to visit Ishaq's house at Senthati village in Diglibari thana, separated by the Bhairab river from the country's third largest city. They carried out tests and found arsenic beyond permissible limit in waters from many shallow tube-wells in the village.

A team from the School of Environmental Studies at Jadavpur University in Calcutta tested some 150 tube-wells in Senthati and an adjacent village in January this year. The tests found 93 wells "not safe" and 11 others "not to be used for long." Four of the six unions of Diglibari thana were affected by arsenic contamination. Senthati union was the worst hit. Biswas and a neighbour, who died soon after him, were among 11 men who died in Khulna of arsenic contamination over the years.

Hundreds of others have been afflicted with arsenic-related diseases. It is difficult to know the actual number of afflicted people as many hide their illness for fears of social isolation. Senthati is just the tip of an iceberg. Millions of Bangladeshis have now been exposed to arsenic in the histo-

ry's biggest mass poisoning.

"Give us safe water, save us from arsenic," cried a resident in Mapur village in Chirghat thana, 45 kilometres east of northern Rajshahi, where a woman died of arsenicosis on May 10 this year. Officials reported 53 cases of arsenic contamination in that village and 65 in Chirghat thana. Villagers say that the actual figure would be much higher.

The wells were sank to save them from different diarrhoeal and water-borne diseases, which are caused by contaminated water. Ironically, the wells that were meant for safe drinking water have turned reservoirs of arsenic poison.

More than two-thirds of Bangladeshis are now affected by arsenic contaminated water. Since its first detection in Chirghat in 1993, many studies have been carried out to ascertain the number of people affected but every time a new figure crops up as new cases are found in new places.

At least 59 of the country's 64 districts are now affected with an estimated 1.12 million tube wells contaminated with arsenic. About 24 million people are exposed to arsenic contamination and over 50 million at some risk of exposure. Some 5,500 arsenic poisoned patients have already been registered, according to official statistics.

Arcene poisoning cannot be traced immediately. It takes 10 to 15 years to detect the disease.

At Sapania village in Sadar thana of Barisal district, Abdur Rashid Sikdar is fed up with frequent visitors, including Americans and Indians. All the

29 people in his home known as Sikdar Bari fell victims to slow poisoning of arsenic. Six of them are already dead.

Many locals and foreigners visited us. But our problem has not been solved," said Sikdar, who in his 60s appeared tired of the tests.

Not even his grandchildren have been spared by the scourge.

He helplessly watches his wife and five children becoming victims of the silent killer. One of his sons is under treatment at the Bangabandhu Medical University Hospital in Dhaka.

A deep tube-well that replaced his 16-year-old arsenic-affected hand pump well has hardly solved the problem.

"But we cannot drink its water because of bad smell," Sikdar complained. Many Bangladeshis can ill afford Tk 40,000 to 50,000 to install a deep well.

Experts say, arsenic, known as the king of poison, is a naturally existing element in the ground that seeps into groundwater and then into tube-wells. Prolonged exposure to arsenic proves fatal to human beings.

The maximum permissible level for human intake of arsenic is 0.05 mg per litre while the World Health Organisation (WHO) limit is 0.1 mg per litre. But testing samples collected from the tube-wells in parts of the country revealed that the water these spilt contained arsenic in the range between 0.1 mg/litre and 0.3 mg/litre.

Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH) found arsenic concentration beyond acceptable limit in waters of 60 per cent tube-wells of 200 villages of 20 districts it surveyed. Of them, 112 villages

are affected by arsenic contamination. The DCH will conduct the survey in 300 more villages under the emergency arsenic mitigation programme of the Health and Family Welfare Ministry supported by the UNDP.

Experts are struggling to determine what actually causes the arsenic poisoning. It is believed to be the outcome of a natural process under the ground. Arsenic is widely distributed geologically as a component of hundred other minerals. One of the theories blames over-drawing of ground water. Bangladesh has one of the world's highest concentration of wells to pump out ground water for drinking and irrigation.

Dr Iftikhar Hussain, Deputy Programme Manager (Arsenic) of the Health Ministry, observes that the promoters of tube-wells considered bacteria-free water as the only parameter in declaring it "safe". They ignored the presence of harmful chemicals in the groundwater that could come out of the tube-wells sunk by them across the country.

A victim of arsenic poisoning suffers from arsenicosis, a disease that degenerates various body tissues. There are also different kinds of effects of this disease but the two main symptoms are Melanosis and Keratosis. The most visible effects of this disease are on the palms of hands, feet and on the chest. These diseases have potentials to harm kidneys and other vital organs of human body. It can also lead to cancer, mainly that of skin.

There are complaints of lack of seriousness on the part of the Department of Public Health Engineering. Many tube-wells were sealed leaving no alternative source of safe drinking water. In some places people still drink water from wells marked in red not knowing what the mark means.

"Our eyes are the only instrument to examine the suspected patients... Arsenic contamination of water is certainly a big public health problem and it calls for more effective measures," says civil surgeon Dr M Sukur Uddin Mridha of Khulna.

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## Dealing with dropouts

Dropouts at the secondary level have become a sadly familiar phenomenon. Increasing number of secondary level dropouts adds up to huge unemployed manpower. The Village Vocational Training Centres (VVTC) may have the solution to the emerging crisis, writes Mohammad Faizullah

As regards the issue of crime, it goes without saying that slums are not the only places where criminals reside. An efficient police service, including regular patrolling, should be able to protect slum-dwellers and others alike from criminals and their activities.

Now that a committee has been formed to look at the issue of rehabilitation, it is important that this committee takes its job seriously, and considers things carefully. In the recent past, various donor agencies such as the Asian Development Bank and the UNDP had initiated projects to improve conditions in the slums, involving the GoB. These should be carefully reviewed and matters expedited. One such proposal of the Asian Development Bank includes development of the secondary towns, which would have a long-term beneficial effect of diverting migrants from Dhaka to nearby cities and towns.

What should be clearly avoided are hasty measures which simply lead to a waste of funds without solving the problem. In terms of rehabilitation, it should be kept in mind that while the job opportunities are in Dhaka, it does not make sense to move people to far flung areas. At the very least, a phase-wise approach should be taken for rehabilitation, if there are alternative plans for using vacant government property. One should not forget that the right to livelihood is a fundamental human right, and some degree of social responsibility is a must.

The issue of preparing this huge youth population for the job market with necessary skill is yet to receive much attention in the government, media or NGO programmes. This issue, however, hardly gets any attention in the overall national policy planning. Virtually no significant programme exists either by Government or non-government organisations targeting the secondary school dropouts as a group. The government has been talking of vocational training for decades. But the programme is yet to be included in the mainstream of the education system of the country. There is a great need to involve the community, private sector and NGOs. It should be recognised that a nation-wide programme would need flexible and innovative approach. Stereotyped programmes without flexibility will have limited result. A flexible programme with the in-

volvement of community, NGOs and private sector needed to be evolved. It should be recognised that the issue of vocational training within the purview of the national education system is mostly relevant to the age group 12-16 although the unemployed manpower consists of other age groups as well. This is the segment of the population which being dropped out of the secondary schools of the national education system knocks the doors of job market at the earliest.

In 1989 under the Noakhali Integrated Rural Development Project (NIRD) three Village Vocational Training Centres (VVTCs) were established at Companiganj, Chatkhil and Hatia thanas of the Noakhali district. With the winding up of the NIRD project in 1992 the VVTCs at Chatkhil and Hatia were closed immediately. However, the local managing committee of VVTC Companiganj

decided to carry on. The managing committee has since then been running the institution through local management and mobilisation.

The managing committee modified the original model and has made it targeted to secondary school dropouts. The scope of training courses has been expanded. The training courses have been made fee-paying and their scope has been broadened to cover now a wide range of vocational subjects such as: electrical and house wiring, turner and fitter, welding, automotive and small engine. Recognition of Directorate of Technical Education (DTE) has been obtained by virtue of which SSC (vocational) course has introduced from 1997. Local contributions are raised towards financing the costs of running the institution. As it is located in a rural area it caters to the need of rural school dropout boys. Programs are at hand to introduce several other vocational courses as per syllabus of DTE. So far about 130 boys have passed out from VVTC in different trades offered by the institution. Over 50 per cent of these boys have found employment abroad and the rest are employed both in wage and self-employment.

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