

Working in Chandpur

A Sub-divisional Officer's

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"**C**HANDPUR *bharpur, jale o sthale, Matir manush ar sonar phole*" this is what a predecessor of mine in Chandpur had written in praise of the subdivision. In early 1961, I was posted as Sub-divisional officer (SDO) Chandpur in the then Comilla District. This was a coveted posting and considered important because of Chandpur's relative development and being an important inland river port. It was educationally advanced, had a politically conscious public, and electricity, telephone and running water. The SDO's beautiful bungalow was right by the side of the Dakatia river, where a fine old government steam launch with crew stood by for tours. The Chandpur-Comilla road was being constructed at the time and I had to frequently go by jeep to the district head quarters, a journey of about one and half hours, through an uneven and dusty road. I had the same experience while in Tangail because the Dhaka-Tanagil road was also being completed at that time. We do have to pay the price for development of the road infrastructure! In olden days, however, eminent ICS SDO's used to be given a pony allowance, often used to tour on horseback, for which the SDO's bungalow had a stable. During my time, it was converted into a garage as I received a new jeep donated by the Australian Government after floods in an earlier period.

Chandpur was not far from the confluence of the Padma and Meghna rivers and touring in the SDO's small launch was sometimes quite an exciting and hazardous experience. One could see the distinct colour of each river at the confluence, one darker than the other. Also at that point it was not possible to see the river banks on either side, it looked like a sea. Tangail town as well as its river banks were prone to flooding and occasional tidal bores. Though not of the ferocity and height of tidal bores of the Chittagong coastal areas, the river waters would rise with a roar and endanger the city.

Tornadoes and storms with high winds were frequent. One morning while I was getting ready to go to my office, suddenly I saw the sky above the bathroom and drops of water falling on my head. The roof which was made of

two layers of woven bamboo had been blown away to the middle of the river and we were left with no protection. I therefore, had to go with my wife to the 'court building' next door. Even that was not safe as water was rising and threatening to flood the building'. I then moved to the close-by two-storied sub-divisional hospital and conducted emergency relief work and administration from the veranda of the hospital's first floor.

As strong winds blew, reports of deaths and injury started coming in, particularly of sinking of launches and consequent loss of life and properties. I still remember the case of an old trader of betel nuts and chillies who lost his companions in a boat. He was carried unconscious to the hospital and soon died of injuries to his head. The hospital staff brought a bag to me which the man was carrying, and in the presence of one of the magistrates the bag was opened. It contained about thirty thousand takas in cash (a lot of money those days one could buy three nice new English cars) and some of the notes were flying out due to high winds as they were being counted. Since the man's identity was not known at the time, the notes were put in an official bag and sealed in my presence, signed by a magistrate and deposited in the treasury. Nobody had any ulterior

motive and everyone including the civil and police staff were very helpful and forthcoming in assisting the victims of the cyclone. We opened a shelter for those who had lost their homes and boats at the local high school and I went out to tour nearby areas and sent health and other officers to go to the thana headquarters to provide assistance.

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