

Fighting for survival...

Hermaphrodites remain despised, deprived of rights

SULTANA RAHMAN

Bakul was expelled from school while she was in class IV -- not for any misconduct or doing anything wrong. The reason was the identity of Bakul -- a hermaphrodite.

Bakul, hailing from Naria in Shariatpur district, is neither a man nor a woman. That is why the villagers boycotted Bakul's family, forcing them to live an isolated life.

The hijra or hermaphrodite community has been a despised and neglected minority in society. They face discriminations and deprivations throughout their life.

As the hermaphrodites are hounded out of school, they are deprived of basic education and job opportunities. It is impossible for them to cast vote in elections, get a passport, open a bank account or even get a decent house on rent.

"My classmates did not play with me, did not sit beside me, I was totally isolated in my school," Bakul, now 35, recalled her painful memories. "From my childhood, I was treated not as a human being, but as a sub-

ject of entertainment."

Bakul came to Dhaka at the age of 12 and resided at Kaptan Bazar in the old part of the city where Osman Hijra identified Bakul as a hermaphrodite and gave her shelter.

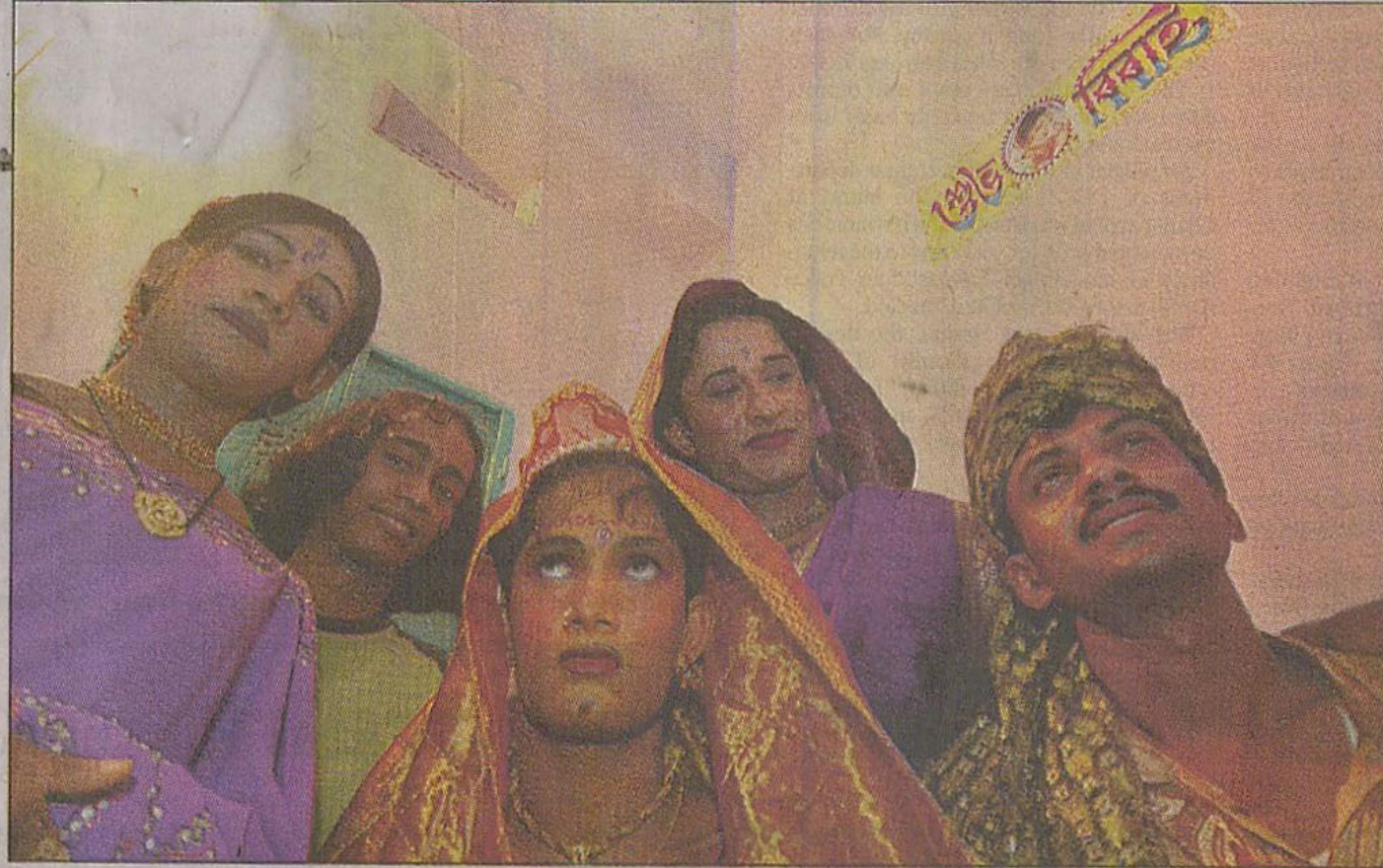
"Osman was my guru whom we traditionally respect as parents. Each of the hijras has a guru," said Bakul who has recently performed hajj and is now known as 'Bakul Haji' in the locality of Dhamrai where a large number of hermaphrodites live.

In Dhamrai, some eight hermaphrodite gurus reside. Bakul has also become a guru.

Abandoned by the society, the hermaphrodites live in a society of their own. They live in small uncommunicative groups, each led by a guru, or teacher. New hermaphrodites are taken into the community by a guru when they become adolescent.

There is no statistics on how many hermaphrodites live in the country. Neither the government nor the NGOs working on the deprived community know it.

According to two hermaphrodites' organisations -- Badhan Hijra Sangha and Bandhu Social



A hermaphrodite ties the knot with a male at Doyaganj in Old Dhaka (top). Two from Tejgaon collect vegetables and other rations for a single meal (left).

Welfare Society, around 3,000 hermaphrodites reside in the city and its outskirts. Monu is the 'chief guru' of all the hermaphrodites in Dhaka.

This correspondent talked to Poppy, another hermaphrodite in city's Kamalapur area, who was ousted from her rented house after the landlord recognised her.

Poppy rented the house hiding her sexual identity and studied in a college. The college authorities, teachers and students were also unaware of Poppy's sex.

Haider, 28, another hermaph-

rodite guru, said: "We are hired to dance at wedding ceremonies and to celebrate the birth of a baby."

"Many people who build a new house also hire us to dance in each room of the house with a belief that it will keep bad fortunes away from their house," Haider added.

Haider has eight followers in Bashpattislum of Dhaka.

But the life of the hermaphrodites is increasingly becoming difficult with the spread of entertainment media. Their sources of earning are drying up.

The hermaphrodites are now compelled to earn their living by collecting money from shopkeepers, a kind of extortion, but they never force anybody to pay them toll.

However, a good number of hermaphrodites are involved in sex trade and many of them have been affected by sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like syphilis and HIV/Aids.

"Syphilis and Aids have been diagnosed among many hijra sex workers," admitted Pinky Sikder, president of Badhan Hijra Sangha.

Among the HIV-infected people in Bangladesh, the hermaphrodite community constitutes 0.8 percent while 34.9 percent of them have syphilis, according to National AIDS/STD Programme of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

"In India, the hijras have started a movement with the demand for recognition as a separate social group and equal opportunities in education, jobs and housing," Bakul Haji said. "But we are far away from these rights."



Bus stops at unauthorised spots cause jam

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

Unmethodical, unauthorised, and haphazard stops at intersections are identified as a few reasons of traffic congestion in the city, said traffic department officials.

They admitted that the department lacks sufficient manpower to check such stoppages.

With the traffic month starting October 1, the traffic department has cited illegal stoppage of public transport as one of the main reasons.

"Buses and other public transports stop just after the intersections are crossed leaving a long line of vehicles behind them, resulting in severe traffic jams," Jahurul Islam, Traffic Inspector-1, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

The Banglamotor intersection, the busiest intersection, faces the traffic problem only because of illegal stoppage of

buses even though the road was made off-limit to rickshaws. Buses plying the Farmgate-Shahbagh route stop immediately the traffic signals have been cleared blocking the on-coming traffic flow from Maghbazar even through the green signal light is on.

"The green signal lights at this intersection are on for 30 seconds every three minutes but because of the buses the traffic cannot move and the traffic police do not do anything about it," complained Sadek Ali, a regular passenger.

Such is the situation at every intersection, be it Maghbazar, Shahbagh, Farmgate, Mohakhali, Postogola, Jatrabari, Sayedabad, Mouchak, Malibagh, Kakrail or Asadgate.

At many intersections like Maghbazar signboards point out that bus stops are 100 metres from the intersection, but driver nor passengers pay heed to the indication.

Drivers of public vehicles said the only way they could collect passengers are just after the intersections.

"We know that we have to either pay fines or bribe the police when we stop at such places, but we are helpless, else we would not be doing so," said Hadi Mia, a bus driver.

The traffic department has a total manpower of around 2,200 persons to maintain traffic in 376 points in the city.

"Although the number of intersections in the city is three times more, we cannot provide adequate police to these 376 spots. If we are to have at least one police officer at each intersection we need 376 more," said Jahurul Islam, Traffic Inspector-1, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

The traffic department officials also blamed the unplanned bus counters and inconsistent road widths for the traffic menace.

They however said they



Passengers board a minibus at the Sonargaon Intersection.

would do their best to improve movement of traffic within their limits.

"A systematic traffic system

is possible with all these limitations if only awareness among people can be created. We hope to do so during the

month dedicated to traffic, which coincides with the month of Ramadan," said traffic inspector 1.

Elevated road project over Hatirjheel waits Ecneec approval

CITY CORRESPONDENT

A Tk 530 crore project, lion's share of which will be funded by the Japan Bank of International Corporation (JBIC), has been gathering dust in the Planning Commission for the last eight months.

The project is aimed at constructing an elevated road over Hatirjheel, one of the city's biggest waterbodies, in a bid to connect the East-West traffic corridor in the capital. The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC),

the implementing agency of the project, has already completed all the preparations. The JBIC has sanctioned Tk 300 crore for project which was supposed to start from July this year. However it is still waiting for the Ecneec's (Executive Committee for National Economic Council) approval.

Sources said JBIC chief representative Kiyoshi Amada has recently sent a letter to the government requesting an immediate approval of the project. When constructed, this elevated road will be the first of its kind in the

country.

"If the project is implemented, it will be an international standard elevated road and would greatly facilitate the traffic movement on critical intersections of the Tongi Diversion Road, Panthapath and Moghbazar. The road will have the option of extension in future according to the volume of traffic," said Ashiqur Rahman, the project director.

The elevated road will have four lanes, walkways on both sides, a median and a breakdown

lane. It will connect the Gulshan Avenue and Pragati Sarani at Rampura.

There is no straight road network from Panthapath to Rampura that forces the commuters to go around the Moghbazar-Malibagh-Mouchak or Mohakhali-Gulshan route. Due to this, the entire area experiences severe traffic congestion.

"The proposed corridor is expected to ensure uninterrupted traffic flow between the eastern and western parts of the

city which will increase the overall speed of traffic movement," added Ashiqur Rahman.

Once the project has been approved, the DCC will call international tender for construction. The elevated road stretches from Tongi Diversion Road to Rampura in the city's east. It will also link the Panthapath-Sonargaon road with Rampura Bridge.

According to the project proposal, construction was supposed to end in June 2008. Sources in the DCC said that the

cost has increased in eight months and the elevated road will be narrower than the previously proposed 100 feet width.

"The DCC has prepared a new PCP (project concept paper) for constructing the elevated road following the technical assessment by BUET to save the city's last remaining waterbody," informed Ashiqur Rahman.

He added that they had taken the decision after a detailed environmental survey which was designed in a way so that the elevated road over

Hatirjheel helps both road networking and preservation of the wetland.

Originally, the authorities had planned to fill up portions of the Hatirjheel to implement the project to connect the eastern and western parts of the city. But the Urban Planning department of BUET suggested constructing the elevated road for the sake of saving the waterbody. The BUET survey warned that if the Hatirjheel area was filled up, the city would face an unprecedented waterlogging problem in

which all roads and localities around the Hatirjheel would be inundated with the slightest rainfall. Environmentalists had also expressed their deep concern over the project and said the area was naturally designed to retain storm water covering 40 square kilometers. The Project director told the Star City that they have already received clearances from all concerned agencies including the Department of Environment, Dhaka Transport Coordination Board, WASA and Rajuk.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.

"The Prime Minister's monthly salary is only US \$ 500. The amount is so little that I feel ashamed to mention it when we go abroad"

-- Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan

LRGD and Cooperatives Minister

Told Jatiya Sangsad proposing a bill to increase salaries of ministers, on September 18. Source: Prothom Alo

"As a Bangladeshi I can travel across the world with courage, but can an American move so freely? Even an American can't claim himself outside his country as American with courage because of terrorism"

-- Justice Abdur Rauf

Former Chief Election Commissioner

Said at a three-day regional seminar on "Islam: Religion of Peace, Progress and Harmony; Bangladesh: Model of a Moderate Muslim Nation" at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre, on September 23. Source: The Daily Star

"If we could shed blood for Bangladesh in 1971, we can give you more water. But both sides must have the sacrificing attitude"



-- Priya Ranjan Dasmuni

Indian Minister for Water Resources

Told the Daily Star in an exclusive interview on his visit to Dhaka for talks on water issues, on September 20. Source: The Daily Star

"I feel sorry for the 1971 atrocities in Bangladesh. It was the failure of Pakistani leadership in 1971 to halt the atrocity"

-- Dr Javid Iqbal

Former chief justice of Pakistan and son of poet and renowned Islamic scholar Allama Iqbal

Told a seminar under the theme "Islam: Religion of Peace, Progress and Harmony; Bangladesh: Model of a Moderate Muslim Nation" organised by Dhaka-based Centre for National and Regional Studies (CNRS), on September 23. Source: The Daily Star

"When I was in jail during the anti-Ayub movement, those journalists were not even born"

-- Fazlur Rahman

State Minister for Youth and Sports

Told journalists reacting to press reports on the comment he made in Colombo, on September 21. Source: Prothom Alo

"Chhatra Dal is the largest student organisation of meritorious students. So 150 (JCD men) out of 300 can be easily recruited"

-- Shafiul Bari Babu

General Secretary, Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), student wing of ruling BNP

Told news persons reacting to the recruitment of 150 activists of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and relatives of BNP lawmakers as Upazila Election Officer (UEO) through the Public Service Commission (PSC) ahead of the next parliamentary election, on September 20. Source: Prothom Alo