

Unending battle of a martyr's family

They stayed at a worn-out house for decades without any permanent allotment and with fear of being evicted any day

DURDANA GHAS

Hasina Chowdhury was trudging in the little strip of porch at the front of her dilapidated house. Over her head hung the worn out ceiling with iron rods bared and the plaster peeling off.

The wrought iron gate hanging on its rusty hinges gave an impression of its long journey through the passage of time. The hinges of the Victorian gate gave out a sharp screech when it is moved. A patch of broken pieces of brick and gravel stone led to the porch of the house.

The front door bears a nameplate: 'Shaheed Buddhijibi Rafiqul Haider Chowdhury'.

The termite-infested rooms, doors and windows, the ramshackle look of the whole structure give an impression that it may crumble away at any moment.

Hasina is the wife of litterateur and martyred intellectual Rafiqul Haider Chowdhury who was picked up by the collaborators of the Pakistan army on December 13, 1971. He never came back.

At that time Hasina's daughter was 6-year old and her two sons were infants.

Hasina lived in this house, located at Siddheshwari Lane, with her three children since the independence. She tried her best to get permanent allotment of the house over the last three decades, but to no avail. Recently she left the run-down house and shifted to a rented one.

Originally the house belonged to a Hindu family in the British period that went to India.

Abandoned for the last few months, the house still bears the memory of Hasina's silent agony of the last three decades. The dilapidated rooms speak of the troubled time she had to face after the untimely death of her husband.

A rickety staircase was leading its way to the rooftop under which books and drafts of poems and write-ups of her husband were stacked up in neat rows.

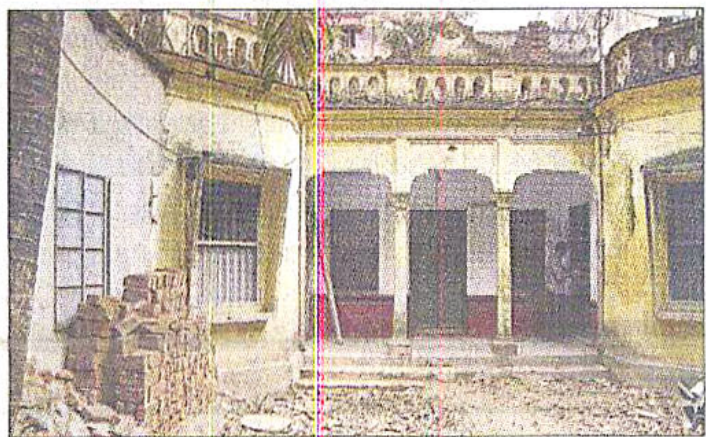
Hasina was reminiscing the memory of the battle she had to fight to get a foothold in this country for which her husband had to lay down his life.

She applied for the permanent allotment of this house in June 1972. She was supposed to get a house from the state as widow of a martyred intellectual, but nobody helped her get it.

"For years I lived in this house with water dripping inside during the rainy season. Many of my husband's drafts were ruined in the rainwater. The furniture are damaged," she said.



Hasina Chowdhury in a pensive mood in front of the portrait of her martyred husband, (below) the house she stayed for decades.



"Four months after the independence I heard from my brother that the government was going to allot houses for the families of the martyred intellectuals and freedom fighters. At that time this house was the office of freedom fighter commander Gazi Golam Dastagir," said Hasina, a retired teacher of Siddheshwari Girls High School.

Hasina decided to live with her children on her own because she did not want to burden her father with her problems.

She told Dastagir that she wanted to live in the house and he agreed. Then she started living in the house with the three

children. Dastagir left the house but two freedom fighters, one of them with family, used to live with the Hasina.

At that time she lived in one room of the house with her children.

"As I was a teacher of Siddheshwari Girls School this house was closer to my workplace. I applied for permanent allotment of the house and the then works minister Motiur Rahman took steps to allot the house in my name. But when I went to the ministry the section officer said the house is quite big and so it should be partitioned to accommodate more people."

After the house was partitioned different kinds of people started to take hold of the other portion of the house and the martyr's family had to live with them because they did not have any place to go. In 1981, a police officer took over the other half of the house and lived there for 22 years.

"It was not clear to me why a police officer was allowed to live in that house when the government has housing arrangements for them," said Hasina.

"I brought the Wasa supply line going through the bureaucratic tangles and paid the bills of other tenants. The police officer requested me to share the water with him and I did, but when he brought the gas line he did not share the line with me. I had to cook using kerosene," she said.

"In 1975, the then headmistress of my school shifted some school furniture to my house and put up a signboard in front of the house declaring it as the school's science building. Later I got rid of this problem through an acquaintance who was in the school committee."

From 1972 to 1978 she paid a monthly rent of Tk 350 for the house. But in January 2004 the PWD told her that the rent of her

portion was Tk 20,000 and the other portion's was Tk 500.

"When I asked how was that possible the PWD officials said that the house was situated in a posh area of the city. Then I complained to the then works minister and later I did not have to pay the money," she said.

Md Delwar Hossain, joint secretary, Ministry of Public Works, declined to comment on the issue. He however said he will have to check all the papers relating to the allocation of the house as the official concerned is on training leave.

"If the family is a demand note holder and fulfils other criteria,

like clearance certificate from the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, they are supposed to get the allocation," he said.

In fact the family stayed at the house for decades always with a fear of being evicted any day.

Hasina also had to face trouble in getting the pension money for her husband.

"In 1985 a pension was granted for my husband but when I went to the Muktioddha Kalyan Trust (MKT) they asked me whether I can prove how my husband was killed," she said.

"Sometimes when I went to the ministry the officials said there is nothing called Shaheed Paribar. In spite of these I tried to get the allocation so that my children have a place to live."

Asked about the pension, Rezwan Ahmed, general manager, welfare section of MKT, said, "We deal with the families of freedom fighters, not with the families of martyred intellectuals."

"In the last thirty years I have approached so many ministers and secretaries that I can write a book on it but none of them helped me in getting the house permanently," said Hasina.

"I met with Khaleda Zia when she was the prime minister but she did not help me. All I had was this job of a schoolteacher to bring up my children," she said with eyes welled up in tears.

"There was hardly any day when I did not weep before I took meal at night with my children. I did not get even a bit of cooperation or sympathy from anybody."

"Now I need a few lakhs taka to repair the house to make it habitable, but how can I spend my hard-earned money when I'm not sure that this house will be permanently allocated to me?" she said.

"Can't I expect even a dilapidated house from this country for which my husband gave his life?" added Hasina who has recently shifted to a rented house abandoning all hopes for the house.

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.

"We are poor but the cyclone-hit people are poorer now. They have nothing, no home, clothes or food to eat. We poor people can realise how painful it can be to be in a situation like that."

-- Hazera

A slum-dweller of Karail Bosti and mother of four. Told a reporter after donating 40 pieces of clothes to Sidi-affected people, on Friday. Source: The Daily Star

"I have got reports that cyclone victims in some areas have received large quantities of relief and they are selling the excess materials."

-- Lt Gen Masud Uddin Chowdhury

Principal Staff Officer, Armed Forces Division. Told businessmen in a meeting, on Sunday. Source: The Daily Star

"We don't see any crisis until March next year."

-- Mirza Azizul Islam

Finance Adviser. Told reporters replying to their apprehension of food crisis, on Wednesday. Source: The Daily Star

"Maybe BNP had lack of willingness that's why they could not try the war criminals."

-- Enam Ahmed Chowdhury

Adviser to the BNP Chairperson. Told BBC Sanglail, on Saturday. Source: Prothom Alo

"If the economy is not well, no government can survive."

-- Hossain Khaled

President, Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Told a reporter, on Wednesday. Source: The Daily Star

Compiled by Durdana Ghias

Tale of the gold dust hunters

Mozaffar, like many others, sweeps alleys and corridors of Taantibazar for years to collect and sell the precious dust

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Starting from 1:00am to 6:00am every day Mozaffar Ali sweeps the alleys, drains, building corridors, stairs, toilets and every hidden corners of Taantibazar.

It may seem like the regular cleaning job for the city corporation. However, in Mozaffar's case it is a nightlong hunt for precious gold.

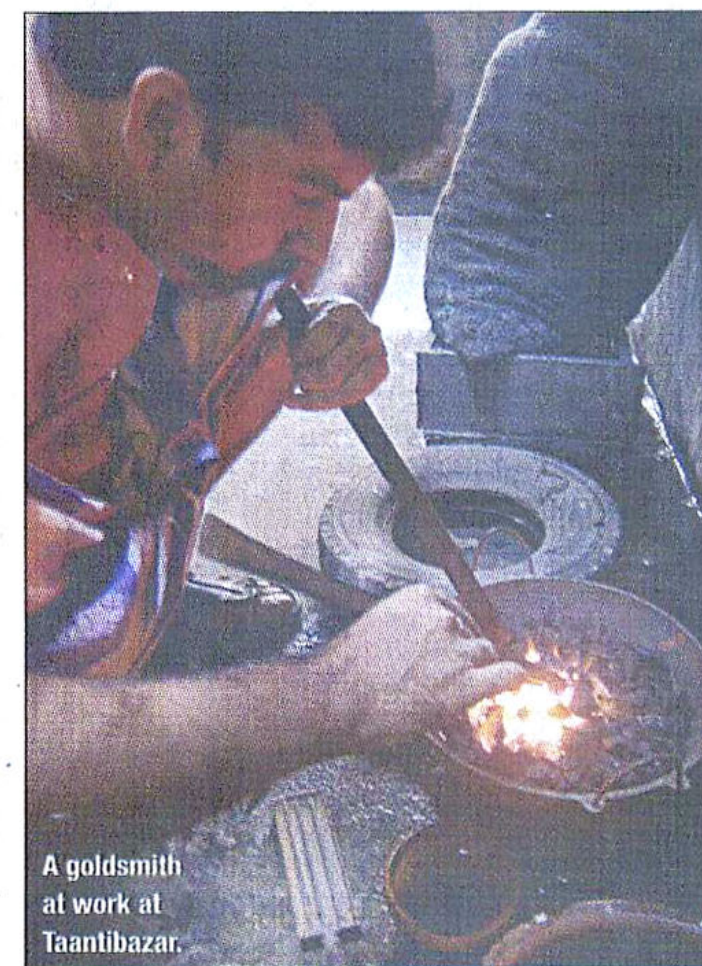
Scouring the streets of Taantibazar for dust and debris that may or may not contain crumbs of gold has been Mozaffar's profession for the last 35 years.

This has been a very popular profession for many others in the city's most important jewellers' district Taantibazar, Islampur, Kotwali, Shutanagar, Panitola and Kumartuli. There are around a thousand jewellery shops in the area.

The collection of dust and debris starts from the jeweller's workshop where chunks of gold take the shape of gorgeous jewelries. Dust of the jewellery workshop and the entire market area or even the street is called the Nehara and those involved in the business of this precious dust of gold is called Nehara wallah.

There are some unwritten rules followed by everyone in the trade. Dust of the workshop belongs to the workshop owner, which is later sold to Nehara wallahs while the dust and rubbish left in the street belongs to the market committee, who have special arrangements with groups like Mozaffar and his partners.

There are two separate groups of Nehara wallahs. One group purchases the dust only from the workshops and the others like Mozaffar and his partners collect the dust by cleaning the streets and drains. Mozaffar works six days a week while the sale of the dust from the workshop takes place on the first day of every Bangla month.



A goldsmith at work at Taantibazar.

With a little break for lunch Mozaffar, a resident of Gopibagh area, sleeps during daytime, until late in the evening. With his two associates Sharif and Harun, he starts working at midnight. The dust collection continues until the daybreak.

Every area is divided into several zones and the area has a Sardar (leader). The Sardar controls all the groups of the area. Each group has a designated zone.

The strenuous work of separating gold from the dust begins immediately after the collection. The dust is carefully washed with water over and over again for hours. In the final stage the gold,

if found any, is separated from the water with the help of sulphur and nitric acid, which is later melted and turned into solid gold chunks.

The gold recovered from the dust is later sold to the jewellers. Whatever amount is recovered from the dust, it is equally shared between Mozaffar and his partners.

Babul Das, one of the senior jewellers of Taantibazar area, gives detail. "When the jewellers work, little splinters and flakes of gold spread all over the workshop floor and that is why the dust of the workshop is so precious."

"Even the dust of the corridor or the street in front of the build-

ing is precious as the gold flakes make their way out of the workshop, hiding in the shoes or clothes of the jewellers, later spreading all over. This is normal in this business," he added.

The coal used to melt the solid gold is also sold as it often contains residue of gold.

Das relates that previously all the jewellers used to work manually, which left less gold flakes. Use of machine to cut the gold has increased among the jewellers recently. Machine creates more gold flakes increasing the price of Nehara and the risk of eye injury for the jewellers. Wearing eyeglasses is a must for jewellers using machines.

Every day jewellers carefully sweep the room, detailing every corner, underneath the furniture and brushing off the mattress. They keep the dust in a hole dug up on the floor. Jewellers never wash their workshop with water.

Nehara of one workshop is sold at around Tk 2,000. Price may vary depending on the size of the workshop and volume of the dust. Nehara wallahs collect the dust in plastic bags every month. Most Nehara wallahs come from Manikganj district.

The number of people involved in the business is unknown. According to Mozaffar there are around 70 street Nehara wallahs in Taantibazar alone.

Street cleaner Nehara wallahs has yearly contract with the market committee. The amount collected from Nehara wallahs is spent on the market's lightings and security. Often the street cleaners themselves provide these services.

Mozaffar pointed out that Nehara business takes a different turn every day. "Often the Nehara wallahs get lucky and find good amount of gold in the dust and often the day's hard work goes in vain with only a small morsel of gold recovered," he said.

Yet the trade exists and the hunt for gold continues.

Neglect, whim killing Jirani Khal

Waterlogging, mosquitoes and bad smell are the gifts

ERSHAD KAMOL

The Jirani Khal that stretches from Sayedabad bridge to Trimohoni has turned into a breeding ground for mosquitoes and source of water logging in the areas of Madartek and Basabo as several roads built right through it are obstructing its water flow.

Most of these roads are located in the mid section of the canal -- between Nandipara bridge and Kadamtala bridge.

Abdul Mannan, a senior citizen from Madartek, said, "Jirani Khal has turned into our curse. It now smells really awful because people dump garbage in it indiscriminately."

"Mosquitoes are breeding in its stagnant water and the people living in nearby houses suffer the most. We made complaints about the issue to the local ward commissioner (ward 27), but he hasn't taken any measure yet," he added.

Another resident of the same area Golam Mostafa said, "A few neighbourhoods of Madartek get waterlogged even after a brief shower because the connecting ditches fail to drain out the rainwater into the stagnant Jirani Khal."

Residents of the adjacent areas -- Kadamtala, Baganbari and Purbas Basabo -- also suffer from similar nuisances.

Saiful Islam Kochi from

Baganbari said, "The mosquito menace and the ghastly smell from the canal are two major problems and these keep us from hanging out by the bank of the canal."

A number of locals alleged that the ward commissioner is not doing anything to stop people from throwing waste into Jirani canal. Apart from that, the neighbourhood garbage collectors are also dumping garbage in it.

Unlike the canal recovery and restoration programmes being undertaken recently by Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) in different areas of the city, nothing is being done to save the Jirani canal that also belongs to Dhaka Wasa, they

added.

The initiatives had been limited to laying a few foundation stones by the former local law-maker for connecting the roads on both sides of the canal with bridges, the locals pointed out.

The superintendent engineer of Dhaka Wasa drainage department however denied the allegation and said, "We've removed illegal structures from several points of the Jirani Khal -- between Uttar Manik Nagar and Manda bridge. We also did renovation work in July."

"At present, the Jirani Khal from Manda to Kadamtala bridge is alright. It flows

smoothly from Nandipara point to Trimohoni. Renovation work and illegal structure removal between Nandipara bridge and Kadamtala bridge of the canal could not take place due to the floods, but will be done in the upcoming dry season," he said.

"Local ward commissioners built unplanned drainage and roads by intersecting the canal and turned the canal stagnant. Sometimes they do it to grab government property," he added.

"Unless the proposed 'Eastern Project' is implemented, Wasa has little to do for preserving canals in the eastern part of the city," he said.

