

# Better future for autistic children

ZILLUR RAHMAN KHAN RATAN

THE two-day international conference on autism, which was inaugurated by the Honourable Prime Minister, ended on a high note. It was jointly organised by the Center for Neurodevelopment and Autism in Children of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and international autism awareness organisation Autism Speaks.

The theme of the conference was "Autism Spectrum Disorder and Developmental Disabilities in Bangladesh and South Asia," which drew media and public attention in our country. A unanimous "Dhaka Declaration," which would be regarded as a common framework and guideline for combating autism in the South Asian region, was adopted. The declaration highlighted the need for awareness, treatment, research and legislative framework for autistic children.

The conference was supported by World Health Organization. Indian Congress President Sonia Gandhi was the chief guest of the programme, and distinguished political figures from South Asian countries, autism experts, child psychiatrists, child neurologists, pediatricians, psychologists and participants from different countries attended the grand event. The event was chaired by the health minister of Bangladesh.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is a group of pervasive developmental disorder which includes classical autistic disorder to high functioning Aspergers disorder. It is a public health problem globally and in some western countries it spreads like an epidemic. The prevalence rate has risen alarmingly in the South Asian region.

Whatever may be the cause of the high prevalence rate, it is high time to act. A large section of our society lacks scientific knowledge of, and has a negative attitude towards, the condition, which make detection of autism difficult. But early detection is crucial for prevention and management of autistic disorders.

There are no nationwide statistics on prevalence rate of autism in our country. A survey among children and adolescents (aged between 5-17 years), conducted by National Institute of Mental Health, Dhaka and World Health Organization (WHO) in 15 districts of Dhaka

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Division, revealed that the prevalence rate was 8 per thousand respondents, which is close to the global prevalence rate. Boys suffer around four times higher than girls.

The specific cause of autism is still unknown. But from the scientific evidence, genetics is the most convincing and plausible cause of autism. But there is no conclusive scientific evidence on parenting style and MMR vaccine in causation of autism. Like many other public health problems autism is a preventable, treatable and manageable condition, but not a curable one. That's why public health approach is needed for combating it.

ASD is not like other developmental disorders. Developmental problem is not only delayed but also atypical and deviant in nature. Among three cardinal features of autism, problems in social interaction are more prevalent than problems in speech and communication, and restrictive and repetitive activities and behaviour.

Usually, a child begins to smile within 6 months and responds reciprocally. In autism this is absent or delayed. An autistic child is withdrawn and aloof, avoids eye con-

tact, is not interested in social conversation, avoids hugging and becomes irritated when cuddled by someone. Speech and language are delayed and no babbling by age of one year is found. Sometimes previously acquired language skill is lost. Sometimes, if adequate speech is present, it is monotonous and insufficient to continue normal social conversation. There is difficulty in verbal and non-verbal communication.

Autistic children have restrictive and repetitive behaviour, stereotyped motor behaviour like hand flapping and to and fro movement. There is an obsessive interest for the same object, colour, toy, clothing, food, etc. Slight deviation from this strict environment brings about severe temper tantrum and aggressive outburst. Sometimes around three years are needed to gauge the full range of autistic features for diagnosis. Besides, an autistic child may have co-morbid mental health problem like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, aggressive and odd behaviour, intellectual disability and physical health problems like sleep disturbances, eating problem, epilepsy etc.

Early detection of autism can prevent disability and

enhance highest level of functioning. A multidisciplinary team of child psychiatrist, child neurologist, child psychologist, speech therapist, occupational and physiotherapist and autism-related professionals is highly recommended for better management of autistic children. Coordination of this service is essential and every team member is equally important for better management of autistic children.

It is essential for guardians of autistic children to know about the existing government, autonomous or non-government services provided to autistic children. Among the specialised service centres for autistic children the child guidance clinic of National Institute of Mental Health, Dhaka, Dhaka Shishu Hospital, Dhaka Medical College Hospital and recently developed Autism Center of BSMMU are noteworthy.

Most specialised autism centres are located in urban areas, which is a major problem for those in rural or semi-urban areas. Most private schools for autistic children are too costly to bear for most of the guardians. For this reason, National Disability Welfare Foundation under the Ministry of Social Welfare has established 15 disability and autism service centres in different districts. Though not specialised, the services provided by trained manpower would be a great help for the less advantaged section of the society in rural and semi-urban areas. But we have to keep in mind that every citizen has equal rights in getting health service.

The autism conference was followed by a three-day training programme for parents, caregivers, educators, therapists and medical professionals, which will be helpful for the participants. One of the speakers said that parental training programme is crucial because they live with autistic children.

Awareness among the public about autism is vital and will create an autism-friendly society in our country, which will reduce stigma and discrimination. Concerted efforts by all concerned are needed for building a protected and better future for autistic children. Then autistic children could be mainstreamed in our society and could take part in our national developmental activities like other citizens.

The writer is Psychiatrist and Epidemiologist, Assistant Professor, Department of Child, Adolescent and Family Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health, Dhaka. E-mail: mzkhan@gmail.com

## Why vote for Sundarban?

GOLAM ALI FAKIR

THE leading seven natural wonders of the world are being elected through global poll under the guidance of Bernard Weber and the direction of Switzerland-based "The New 7 Wonders Foundation." The voting process started in 2007 and will end in November 2011. Of the 440 noteworthy natural sites of the world, 28 were elected through polls by July 2009, of which the Sundarbans is one, and only 7 will be elected by November 2011.

The Sundarban, on the southeast coast of the Bay of Bengal and comprising 10,000 square kilometers of Bangladesh and India, is the world's largest mangrove forest, of which more than 60% is located in Bangladesh.

The Sundarban has exquisite natural beauty, and an incredible array of diverse flora and fauna. There are 315 species of birds including 80 species of migratory birds. There are 400 varieties of fish and crocodiles, turtles, tortoises and many other marine creatures. For this reason Unesco has rightly declared it as a World Heritage Site.

It is also the home of the world famous Royal Bengal Tiger. According to a survey of UNDP there are at present about 440 of them in the Sundarban. There are 35 varieties of reptiles, 42 varieties of mammals, 291 varieties of fish, 24 varieties of shrimps, 14 varieties of crabs, and 43 varieties of mollusks. Crocodiles, wild boars, monkeys, dolphins and wildcats are very often seen in this forest. The presence of the rare species of spotted deer enhances the beauty of the Sundarban.

Prominent among the different categories of trees in the Sundarbans are 'sundari', 'gheoa', 'goran', 'kewra', 'poshur', 'singra', 'khalsi' etc. The forest is called Sundarbans for the predominance of the beautiful 'sundari' trees. Golpata and honey are also valuable assets of the Sundarbans. Sundarban provides livelihood to millions of people, and also acts as a shield for the coastal areas.

The charming and eye soothing beauty of the Sundarban, the novel and exceptional structure of the mangrove trees, and diverse wild life are immensely conducive for the tourism industry. It is possible to make it one of the most attractive tourist-spots of the world through proper planning, management and determination. In this way Bangladesh can earn a large amount of foreign exchange from the tourism sector.

This will also help Mongla, the second sea port of Bangladesh, develop. This will, in turn, upgrade and intensify the international trade of the country. Moreover, it will pave the way for establishing the proposed airport at Foyla in Bagerhat. The neglected and underdeveloped south western zone of Bangladesh will

be developed to a great extent.

I hope the readers will be able to realise from my discussion how important and necessary it is to vote for the Sundarban as one of the seven natural wonders of the world. It's a question of life and death -- a battle for existence. We have to vote for the Sundarban if we are to exist in this competitive world as proud citizens of a developed and prosperous country.

Unidentified sources have revealed that Sundarban is placed 12th among the 28 competing sites. About six and a half lakh votes are required to achieve the 7th position.

It will not be difficult to earn a place among the seven natural wonders of the world if votes are cast through careful planning and motivation. We have only four and a half months to complete the voting process. So let us all vote for the Sundarban. If we fail to elect the Sundarban as one of the seven natural wonders of the world, the future generation of our country will not pardon us.

I present 6 propositions by which we can make our World Heritage Site, the Sundarban, one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

- The number +44758-900-1290 should be made toll free so that the people of Bangladesh can vote in great numbers free of cost.
- Thankfully, the voters have been able to vote through SMS at a cost only Tk.2 from June 2011;
- As there is provision to vote through mobile phones, those who are financially solvent can vote as many times as

they can afford. If in this way if one lakh people vote for 100 times, the Sundarbans will easily earn one crore votes;

- Voting should be ensured for people of all walks of life on an emergency basis. In this respect, government, semi-government, non-government and all organisations and associations can take up various programmes to make a meaningful contribution;
- The electronic and print media can make maximum effort to publicise the voting issue;
- All educational institutions should chalk out programmes for making the voting process successful;
- A portion of the Sundarban is situated in India. Thus it is very necessary for the people of India to participate in the voting process actively. For this, effective measures should be taken at government and non-government levels of both the countries;
- I, therefore, appeal earnestly to all the students, teachers, officers and employees of all educational institutions to vote for the Sundarban. If they all do so, I believe, it will achieve the first position in the election.

The writer is Vice Chancellor in Charge of Bangladesh University, Dhaka.

## WATER-BODY MANAGEMENT POLICY 2009

# Does it benefit fishers?

*Though the policy encourages the genuine fishers to come forward and have access to water-bodies, the gaps that still remain are leading to practices at the field level that are not supportive in this regard.*

SONIA KABIR

TO meet the targets of millennium development goals, Bangladesh needs to reduce the number of poor people by half of that of 2000 by 2015. But the latest reports claims that till 2009, almost 3 crore 50 lakh people were considered to be extreme poor among the 6 crore poor people of Bangladesh. Most of these extreme poor people live in rural areas, with agriculture, fishing and other farm activities as their main source of income.

Different research reports have shown that fishermen are among the poorest and most marginalised of the rural poor. The role of public water-bodies is important as these poor fishers can increase their income through access to them. Government statistics show that there are around 28,000 public water-bodies across the country, which are leased out every year. It was seen from different aquaculture development projects undertaken by the government and donor agencies that when the genuine fishers' groups directly lease the water-bodies from the government their share in catch increases substantially, resulting in an increased income for them.

The government adopted a national water body management policy in 2009 to ensure access of genuine fishers to these government resources. According to this policy, only genuine fishers' groups can participate in the bidding process through forming an association, which has to be registered from the local Social Welfare Department or Cooperatives Department. This policy also clarifies that those who earn their living through fishing in the natural sources and who live near the water-bodies like rivers, oxbow lakes, haors, beels etc will be considered to be "genuine fishers."

But the policy remained quiet on the process of how the poor fishers could form groups/associations and get them registered with the Cooperatives Department. Instead, fishers' cooperatives/associations already registered have been getting original fishers' certificates for their members through paying bribes to the concerned local officials.

The public water-bodies are under Ministry of Land while the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock and the Department of Fisheries (DoF) look after the fisheries resource management and conservation. The new water-body management policy tried to ensure coordination of all local bodies of the relevant ministries in the form of district and upazilla water-body management committees in order to ensure access of

original fishers to the public water-bodies. It has also ensured three-year lease of the water-bodies by the associations of original fishers as it was thought that lease security would encourage the fishers' groups to invest in the development of these water-bodies. However, the policy is silent on the issue of forming of groups by extreme poor genuine fishers.

According to the policy, the upazilla fisheries officer, on behalf of the upazilla water-body management committee, will provide genuine fishers certificates to the associations/cooperatives that would take part in the bidding process. But the poorest fishers who want to form an association through the Cooperatives Department are facing trouble as the Cooperatives Department is not registering their groups without the "genuine fishers" certificate given to them by the upazilla fisheries officer.

The Fisheries Department, on the other hand, has directed its field-level officers to issue this certificate only to the groups that are already registered. This lack of coordination between the two departments, both of which are members of the upazilla water-body management committee, is unfortunate as this shows the intention of the local administration to not allow new fishers groups to form, register and bid for public water-bodies.

Though the policy encourages the genuine fishers to come forward and have access to water-bodies, the gaps that still remain are leading to practices at the field level that are not supportive in this regard. The advertisement seeking applications from interested fishers' cooperatives to participate in the auction process has already been published in the media and the water-bodies will be leased out from next April.

Therefore, there needs to be consolidated efforts from all the concerned ministries to reduce the gaps so that the genuine extreme poor fishers can reap the benefits of leasing public water-bodies and secure a sustainable source of income.

The writer works for Uttarban, social development organisation working with extreme poor communities in the south west region of Bangladesh. www.uttarban.net

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