

# First day as Bangladeshi

STAR REPORT

Julekha Begum heard the song "Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomay Bhalobashi" numerous times before. She probably had hummed along occasionally.

But yesterday, it was different. At 6:01am, the 25-year-old along with 700 others of Bhitarkuti in Lalmonirhat stood shoulder-to-shoulder in a local ground and for the first time in their lives sang the song in chorus.

Bhitarkuti, which was previously an Indian enclave, has just become a part of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's national flag was also hoisted there.

The entire area echoed with the chorus that reflected their pride in becoming Bangladesh's citizens after decades' old wait.

"It is not possible to express my feeling in words" Julekha, mother of a four-year-old boy, told our Lalmonirhat correspondent afterwards.

Like Bhitarkuti, the national anthem was sung and the flag was hoisted in all the tiny pockets of lands which merged with Bangladesh yesterday, according to our correspondents.

The moment the clock struck 12:00am yesterday, around 52,000 inhabitants of 162 enclaves inside Bangladesh and India got the taste of freedom for the first time in 68 years, officially becoming citizens of either of the two countries.

In Bhitarkuti, the flag was hoisted by Safura Begum Rumi, a local lawmaker from the reserved seats for

women. The programme was organised by the district administration. A colourful procession was brought out there later.

Sixty-eight-year Fateh Ali said, "We are proud of being Bangladesh nationals. Our land has become Bangladesh's land. Now, we will be able to get all the legal documents."

In Patgram upazila, people yesterday brought out a procession with a 68-foot national flag to celebrate their freedom.

Abu Taher Md Masud Rana, acting deputy commissioner of Lalmonirhat, said on official directives, they hoisted the national flag in all the erstwhile 59 Indian enclaves in the district.

At 6:01am yesterday, the national flag was hoisted in the erstwhile 36 Indian enclaves inside Panchagarh, reports our Thakurgaon correspondent.

Three temporary police camps were set up in three former enclaves to maintain law and order there, said the SP.

In Nilphamari, Aftabuddin Ahmed, a local lawmaker, on behalf of the district administration, hoisted the national flag at Boro Kanki, reports our correspondent there.

Additional Deputy Commissioner of Nilphamari Mojibur Rahman, superintendent of police in the district Zakir Hossen, Dimla Upazila Nirbahi Officer Rezaul Karim, among others joined the programme.

In Kurigram, Fulbari Upazila Nirbahi Officer Nasir Uddin Ahmed hoisted the national flag at Dashiarchhara at 6:01am, reports our correspondent there.



**A NEW BEGINNING ... Sixty-eight candles lit at Zigabari enclave in Nilphamari to mark the end of as many years of virtually stateless life. Hindu women of Garati, formerly an Indian enclave in Panchagarh, top right, light earthen lamps in celebration as they become Bangladeshi nationals at midnight Friday. The national flag, bottom right, being hoisted at Garati.**



PHOTO: STAR

## Target jobs

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For 68 years, people of Dashiarchhara, as those of the other former enclaves, had no access to basic facilities like education since there were no schools in this pocket of land located inside Bangladesh but belonging to India until yesterday.

So those, who wanted to study, had to fake their identities and enrol themselves in Bangladeshi institutions. However, they failed to get government jobs as their real identities would eventually be exposed.

"I have done my masters from [Bangladesh] National University in 2010 by faking my identity. But I could not apply anywhere as my Indian identity eventually got disclosed. And now, I have passed the maximum age for applying for a

government job," said Nur Islam, 32.

"With the help of some locals, I am now trying to establish a junior secondary school in Dashiarchhara where I can serve as the headmaster," he said.

"Decades ago there were three primary schools run by the locals here. One of them was Rashmela Primary School which survived until a few years after the Liberation War. It later had to be closed for fund crisis," said Joynal Abedin, 70.

He is now donating money to rebuild the school and to construct another -- Alokito Rashmela Junior Secondary School -- in Rashmela village of Dashiarchhara.

"Locals are trying to construct at least 16 educational institutions here. They are using the banner of enclave co-ordination committee,

hoping that the institutions will be nationalised later," said Jobed Ali, 48, of Dashiarchhara.

Altaf Hossain, chairman of Dashiarchhara Co-ordination Committee, said: "I have already been nominated president of a junior secondary school, three primary schools and a madrasa while other school committees are also offering me posts."

However, all these institutions may not get government approval.

With an area of 6.65 square kilometres and a population of 6,889, Dashiarchhara can have a maximum of three primary schools, one high school, one girls' high school and one Dakhil madrasa, Kurigram district education officials estimate.

"According to an official order, no primary school can be set up here now, not even by non-government

entities. The government will establish the schools if it's deemed necessary," said Shapan Kumar Roy, acting district primary education officer.

"A population of at least 2,000 is a pre-condition for setting up a primary school in an area. So, Dashiarchhara may get three primary schools at best," he said, adding that a proposal for constructing the schools had already been sent to the education ministry.

District Education Officer Bhabo Shankar Barma said, "A population of around 10,000 and a distance of over 3km between two high schools or two madrasas are required for setting up a new high school or madrasa. So, one high school, one girls' high school and one dakhil madrasa may be set up in Dashiarchhara."

## Cheers!

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enclave exchange, but Ratan also got to marry the girl of his dreams.

Ratan's bride Nurfa Begum, 19, had turned down the marriage proposal because Ratan, 26, was a citizen of an Indian enclave. She did not want an Indian husband.

But, all that changed yesterday and wedding was held.

Banshkata is one of the 111 enclaves India exchanged with Bangladesh in the four northern districts yesterday.

"I had refused the proposal as I did not see the point of getting married to an Indian enclave resident," said newlywed bride Nurfa, a resident of Shahabdanga in Patgram of Lalmonirhat.

Nurfa's father Nur Alam said his daughter changed her mind right after the clock struck 12:00am yesterday. Six months ago, Nur could not even argue with Nurfa when she refused Ratan citing his Indian citizenship.

"It was as if our lives hung in the balance," said Nur Alam.

Following a bridal shower held in the morning, the marriage ceremony was held at the house of the groom in the afternoon.

The former Indian enclave was visited throughout the day by Nurfa's relatives and neighbours, who prayed for the happy nuptial life of the couple.

Ratan and his father Mansar Ali were ecstatic.

"Now we are Bangladesh citizens and my son is marrying Nurfa," said elated Mansar. "They are going to make a happy Bangladeshi couple."

Ratan shared his personal feelings about the whole affair with journalists.

"You cannot imagine the pain I endured during the last six months after being rejected."

"I will never forget the pain of being an enclave resident," he said, holding Nurfa's hand on the wedding stage.

## Heartburn for land

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the survey camp this year. So they will not be eligible for citizenship and ownership of land.

Liton claimed that he has 25 bighas of land worth about Rs 3 crore, but he is worried that he might not be in possession of the land any more.

Another local, Noor Hossain, also has 25 bighas, but he fears the same fate.

Many enclave dwellers visited Diptiman Sengupta, leader of the enclave exchange coordination com-

mittee, in the last two weeks to discuss land ownership. Liton and Noor met him on the Eid day (July 18).

Diptiman said many residents believed that the enclaves would never be exchanged. So they didn't bother to register their names in 2011. And now they are in deep trouble.

The Bangladesh government took over the total land of 111 enclaves at Friday midnight. The land will be handed over to citizens with valid documents.

Some 70 families have lodged com-

plaints with the Cooch Behar district administration about not getting citizenship, said sources.

Magistrate P Ulaganathan of Cooch Behar, however, said confirming the ownership of land would not be a problem. The district administration will conduct a survey on enclave land after the exchange of enclaves between the two countries is done, he added.

Cooch Behar-based journalist Sushanta Guha said many people tend to take land disputes to court. Once a case goes to court, the government

cannot hand over the land to anybody until the case is disposed of, he noted.

Lawyer Ahsan Habib of Cooch Behar, who dealt with the enclave land issue for a long time, said ownership of many pieces of land will be settled by court. Some enclave residents have already started consulting lawyers about their land, added Ahsan.

Bangladesh, according to the LBA of 1974 and protocol, received 111 enclaves with 17,160 acres and ceded 51 enclaves with a land mass of 7,110 acres to India.

## Cleaner beaten to death

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College Hospital around 4:00pm.

On-duty doctor Sajib at the hospital said, "The trauma from the beating caused cardiac arrest." He died 45 minutes after he was brought in.

Hundreds of cleaners and sweepers then rushed to the factory around 6:30pm. They vandalised the factory-slash-home of Farhad Hossain and also attempted to torch it.

"Police were able to take the situation under their control," said officer-in-charge of Pabna Police Station.

Tulshi's father Shaon Kumar claimed that his son was beaten up inside the factory. "My son went to

the factory around 7:00am but he did not return home even though it was noon by then. My brother Chondon then went to the factory to look for him and found him critically injured," Shaon said.

"I want justice for the killing of my son," he said, adding that if Tulshi was guilty of theft, he should have been in police custody.

Niom Food Ltd owner Farhad Hossain is the brother of district Awami League leader Abdul Hannan and the uncle of former Bangladesh Chhatra League leader Rafikul Islam Rumon.

Police and locals said the angry cleaners and sweepers also vandalised Rumon's home.

Talking to The Daily Star, Hannan claimed that Tulshi had stolen a bicycle and that angry locals beat him up. He denied that Tulshi was beaten or tortured inside the factory.

Factory owner Farhad Hossain could not be reached for comments.

Protesting the killing of their community man, sweepers and cleaners announced work abstention for today.

"A community man was mercilessly beaten to death. We want a proper investigation," said Subol Chandra Das, president of Horizon Oikya Parishad, Pabna.

He said if the criminals were not punished, they would go for tougher agitation programmes.

## Record rainfall already

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of the country.

Just three days after flood water receded from Bandarban town, the hilly town was inundated again yesterday as water level of the Sangu river rose.

Meanwhile, most of the distressed people who took refuge at the cyclone shelters in different coastal districts went back home, report our correspondents.

The Cox's Bazar district has been worst-hit by inclement weather that saw the death of at least 18 people last week with four fishermen still missing.

On Friday night, the body of Mohammad Faisal, who was swept away by a storm surge, was recovered

from Hwaykang village in Teknaf. Cox's Bazar saw total 208mm of rainfall yesterday, reports our Cox's Bazar correspondent.

Flash floods washed out fish worth Tk 8 crore in six upazilas of Chittagong. At least 1,300 fishermen dependent on fish farms in the upazilas have been seriously affected.

In Barisal division, many rivers including the Bishkhali, the Khakdon and the Buriswar were flowing above the danger level, our Barisal correspondent reports.

Shahidul Islam, executive engineer of Water Development Board (WDB) of Barguna, said the Payra and Baleswar rivers were flowing 20cm above their danger levels.

In Satkhira, around 1,000 people were marooned due to incessant rain. Around 15 to 20 families took shelter elsewhere. Several hundred victims in the district's Itagacha, Kamannagar, Kharibila, Raichpur and Daulatpur areas laid siege to the office of local executive engineer of WDB, demanding immediate steps for draining the water.

In Munshiganj, launch and speed-boat services remained suspended yesterday on the Shimulia-Kawrakandi route of the Padma river due to rough weather, reports our correspondent.

Besides, slow movement of ferries caused immense suffering to people as around 200 vehicles were stuck for hours on the Shimulia end.

## Representatives unfit for local governance?

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Since then, the election has become a must to ensure people's participation in the district administration through their elected representatives. This is the provision of the constitution which speaks for empowering zila parishads to have control over the district administration.

This provision must be honoured if the government wants a democratic country.

Politics has been trampling the constitutional provision too long, making people's participation through their representatives in the district administration an unfulfilled promise.

All the successive governments including the present one have kept on empowering the deputy commissioners (DCs) allowing them full control over the district administration including supervision of local development activities.

Hossain made the statement after attending the DC conference organised by the government to discuss improvement of governance in district

levels.

These kinds of assurances are not new. Yet, he deserves thanks because at least he did not speak against keeping the zila parishad system like his predecessor Syed Ashraf Islam did.

Ashraf, at the July 9, 2014 conference, had hinted at abolishing the zila parishad. Too many branches of the local government, in his view, yielded no positive results and it was not good for a democratic country.

His announcement that the government had no plan at that time for holding the long overdue polls was proved right after a year.

The AL was not short on promises though. The early days of the Awami League-led government's tenure of 2009-January 2014 held hope for holding the zila parishad polls.

In the run up to 2008 parliamentary election, AL had also promised to hold the elections and to strengthen the zila parishad to ensure people's empowerment.

But those promises were soon forgotten. The government has appointed AL leaders as administrators to 61 zila

parishads in December 2011.

Even after that appointment the government had promised to go for holding polls in the next six months. But none of the pledges were kept.

As the AL general secretary Syed Ashraf also questioned the necessity of the zila parishad last year. It signified a dim prospect of holding the polls. Mosharraf's recent statement may only be rhetoric in the play of pervasive politics centring the zila parishad.

The fate of elected zila parishads was doomed in early January 1975, only two years after the enactment of the constitution.

In 1975, the then AL government abolished the elected local government system. Party men were appointed as district governors with powers to control all government offices and departments at the district levels, a move the bureaucrats were not strong enough then to oppose.

The system, however, was nullified following the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975 that led to the subsequent military takeover of state

power.

During the second martial law regime, a conflict brewed between the MPs and the upazila parishad chairmen to take control over the local administration.

To resolve that, the Ershad government enacted the Zila Parishad Act in 1988 that made the MPs chairmen of the district councils.

Ershad's fall in 1990 brought an end to the system.

When BNP assumed power in 1991, it appointed DCs as chairmen of the district councils.

The AL-led government repealed the Zilla Parishad Act of 1988 and introduced a new one in 2000 with provision for direct election. However, it has not done anything to hold the zila parishad election.

The BNP-led government also neglected the zila parishad election. In 2003, the BNP government however formed district council development coordinating committee for each district headed by a chief executive officer, a government official.

Thus, elections to the zila

parishads remained an ever receding promise.

The government's incremental empowerment of the DCs with new authorities every year will make it difficult to establish the elected representatives' supremacy over the public servants in running the district administration.

Functioning elected zila parishads may frustrate the DCs who have emerged over the years as all-powerful officials to run the district administration. An elected zila parishad may cause malcontent in district level administration.

The upazila level administration has become a glaring example. Elected chairmen and vice-chairmen of more than 480 upazila parishads have remained neglected since 2009 as they could not discharge their functions because the upazila nirbahi officers (UNO), civil servants, hold the overall power in the upazila administration and the central bureaucracy backs them to retain control.

The government could not come up with a strong leadership to

empower public representatives in the local administration.

The constitutional provision that is supposed to give the elected representatives of the upazila parishads the power to administer is ineffective because the government favours the bureaucrats.

And there is no guarantee that the constitutional protection will work for elected chairmen of zila parishads if the government does not change its strategy to depend on the bureaucracy for local governance.

All signs say the hope for elected and empowered zila parishad will remain a far cry.

Moreover, Public Administration Minister Syed Ashraf Islam on Thursday, on the last day of DC conference, said the government wants decentralisation of the administration and asked DCs to get prepared for this as they will have to play important role in this regard.

Does the government then want to bank on DCs, not public representatives, for decentralisation of the power?