



PHOTO: STAR

Women cut into pieces areca nuts at the processing centre set up by Yousuf Sawdagar and his wife Shamima Akter in Shikalbaha union in Patiya upazila under Chittagong district. The initiative created employment opportunity for around 3,000 people, mostly poor women, elderly men and physically challenged persons in the area.

## Areca nut brings prosperity to Chittagong's Patiya upazila

Enterprising couple improve 3,000 women's lives

MINHAJ UDDIN with ANDREW EAGLE

Two decades ago, when Shamima Akter and her husband Mohammad Yousuf started the business of cutting areca nut they had to leave their rented house because the constant noise of the nut-cutter annoyed the neighbours.

They had to do that several times, but stayed with the business in which they found potential.

Ultimately the couple not only changed their fortunes but also improved the lives of many others in the three unions of Chittagong's Patiya upazila.

"We lived through very difficult years," says Akter, "years of hardship and poverty." In the 1990s Yousuf laboured in a betel leaf shop, which is how he came to understand that there was demand for the accompanying processed areca.

Later he opened a small shop of his own at Riazuddin Bazar, specialising in areca nuts which he bought wholesale, his wife would cut and they would sell. Demand grew and soon they decided to involve the neighbours. Thereafter the task of cutting areca nuts came to involve the entire neighbourhood.

"Our efforts finally paid off," says Akter. "I used to visit nearby villages to organise the women, show them how to cut areca to the required shape and size. Some were interested, others indifferent, but these days almost every poor woman in the area does this job."

"The demand for processed areca nut is always there," says Yousuf, "our constraint is capital. With greater capital another 5-10,000 village women could do this."

Despite his words the once landless couple is now

wealthy, with land, a car and a three-storey building. The business that started with Tk 20,000 now has 7 branches employing over 3,000 women, and a value of over Tk 1 crore, all achieved through cutting areca nuts.

The 3 unions of Patiya upazila, Char Lakka, Char Patharghata and Shikalbaha are not, by tradition, affluent areas. With low literacy rates, employment opportunities, especially for women, were limited. Before areca nut cutting became common, some women would beg or work as domestic help.

"We had no opportunity to earn money before," says Hasina Begum, 45, of Banglapara village. "We used to sit idle and gossip. But now we can earn." With her two daughters, she makes around Tk. 500 per day.

Kamal Hossain, 54, of Shikalbaha meanwhile, used to work as a labourer in

Chaktai Khatunjang in the early 1990s. But twelve years ago, his right leg was impaired in an accident. "I begged for two years," he says. "When everyone was talking about nut cutting I also started taking some areca nut to cut each day, as the work only involves using your hands. I earn about Tk 150 a day", he said.

Every morning long queues are to be found outside the seven centres, women waiting to collect ten to twenty kilograms of areca nuts each. After cutting at home, the processed nuts are returned, with each woman paid Tk 10 per kilogram.

Processed areca nuts from Patiya are supplied daily to ten districts including Narayanganj, Mymensingh, Manikganj, Cox's Bazar and Rangpur. Up to 20 tonnes of processed nuts are produced daily.



PHOTO: STAR

A section of unscrupulous sand traders carry sand from the Teesta char (landmass emerging from riverbed) area, posing threat to the flood control embankment on the river in Haripur union of Sundarganj upazila under Gaibandha district.

## Mindless sand lifting threatens Teesta flood control dyke

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

Sand mining from near the flood control dyke along the Teesta River at Haripur in Gaibandha's Sundarganj upazila is going on unabated, weakening the dyke and making it vulnerable to collapse in the rainy season.

The sand-miners are busy in the dry season, extracting sand for con-

struction sites and stockpiling it to sell at high price in the rainy season, when sand is otherwise unavailable.

At least two kilometres of the dyke have been badly damaged, with ditches on the upper surface, due to the frequent movement of tractors. The banks of the dyke have collapsed at many points, locals said.

"The whole area is engulfed by dust, creating a health hazard for the locals, especially for children," said freedom fighter Abdul Wahed, who lives on the bank of the Teesta.

"Sand traders are reluctant to stop the movement of tractors on the dyke, which is worsening its condition," said Khorshed Alam, a former UP chairman.

Last month, a mobile court fined a sand trader Tk 1 lakh, but the situation is still the same, locals said.

"Stern action will be taken against the illegal sand miners immediately if they do not stop pilfering sand from beside the dyke," said Abdul Hye Milton, upazila nirbahi officer of Sundarganj upazila.

## NILPHAMARI

# School students played glorious role in Language Movement

EAM ASADUZZAMAN, Nilphamari

A large number of boys and girls of two high schools, inspired by their headmasters, joined the 1952 Language Movement in the then sub-divisional town, recalls advocate Mahbubur Rahman Dulu, lone surviving Language Movement veteran in the area.

Demanding official declaration of Bangla as a state language, the then Muslim Chhatra League called strike in all educational institutions of East Pakistan on February 4 in 1952.

But local Urdu speaking students and pro-Muslim League student activists with the support of local Pakistani administration flexed muscle to foil the movement, said Dulu, now bed ridden due to old age complications.

As a tense situation was created in Nilphamari High English School, the then headmaster Asiruddin Ahmed, also father of martyred freedom fighter of 1971 Capt Khairul Bashar, called all the students at the school ground.

In response to his question who wanted to join the language movement, most of the students raised hands in support while a handful of Biharis and pro-Muslim League students differed.

Encouraged by the headmaster, the students burst into slogans and brought out a procession, said Dulu.

School students Shafiq Rahman, Shamsul Islam, Mahbubur Rahman Dulu, Shawkat Ali, Hemonto Roy then played forefront role.

The agitation gained a new dimension as many students from Nilphamari Girls' High School, joined them in procession, said the language veteran Dulu.

Fouja Begum, Jakia Sultana, Chhomela, Feroja, Halima, Rabeya, Saleha, Sufia, and Bulu were among the organisers of the movement.

It was possible despite the conservative environment of the time as Abu Nazem Mohammad Ali,

headmaster of the girls' high school, inspired the language movement in Nilphamari.

Abu Nazem, also father of present cultural affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor, held a secret meeting with his fellow comrades to chalk out programmes for the movement, said Dulu.

Furious at the success of February 4 programme, the then Urdu speaking sub-divisional officer Monwar Hossain verbally abused the two headmasters for 'provoking' their students.

In protest, students and teachers in the town called strike on February 8, 9 and 10, recalled Language Movement veteran Dulu.

After the martyrdom of Rafiq, Salam, Barkat, Jabbar

and Shafiq in police firing during the Language Movement in Dhaka on February 21, Khairat Hossain, provincial assembly member elected from Nilphamari, walked out of the assembly along with Moulana Abdur Rashid Tarkobagish.

Police arrested Khairat Hossain the next day.

Local Awami Muslim League convener Labiruddin Ahmed and headmaster Abu Nazem Mohammad Ali were arrested on February 26, and secretary of local unit of Muslim Chhatra League Shafiq Rahman and Jubo League convener Shamsul Haque the following day.

They were released after spending long time in

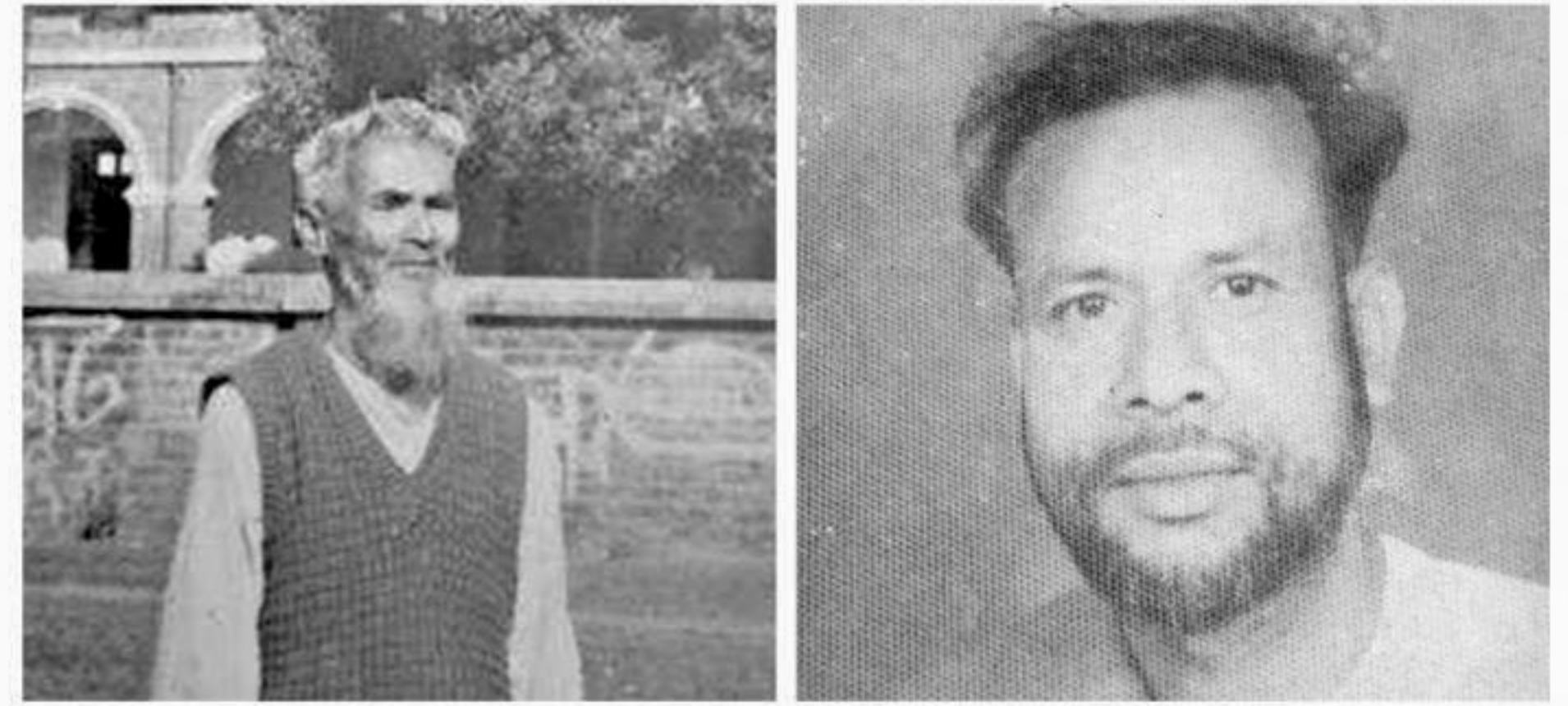


PHOTO: STAR

Late Asiruddin Ahmed and late Abu Nazem Md Ali, then headmasters of Nilphamari High English School and Nilphamari Girls' High School respectively, played significant role in the 1952 Language Movement in the area.

## 'Sunglass Cat'

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come to associate her glasses as a means of comfort and protection. Without shades, her eyes are at a constant risk of being damaged due to cornea damage. Karen removes the jewel-lined glasses from time to time so Bagel can wash her eyes, but she keeps them on at all times in public. The cat also has allergies and cannot regulate her body temperature, which is why she is seen wearing clothes in a few photographs.

The accessories have actually worked in Bagel's favor - she appears totally chilled out in a variety of extremely adorable poses. This has earned the friendly feline a lot of attention both online and in the real world. Nearly 30,000 people currently follow her Instagram account, and she made it to the top five finalists in an Animal Planet contest for the next cat star. Karen also gets requests for personal appearances.

It appears that Bagel, aged two, is quite deserving of all the admiration being thrown her way. Karen, who rescued her from a shelter when she was just a kitten, has only the best things to say about her. "Bagel is the most loving, gentle, calmest, and kindest cat that you'll ever meet," she said.

"People are always amazed at how calm she is. Everyone always wants to touch her as well as hold her. They want to stop and talk to me about her sunglasses, which I always do since it's so rare to see a cat in glasses, and I tell them why she's wearing them as well as her condition."

Karen is also glad that Bagel's Instagram is able to help bring smiles to thousands of people around the world. "As long as I can put a smile on someone's face, make them have a better day, look at life differently because of our posts, then her Instagram account is successful," she said.

She also hopes that Bagel's popularity will inspire more people to adopt and care for animals with special needs. "Animals deserve to be happy in a loving home," she said. "If I didn't adopt Bagel she probably would have been returned and euthanized due to her special needs."

"I couldn't fathom Bagel not being there," Karen added. "She has touched so many people as well as helped numerous people through situations in their lives. Please don't turn your head on a special needs cat. I don't care if they have one leg or three legs or are blind, they need love too."

## Classes hampered as school abandoned for 18 months

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

The education of 165 children of Darihamidpur Government Primary School in Jamalpur's Sadar upazila has been hampered for around one and a half years due to an accommodation crisis and the short period of classes.

The institution established in 1930 and nationalised in 1973, benefited from a three-room concrete structure in 1994, which was subsequently declared abandoned 20 years later, sources said.

The school authority, finding no alternative, started conducting classes from 7:00am to 11:00am in two shifts at nearby Hanif Uddin High School after the lone school building of the primary school was declared abandoned on September 17, 2014.

Due to this situation, three classes from pre-primary to Class II are being held at the high

school in one shift from 7:00am to 8:30am, and the students of each class receive lessons for only one and a half hours for four subjects, whereas the normal timing is from 9:30am to 12:00pm. As a result, teachers can teach for only 22 minutes instead of over 35 minutes, said Majeda Begum, head teacher of the school.

In the second shift, students of Classes III, IV and V attend classes from 8:30am to 11:00am, with only two and a half hours to cover six subjects instead of three and a half hours, she added.

Kids of the three classes at normal schools attend classes from 12:15pm to 4:15pm and enjoy a 30-minute tiffin period from 1:35pm to 2:05pm.

Due to the prevailing situation, the teachers are taking a 25-minute class instead of 35 minutes, said assistant teacher Kamrul Ahsan, adding that the children are

being deprived of full-length classes and the teachers are failing to properly cover the syllabus in such a short period.

Unable to get a proper education, a number of students left the school to take admission elsewhere. As a result, the number of students has fallen from 220 to 165 in about one and a half years, said the head teacher, adding that admission rates in pre-primary and Class I until February 9, 2016 are much lower than in earlier years.

"I formally informed the district education officer (DPEO) of the matter on September 25, 2014, and requested him to build a new school building on an emergency basis," Majeda Begum said.

Contacted, Abdul Alim, DPEO, said he sent a proposal to the concerned authorities to construct a new building for the school in October 2014, but as yet to no effect.

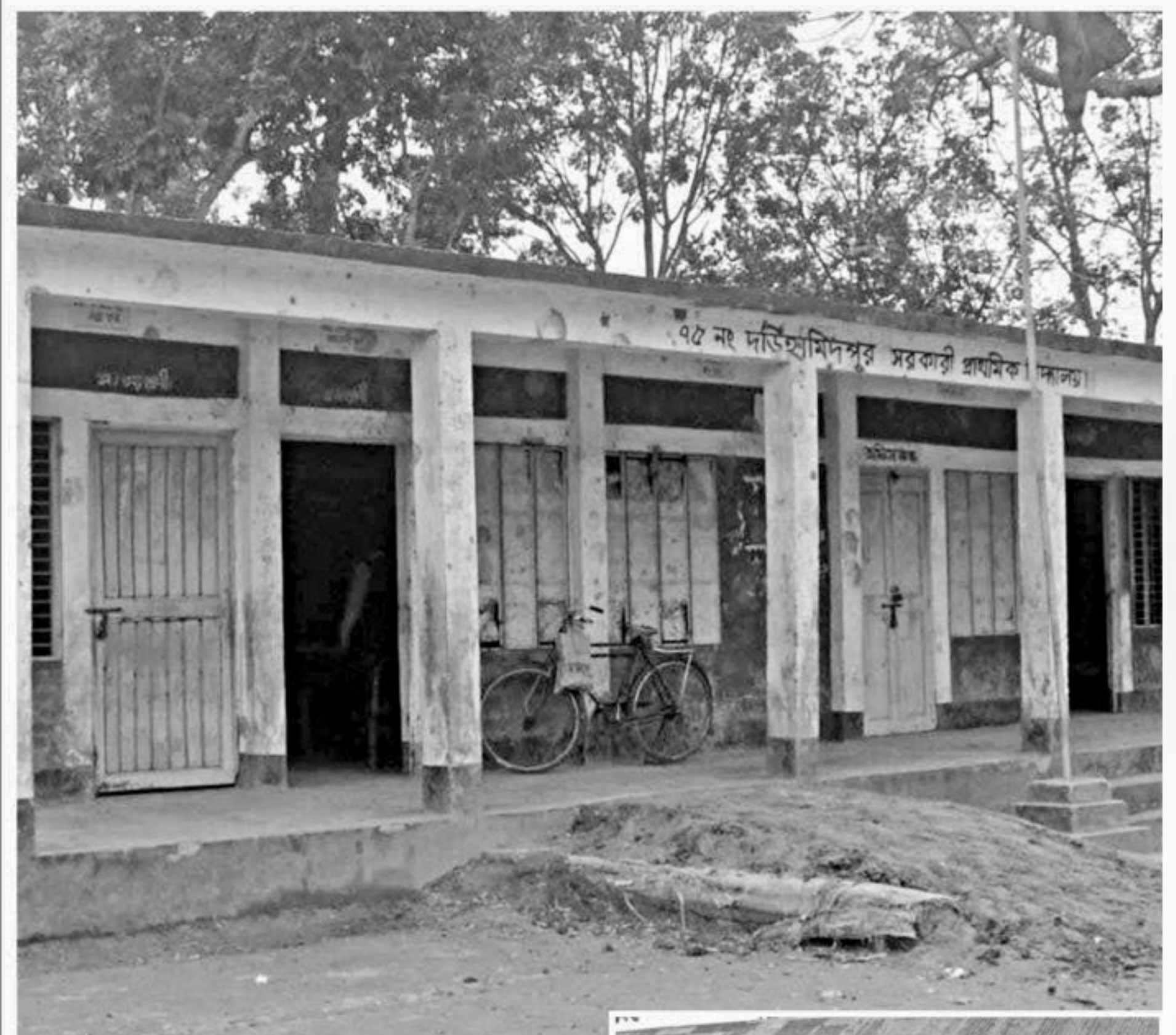


PHOTO: STAR

The building of Darihamidpur Government Primary School in Jamalpur Sadar upazila remains abandoned for the last one and a half years, forcing the authorities to arrange classes for the kids at nearby Hanif Uddin High School (inset). However, the arrangement, made during the off time of the high school, is far less than enough for classes under two shifts of the primary school.

