

Hobby turns out to be fortune

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU with ANDREW EAGLE

Hafizur Rahman, 40, of Ratanpur village in Pabna's Faridpur upazila, found a hobby in a river. Well, at first he thought he'd found a hobby. As it turned out it was more than that. He'd actually discovered a bit of a fortune.

It happened in 2010 on a fateful trip to Chandpur where he saw fish being raised in boxes placed in the Dakatia river. "When I returned home," he says, "I thought to do the same in the Boral river beside my house."

In 2011, he began with 10 boxes made of iron rods and nets, each measuring about 20 feet by 10 feet, with a depth of six feet. In each box he stocked at least 1,000 fry at a cost of Tk 20,000. His hobby proved successful. An initial profit of Tk 2 lakh inspired him to expand.

Hafizur added a further 40 boxes. "I have 50,000 telapia fish in the 50 boxes," he says. "After about six months they weigh up to 500 grams each." Hafizur can produce at least 40,000 kilograms of mature fish from his project, which will bring earnings of up to Tk 12 lakh.

"Raising the fish in river boxes reduces production costs," Hafizur explains. "The fish don't need medicinal support because the flowing river water suits them. I only provide dry food to promote fast growth." In addition, in-river fish farming avoids the expense of pond digging and

needing land.

With the cost of running one box at around Tk 15,000 per annum, which can realise up to Tk 40,000 in fish sales, it's a style of pisciculture that maximises return while minimising required investment, Hafizur says.

Hafizur's efforts have impressed Ratanpur's villagers. "When Hafiz Bhai started working on his river boxes we thought he was having a joke with us," says one villager, Abdur Razzak. "We never imagined this kind of pisciculture could be so profitable." Following Hafizur's lead, from last year Razzak also began cultivating fish in boxes in the Boral River. He already has 40 boxes of his own and is hoping to earn a minimum of Tk 8 lakh this year.

Like him, Pavel Hossain who was previously unemployed has taken up this method of fish farming, with 50 boxes expected to bring in an income of Tk 10 lakh.

"Hafizur has achieved great success with his river box fish farming," says district fisheries officer Abdul Jalil. "He has inspired others to start such projects in place of traditional pond fish farms. It looks as though this could be something of a pisciculture revolution."

For his efforts, Hafizur received national awards from the fisheries and agriculture ministries in 2014. "Many unemployed villagers are taking up river box fish farming, aiming at quick profits," Hafizur says proudly.



Hafizur Rahman, right, working on a net of a box in the Boral river near Ratanpur of Faridpur in Pabna. Many in the village are following the youth who has earned a little fortune by catching fish using such boxes, made of net, iron rods and bamboo. The photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: STAR

A long, insulting walk to justice

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her in a shelter home in India months after her rescue. Her husband later came to know about it from others.

But Joya (not her real name), a teen girl, did not need to tell anyone anything. When she was found lying unconscious beside a road by her cousin four years ago, the marks on her body said it all.

"My cousin took me to a hospital. I hardly remember anything as my mind was all confused," she told this correspondent recently by telephone from a shelter home run by Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA).

The Daily Star is withholding all the victims' names.

In 2012, Joya was abducted by her stalker who "confined and raped her at gunpoint". Later, her unconscious body was dumped by a road. When her family tried to seek justice, the alleged rapist and his cronies attacked her house and killed her father.

In between long pauses and painful sighs, she described the difficult path she had been walking to get justice. The first blow came at the police station where there were no women's cells or woman law enforcers.

"I felt very afraid. I couldn't trust any one of them. They were all men," she described her feelings at the police station.

"I didn't want to talk, I felt groggy... screams went through my head and my heart wrenched. I kept on wondering why no one could hear my cries or see my tears."

Then came the time for medical examination -- the two-finger test -- and the girl, now 16, had no idea about its insensitive nature.

For the test, doctors use their index or middle finger to check the condition of the hymen and also to look for injuries on the vaginal wall.

So when a female doctor proceeded to do the test, the girl put up resistance at first. But eventually she had to give in because, as her aunt told her, there was no other way to get justice.

Adding to her ordeal, she had to narrate the sexual assault in details repeatedly not just to the police but also to journalists against her will.

"I felt very bad, embarrassed and hurt. But I told myself I needed to do this for justice," said the girl, who is now in class nine.

Four years on, the hearing of her case has not started yet.

But for those who have gone through

the trial, the court proceedings have been a nightmare: character assassination, insensitive and even vulgar questions, cross-examinations for hours are in the defence lawyers' arsenal to further traumatise the victim.

Fahmida Akhter Rinky, a lawyer for BNWLA dealing with rape cases at the lower court for six years, spoke about the torment a nine-year-old girl went through during a trial recently.

"The child was only about four years old when she was raped. So the judge was careful and talked with the girl softly but the defence lawyer was shouting at her and accusing her of lying about how she was raped," said Rinky.

This is despite the medical examination documents and other evidence clearly showing that the girl was raped.

"The child was so embarrassed and ashamed that she shrunk in fear," said Rinky.

The girl recoiled from the humiliation in the courtroom full of people and kept on looking at Rinky.

"I felt so bad that she had to go through that," said the lawyer.

Often, defence counsels "decidedly" choose a line of questioning aimed at maligning the victim in efforts to make the crime look like the victim's fault,

said Laily Maksuda Akhter, director of Legal Aid Unit of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

To save themselves from all this, especially the two-finger test which law activists vehemently oppose, many rape victims do not report the assault to the police.

"Many victims get so traumatised that they do not want to go through the forensic examination. Children in particular scream, because they fear they would get hurt again," said Tahmina Haque, psychological counsellor at the OCC.

However, according to Bilkis Begum, coordinator of the OCC, there is no alternative to the two-finger test for women older than nine years. "It is part of any gynecological examination. Injuries cannot be detected without it."

In many countries, including the UK and the US, doctors use the specula, a medical tool, for the test instead of fingers.

But the main problem lies in the report itself, said Ishita Dutta, project facilitator, SHOKHI, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST). "It is not for the doctors to determine if a victim has been raped or not. But that is what they write down in the reports."

Power situation

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The level of load shedding was decreasing gradually yesterday as most oil-based power plants that had suspended production over the last few days started coming back online.

These plants, which had little to no storage facilities for fuel, could not generate around 500MW to 800MW of power as they ran out of fuel.

The waterways transport workers' strike began on April 20 and as they withdrew their strike late Tuesday, supply of oil to these plants resumed.

"We are hoping that a good part of the load shedding will be taken care of within a day or two," said a Power Development Board (PDB) official.

"Some load shedding may continue if there is no rain," the official said.

"Due to the continuing heat wave, the efficiency of power generators had dropped, this has also reduced power generation to some extent," he pointed out.

The PDB had been supplying up to 8,300MW, the highest ever in the country, until last week. Despite the ongoing heat wave, this supply could meet most power demand. Load shedding was almost zero.

More than 60 percent of the country's power is generated from gas-based plants, while oil-based power plants generate around 2,800MW power. Another 600MW is imported from India, while hydro- and coal-based plants contribute 300MW.

Law 144-year-old, favours rapists

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trial. Countries including the UK, the US and Australia have specific laws to shield victims from such humiliating situation during trial.

But in Bangladesh, section 155 (4) of the Evidence Act still favours a man accused of rape to question the character of his victim to defend himself during trial.

The section says, "... when a man is prosecuted for rape or an attempt to ravish, it may be shown that the prosecutrix [the rape victim] was of generally immoral character."

Taking advantage of this provision, counsels of the accused ask the victim indecent questions to malign her, which is embarrassing and humiliating for the victim and her family members attending the court proceedings, legal experts say.

"Sometimes, the words defence lawyers use to cross-examine the victims are unspeakable outside the court. The victims feel so humiliated that sometimes they keep their heads down," said a lawyer who practises in a Dhaka court.

'HEINOUS EFFORT'

Laily Maksuda Akhter, director of Legal Aid Unit of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, said that some defence lawyers try to make a "heinous effort" to portray the victim as a person of immoral character by narrating her relationship history and blame her for the crime.

Rights activists and legal experts have long been demanding abolition of this provision. In May last year, Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha spoke for changes in the controversial provision and urged women leaders to raise their voice against it.

"What can be more unfortunate than this when the accused during trial raise questions about the character of a woman who seeks justice after losing their honour?" the chief justice asked.

Around the same time last year, Bangladesh Law Commission moved to draft a new evidence law, scrapping the existing one. In the initial draft it did not include the draconian provision. But the Commission will take some more time to send it to the government after finalising the draft, said sources in the Commission.

India, which had the same British law enacted 144 years ago, has scrapped the provision in 2003 after a rape victim died of heart attack in a

courtroom as counsels of the accused questioned her character.

Instead of protecting victims in a similar fashion, the Bangladesh government seems more interested in increasing punishment.

Under the 1860 Penal Code, rape charge carries up to life term in prison. Under the Prevention of Oppression against Women and Children Act 2000, it is life term plus a fine to be fixed by the court as it sees fit. But if the victim dies or if the rape is committed by more than one man, then death is the maximum punishment.

TWO-FINGER TEST: VIOLATION OF PRIVACY

The two-finger test or virginity test allows doctors to inspect the hymen of women who have been raped. This is also supposed to test vaginal laxity and decide whether the victim is habituated to sexual intercourse.

To prove her complaint before the case is ready for trial, the victim must go through this test, however indecent it may sound.

First, it violates her right to privacy. Second, medical experts worldwide, including in Bangladesh, say this test is unreliable. In their views, if the victim is married, middle-aged or has conceived multiple times, then how could this test help find any evidence?

"Undoubtedly, the two-finger test and its interpretation violate the right of rape survivors to privacy, physical and mental integrity and dignity. Thus, this test, even if the report is affirmative, cannot ipso facto, give rise to presumption of consent," said the Indian Supreme Court in a landmark order in May 2013.

In the order, the court asked the government to ban the two-finger test and asked all hospitals to set up designated rooms for forensic and medical examination. Eight months after the SC order, the Indian government banned the two-finger test.

The test also contradicts the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights 1966 and the UN Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power 1985. Under the two legal instruments, rape survivors are entitled to legal recourse that does not re-traumatise them or violate their physical or mental integrity and dignity.

In 2013, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust [BLAST] moved the High Court challenging the test. In response,

the HC in October that year questioned the legality and authenticity of the test. It also issued a rule asking the government to explain why the test will not be declared illegal.

The court also asked the health ministry to form a committee of experts to develop a detailed guideline to provide support to rape victims on examination and treatment, and submit the guideline to the court in three months.

The ministry has submitted the draft guideline, proposing abolishing the two-finger test. The guideline itself recognises that the test is "unscientific" and "horrendous."

The rule remains pending before the HC.

LAWS AROUND THE WORLD

Until 1976, rape accused in England and Wales could question the victim's character by raising questions about her previous sexual history.

In the face of a growing demand for a change, the British government enacted a law, curbing the use of sexual history evidence. This legislation restricted the accused from providing evidence and cross-examining the complainant about any "sexual experience" with a person other than the defendant.

More reforms were brought in 1999 when the government introduced another provision preventing the accused from presenting evidence of the victim's alleged past behaviour before a jury in England and Wales unless it was relevant to the case.

Different states of the US began to protect victims of sex crimes in the late 1970s. These states recognised that the character, morality and sexual history of a victim are largely irrelevant to a sex crime trial.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, almost every jurisdiction in the US adopted some form of rape shield statute. The laws in each state differ in the scope of the sexual behaviour and time limit of the shield.

Many states do not permit any evidence relating to past sexual behaviour of the victim. The Violence against Women Act of 1994 created a federal rape shield law.

In Australia, all states and mainland territories have rape shield laws that protect rape victims. The principal aim of these laws is to prohibit the acceptance of evidence of a complainant's sexual reputation and to prevent the

use of sexual history evidence to establish the complainant as a "type" of person who is more likely to consent to sexual activity.

NO FREE MOVEMENT FOR SEX OFFENDERS

In addition, some countries, including the UK and the US, have introduced sex offender register system -- a mechanism to keep track of sex offenders.

The register contains the details of anyone convicted, cautioned or released from prison for sexual offence against children or adults.

In the UK, those on the register are required to notify the police if they change their names or addresses, and also to reveal any plans to travel outside the country. Failure to comply is an offence. Offenders may also be barred from certain activities and areas frequented by children and tagged electronically.

The UK introduced the system in September 1997.

All states of the US have also enacted sex offenders' registration laws since the 1980s. In 1994, Congress passed a legislation that requires states to enact such laws in order to receive certain federal funding. Introduction of the registration system has significantly curbed sexual violence there.

But things are hardly that forward-looking in Bangladesh.

RANA PLAZA DISASTER Charges accepted against 41

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday took cognisance of the charges against 41 people, including Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana, in connection with the country's deadliest industrial disaster.

At least 1,136 people, mostly garment workers, were killed and more than 2,500 injured after nine-storey Rana Plaza collapsed in Savar on April 24, 2013.

Judge SM Kuddus Zaman of the District and Sessions Judge's Court also set May 15 for the hearing on charge framing against the accused.

Another Dhaka court yesterday set May 10 for the hearing on charge framing against Rana and 17 others in a case filed over "violation of building codes" in constructing the building.

GRENADATE ATTACK ON ANWAR CHOUDHURY

HC publishes full verdict

'No bar to execution of death sentences to Mufti Hannan, 2 others if appeal not filed'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court has published the full verdict in the case over grenade attack on former British high commissioner Anwar Choudhury, upholding the death sentence to three militants including Huji chief Mufti Abdul Hannan.

If the convicts do not appeal there is no bar to their execution now, said deputy attorney general Sheikh AKM Moniruzzaman Kabir.

The High Court bench comprising Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Amir Hossain on February 11 gave the verdict. The 167-page full verdict signed by the two judges was pub-

lished yesterday.

The two other sentenced to death are Huji's Sylhet region organisers Sharif Shahedul Alam Bipul and Delwar Hossain Ripon.

On May 21, 2004, the then British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury came under the grenade attack while coming out of the mazar of Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) after offering Juma prayers there in Sylhet. Three persons were killed and around 70 persons including Anwar Choudhury were injured in the attack.

Speedy trial tribunal, Sylhet on December 23, 2008, sentenced the three to death by hanging and two others to life imprisonment.

ESCAP forecasts steady

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scenario characterised by low oil prices and economic slowdown in Euro zone, China and Japan.

In a separate chapter on Bangladesh, it said garment export, which accounts for more than 80 percent of the country's total exports, was sluggish on subdued orders from Europe and lower cotton prices.

"Despite favourable workers' remittances, strong import demand and tepid export of goods pushed the current account balance into a deficit of 0.8 percent of GDP in 2015, the first shortfall in three years," the report said.

On the downside, it said, high non-performing loans could constrain the growth of bank loans, while there are challenges of low productivity and low investment.

Debpriya said Bangladesh's export market faces challenges due to continued economic slowdown in developed countries and the refugee crisis that might lead to diversion of foreign aid.

If the downturn lingers, it would affect Bangladesh that heavily relies on exports to developed countries. Besides, countries such as Laos and Cambodia may become more competitive than Bangladesh.

"Capital outflow would be towards the US if it raises interest rates. In that case, the

capital that could be invested here would be flowing to the US," he said.

Debpriya said the authorities should put emphasis on quality education that matches the labour market demand. There is a need for increasing investments to create more jobs and raising budgetary allocations for health and education sectors.

Shuvojit observed that income inequality in Bangladesh is going up. In Bangladesh, the poor earn less than \$2 a day while the high income group earns more than \$20, according to the report.

The emerging middle class is "very vulnerable to falling back into poverty due to shocks such as a persistent decline in economic growth and employment prospects, disease in the family or loss of the main breadwinner and natural calamities", it said.

Shuvojit suggested several measures such as increasing government revenue by direct tax, higher and targeted fiscal spending, creating an environment conducive to investment and focusing on enhancing agricultural productivity.

UN Resident Coordinator Robert Watkins said the government should diversify the economy to create more jobs and take advantage of a huge number of working-age people in Bangladesh.