



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

# AN AWAKENED VILLAGE

AMITAVA KAR

*How education changed a village and how that change keeps moving in wider circles*

It's 8:30 on a cloudy Friday morning and I am having freshly baked cookies with coffee. It feels like home except that I am not. I am at Saint Nicholas High School in Nagori, a village about thirty kilometres from Dhaka, in Kaliganj upazilla in Gazipur. The cookies are delicious and have been baked by students.

Nagori is special for many reasons. It has great schools with large, well-maintained playgrounds. It is rich in history. It's green. It is excellent in sports. This is where the first Bangla grammar is believed to have been written by a Portuguese missionary. It is perhaps one of the few places where people settle their disputes among themselves without going to court. This is where cooperatives have taken deep roots. These are the people who gave shelter to thousands of refugees in 1971.

Established in 1920 by Portuguese missionaries, the school educates hearts as well as brains. "The teachers were dedicated. The way they took care of us extended well beyond their academic responsibilities," says Shah Md Habibur Rahman. "They treated us when we were injured or had an ailment. They had the training to do so."

Habibur Rahman is history in the flesh. Matriculating in 1950 with First Division, he went on to study at Dhaka College, Dhaka University, Karachi University in Pakistan and Al-Azhar University in Egypt, considered one of the greatest seats of learning in the world. At 87, he is an advocate, Supreme Court and Notary Public for Bangladesh. "I took part in the 1967 Arab-Israel war," he says matter-of-factly.

Students come from all across the country. There's a hostel with 100 plus seats. Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh studied here for some time, according to locals. "Through education Nagori has illuminated the lives of many," Colonel Joseph A Rozario (Rtd.) of the Bangladesh Army, says over the phone. "Quite a few of my classmates became professors of public universities, high ranking officials in the civil administration, in the Army and Police."

Saint Nicolas gives equal importance to sports. It used to be the district champion in football. "Students concentrate on basketball and football nowadays," says Br. Chandon Benedict Gomes CSC, the headmaster. We have won the national championship several times in both."

It is not the only school around here. "Nagori now has three primary schools and a number of kindergartens," Br. Chandon says. "For girls we have Panjora Girls High School established in 1976. The first girls' school in this area was Tumulia Saint Mary's High School. They celebrated their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year."

Panjora is five minutes' walk from St Nicolas. Cyprian Rozario, an ex-student, walks with me. A former employee of

Bangladesh Railway, Cyprian is about 70 but refuses to let age and a bad knee slow him down. He is a happy father. His daughter and younger brother live in the States and two sons in Italy. The trend is common here—many households have a son or a daughter living in North America or Europe. "All this we owe to our schools."

I am late for my meeting with the headmistress. After we wander around for a few minutes on the premises, Sister Mary Christel, the headmistress, shows up. "A few of our students have become doctors while some have got good jobs both in public and

has many programmes including one that promotes higher education. Taking student loans from the cooperative, 30 students, both male and female, have so far gone to universities in North America and England. "All of them have come back to give back to the village and the country. We have received the best cooperative award at the national level," Tapan Rodriguez, the secretary of the cooperative, says.

On our way out, I see a group of young men hanging out under a tree. Not far from it, an inter-village cricket tournament is being held. We stop for a moment to catch a

dispute resolution, a system to resolve cases out of court. Parliament passed the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) bill in 2010. In how many villages or communities is it being practiced?

Knight Vincent—the name keeps coming up everywhere we go. Vincent was a teacher, a reformer and a social worker. In 1977, he was conferred the Papal Knighthood in recognition of his service to humanity. Patrick Rodriguez, his son, had said to me in the morning, "My father devoted his entire life to serving others. He did a lot of work not only here but also for the Garo community in

their memories and experiences. Santosh Rodriguez, the ex-teacher, is leaving again to check on his goats. Something is wrong with them. I don't ask what it is. "I too fought in the war. We fought for everyone," he says just before leaving.

Md Shirajul Islam, who carries bullet-wounds in his legs, says, "The only way to come here was by train. But our fighters blew up the railway bridge with dynamite, virtually turning the village into an island. And the missionaries were mainly Americans. These two reasons made Nagori a safe place for refugees who came in the thousands. We all



St. Anthony's Chapel established in 1789



St. Nicholas Tolentino Church established in 1663



Nagori gives equal importance to sports



Thousands of refugees took shelter in this area in 1971



Md. Shirajul Islam

private sectors We have a girls hostel with limited seats. We need more funding for the poor students," she says. I point out to a nearby building that looks like a medical facility. "It's a maternity clinic. Nagori needs a full-fledged hospital."

By this time Cyprian's friend, Santosh Rodriguez, joins us again. The former, slightly eccentric teacher, has been with us all morning, briefly leaving us to feed his two goats. He wants to give us a tour of Nagori Cooperative Credit Union. Founded in 1953 by his teacher Knight Vincent Rodriguez, it

glimpse. One of the men steps forward and introduces himself as Apu. "I am an entrepreneur. With help from the Union, I started a fishery. I went to Notre Dame College. I am studying to be a barrister." He is confident and genteel.

Cyprian likes to talk. He knows that I would be leaving in a couple of hours. He is trying to tell me everything that a 'news man' might find interesting. "We settle most of our disputes at the village level. If we need help interpreting the law, we bring in a lawyer." What Cyprian is talking about is alternative

Mymensingh. He was in charge of all three hostels for Muslims, Hindus and Christians. He loved everyone like his own child." After retiring from Sonali Bank as a DGM, Patrick joined the Dutch-Bangla Bank as a senior vice-president. He now works at a drug rehab centre. His younger brother has a PhD in organisational leadership from an American university and is the head of the Holy Cross congregation in Bangladesh.

After lunch, Cyprian suggests we go back to the school where a few ex-students, among them freedom fighters, are waiting to share

opened our doors to them."

Old and frail, passionate yet stoic, these gentlemen hardly seem like revolutionaries. But in their quiet dignity and measured dictum, they are. They are kind even to a stranger. Suddenly, Shirajul Islam starts murmuring, "Our dream of equality and justice for all has not come true. We have forgotten to serve our fellow beings."

With that I will leave wishing the men and Santosh's goats all the best.

The writer is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.