

The people of Chunarughat observed something unique on the morning of March 10. Hundreds of activists, musicians and artists, singing together the songs of life, forests, rivers, and people, of rights and justice, marched towards the Radhamadhab temple of Chanpur tea estate. As they reached the temple, the locals embraced the rally with love and compassion. It was a rally of solidarity.

The march initiated a day-long event organised jointly by the Tea Estate Land Protection Committee, Tea Workers Youth-Student movement and Sharbapran Shangskritik Shakti to celebrate the continued struggle of tea workers to protect their land from the establishment of a Special Economic Zone.

The tea workers of Chunarughat have remained one of the most deprived and exploited communities in the country. They earn only Tk 86 per day. The multinational tea companies make gigantic profit out of the hard work of this *adivasi* population. However, despite exploitation and low wage, the tea workers of Chunarughat sustain themselves through ploughing the little land they live on to grow their own food. The 511 acres of land of Chunarughat officially belong to the state, which was originally leased out to the multinational Duncan Brothers. As the lease expired in 2015, the government decided to take over the land for the purpose of establishing an economic zone.

A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

ANHA F KHAN



PHOTO: AMIRUL RAJIV

However, the tea workers of Chunarughat were able to build a strong and vibrant movement last year with the support of activists, environmentalists, left groups, and cultural activists. They refused to give up their only piece of land, and vowed to fight for it.

The workers are still guarding their land. The celebration on March 10 was a celebration of their victory against state aggression.

It also marked the anniversary of Sharbapran Shangskritik Shakti, a cultural front formed in solidarity with the movement of the tea workers.

Workers from 23 neighbouring tea estates joined the celebration spontaneously. Starting the day by singing the national anthem, the workers, wearing their traditional costume and yielding their ancestral weaponry, such as bow and arrow, joined the procession of the activists which ended at the proposed site of the special economic zone. A cultural programme was also arranged at the premises of the Radhamadhab temple. Children from the tea-workers' family staged a moving play depicting the historic movement against the government, artists painted their protest message in a huge canvas, and students and cultural organisations from all over the country performed various cultural activities throughout the day.

The message of the event was clear: there would be no economic zone in Chunarughat. The tea workers would not bear the cost of a 'development' model which would merely generate wealth for the wealthy at the cost of the already marginalised tea workers.

*The writer is an activist.
Translated by the Star Weekend Desk*



EVENT

ANIMAL WELFARE

ANIMAL WELFARE BILL 2016 A NEW VICTORY ON THE HORIZON

NAZIBA BASHER

There was a time when animal rights activists like Rubaiya Ahmad, Founder, Obhoyaronno Animal Welfare Foundation, would go to file cases or fight against animal abusers, but in vain. Despite the existence of The Cruelty to Animals Act 1920, no one, not even the police, seemed to know about a special law to protect animals. For the first time, in 2015, a full-fledged case of animal abuse was filed with the Rampura police station by Obhoyaronno.

Since then many cases have been filed, and many abusers caught, but the fact still remained that this archaic Act needed amendments. For instance, the 1920 Act defined 'animal' as either domesticated or captured, which left out a large portion of animals in the country that are mainly strays. The need for these changes was recently recognised by the Government when, on February 20, 2017, the Animal Welfare Bill received a go-ahead from the cabinet.

This new bill and its amendments are being worked on by Maya Barolo Rizvi, Country Head, Humane Society International, Bangladesh, and Jayasimha Geethaprabhu Nuggehalli, Managing Director, Humane Society International, India, who recently visited the country for the purpose.

The bill will first and foremost focus on changing the name from "The Cruelty to Animals Act" to the "Animal Welfare Act". "The word cruelty is what we will focus on in this regard, because when you are ensuring that an animal is not facing 'cruelty', we're not necessarily concerned about its 'welfare' and well-being," says Nuggehalli.

Another key point that the amendment will focus on is the definition of the word 'animal'. In the new proposed bill the definition is broadened to "any living creature other than a human being, and includes fish, amphibian, reptile, bird, mammal and all vertebrates" which opens the doorway to saving animals belonging to the zoo, pet shops and the streets. Along with that, the definitions of 'captive animal', 'domestic animal' and 'incapably ill animal' have been added, while the definition of 'owner' has been changed to

"used with reference to an animal, includes not only the owner but also any other person for the time being in possession or custody of the animal, whether with or without the consent of the owner."

The proposed bill suggests the necessity of a State Animal Welfare Board, which will include ministers, law-enforcers, magistrates and animal rights

activists to ensure the implementation of these laws throughout their respective societies and communities. "And to ensure said implementation, once the bill has been passed, we intend to hold training sessions and workshops across the country for the members of the board, to sensitise them upon the issue at hand," Nuggehalli continues.

The Act will also broaden the definition of 'cruelty'; it will have separate sections that address 'cruelty to bovines', 'experimentation on animals' and 'performing animals'.

It is common practice in Bangladesh to bring in foreign breed dogs like a Saint Bernard or an Alaskan Husky, not

been increased to Tk 50,000 from Tk 200 and the prison term to two years from 6 months in existing The Cruelty to Animals Act 1920. Nuggehalli argues that though there is no legitimate proof that raising the fine will stop the crime, it sends a strong message to the people that this is an issue that the state cares about.

With the new proposed bill, we can already look forward to some long overdue changes in our society. Rubaiya Ahmad, Obhoyaronno Animal Welfare Foundation, is optimistic. "In 10 years' time, what we can look forward to is the change in human behaviour, a change in mindsets. The fact that Jayasimha [Nuggehalli] has come all the way here and sat in the same room with the law commissioner and discussed these changes that are about to take place – it's such a victory for Bangladesh. If you asked me four or five years ago, where I saw ourselves in terms of animal welfare, I would just see us within the limited scope of work that organisations like Obhoyaronno engage in. But this is so much bigger than what we could have imagined then."

The Act will also broaden the definition of 'cruelty'; it will have separate sections that address 'cruelty to bovines', 'experimentation on animals' and 'performing animals'.



PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



While implementation can be a legitimate concern, with the kind of work that has already been done and the progress we have seen over the years regarding animal welfare, one has the right to be hopeful of the change that is about to come. "This is not a movement that is restricted within a few animal lovers anymore, we are engaging with the highest authorities and now we are about to have an Act passed by the parliament of Bangladesh acknowledging the importance of animal welfare. The Government of Bangladesh understands that animal welfare is human welfare. If we continue at the rate we are now, then Bangladesh is bound to become a role model in this field," says Nadia Choudhury, Head of Legal Affairs, Obhoyaronno Animal Welfare Foundation.

With the approval of this bill, Bangladesh will welcome a new victory. A victory that will help end violence against those who cannot stand up or fight for themselves, a victory that has been long overdue to bring about a more ethical and moral society. With this victory, we will finally be able to hope for a more humane society, a more humane Bangladesh. ■