

Youth gets life for abducting, raping girl

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

A court here yesterday sentenced a man to life imprisonment for abducting and raping a schoolgirl in 2013.

Judge Md Abdul Mannan of Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal-1 handed down the verdict.

The convict is Ariful Islam, 23, son of Md Hakimuddin of Shajadpur village in Shajahanpur upazila. Two other accused were acquitted of the charge as the allegation against them was not proved.

The case statement said Ariful and two accomplices abducted the victim when she was alone in her house on January 8 in 2013. Her mother lodged an abduction and rape case with Shajahanpur Police Station on January 11. Later, police rescued the girl from a neighbouring village.

Manta people: Life entwined with water

SHYKH SERAJ

Dear readers, A few weeks back, I went to Patuakhali, one of the famous southern districts of Bangladesh. I took a ride on the Andharmanik river to see the lives of a community who eat, drink, sleep mostly on water -- they are known as Manta. And my destination drove me to know more about the livelihood and farming practices of the coastal people.

The Andharmanik river falls into the Bay of Bengal. I knew it was going to take more than two hours to reach by speedboat to Char Montaj where the Manta community lives.

These Manta people live on boats. However, we must not confuse ourselves by calling them 'gypsy'. They are a tribe with distinct lifestyle.

I started my journey through vast water body before the sun was there in the eastern sky. Waterways are the only way to reach your destinations here.

In the waters, beside precious memories there are stories of disasters, loss and extreme pain.

In 2007, when super cyclone Sidr had its severest blow, Kalatoli union of Patuakhali saw massive damage. My speedboat took Ramnabad channel. Far away, I could notice the Paira port. After crossing the channel, Char Montaj will be only an hour away.

People were crossing my speedboat, carrying fish, vegetables and other agricultural goods. The char (landmass emerging from water areas) lands in the coastal islands are becoming really productive now-a-days. In the past, the people of the coastal areas used to face many difficulties. There was scarcity of food, crop etc. Now things have changed for the better.

A few locals riding with me pointed to another char land, named Char Lata. Cyclone Sidr had damaged many parts of it. Many people died there. If you look at the map of Bangladesh, on the southern side, you'll see several small chars. Char Lata is one of those.

As our speedboat got stuck, I asked, "Why is it stopping?"

"There isn't much water due to low tide," replied the boatman and told me not to worry much.

After my boat resumed its journey, I went through different waterways. Slowly, I was entering human habitation. This area belongs to those people who survive keeping the river close to their hearts. The place is surrounded by an amazing atmosphere.

Finally after crossing Rangabali the speedboat moved on to the Tetulia river. This river looks like a sea, believe me. After going on for some more minutes I could notice the Manta community, which means the speedboat is very near to Char Montaj.

The boats are where the Mantas live. They catch fish and live there. They hang their clothes above and put the necessities inside the boat that serve as their own residence.

Finally, I reached Char Montaj. It is a remote union of Patuakhali's Galachipa upazila. The people of this union have been surviving fighting against many



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"Are you living here since your birth?" I asked her.

"Yes, we live in the boat on the rivers. We catch fish. We don't have a place on land or a house," she replied very calmly.

Dear readers, inside the boat, there is maximum 5/6 feet space. They were born here. They live here. They sleep at night here. Here, lies household furniture. Here lie their dreams, children and family. There are racks inside where pots and other household stuff are kept.

When I got inside Kohinur's boat, yes at the tiny place, she was cooking rice and puti fish and also offered me to have lunch with her. I couldn't control my tears.

I asked Kohinur where her marriage took place.

"It happened on this very boat," she replied.

Fishing is the only profession of these people. Their men go to catch fishes. They don't know anything else for earning.

Their sorrow, happiness, and everything lie here. If it rains, they get wet. If only they had a place to stay, they could have lived a much better life. They could've sent their kids to school. Those opportunities are yet to reach the Manta community.

But they have solar panels over the boat. During the nights, they get electricity. And, they have their

National Identity cards.

I learned that only 20 Manta families have been rehabilitated at the nearby cluster village. Yes, their lives are changing. Minara Begum from the cluster village was telling me now she can send her children to school, as they have a home and many other facilities.

It was time to come back. The sun was already setting in the western sky. I started my journey back and after thirty or forty minutes ride, my speedboat stopped again in the middle of the deep river. I started feeling nervous, thinking how all my team members would reach from where we started our journey in the morning. Finally, after waiting for an hour in the mid-river, a speedboat from ActionAid came to rescue us. I reached the ghat and took bus and then motorcycle since I was afraid to use the waterway in the night. The local transports are there but the entire transportation system should be more developed, I thought, especially after this horrible experience. We must consider these factors to bring about the real development of our nation.

Dear readers, in different coastal island areas of Patuakhali district, for centuries, there are families who have been residing on boats. Besides, in riverbank areas, there

are many families who lost everything due to river erosion. This huge population does not fall under the coverage of our development plans. We have achieved millennium development goals. Now we are marching for sustainable development. However, these people are still left in the darkness. It is a must to bring this matter under consideration in terms of policy planning, that's what I think.

Dear readers, Bangladesh is a very small country in the world map. Each locality of this country shines bright with plenty of diversity and cultural wealth. As there are many problems in all the areas, there are also examples of the people marching forward overcoming many obstacles. I tried to unearth the real stories of coastal areas. I tried to look into the lifestyle and advantages and disadvantages of the people to understand where the coastal people stand. I hope, to get rid of the adversities the coastal people face, government initiatives will be taken with much effect. At the same time, through effective development planning, the potentialities of the coastal areas will also be discovered and neglected people of our country will get fundamental rights.

Vow to resist drug, militancy

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhalakathi

Speakers at an anti-drug cultural evening held at Jhalakathi's Rajapur Pilot Girls' High School premises pledged to make the area free from drug abuse and militancy.

The programme was dedicated to Sharmin Akter, a schoolgirl from Rajapur upazila, who received 2017 US Secretary of State's International Women of Courage (IWOC) Award recently for her exceptional courage in advocating women's rights.

Rajapur police organised the programme on Tuesday evening where Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) of Barisal Range Sheikh Mohammad Maruf Hasan was present as the chief guest.

"If any policemen are found guilty in drugs related issues he will have to return home empty handed rather than serving the force," said DIG Sheikh Mohammad Maruf Hasan.

He also asked his fellow policemen to fight against drug abuse and save the young generation from its deadly effects.

JMB man arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

Law enforcers arrested an alleged member of banned Islamist outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) from Mirzapur village in Jamalpur Sadar upazila early yesterday.

The arrestee is Asadul Islam Asad, 35, son of Md Alauddin of the village.

Asad was a fugitive accused in a sabotage case filed with Sadar Police Station on June 18 last year, said Officer-in-Charge (OC) Nasimul Islam of the police station.

A police team raided Asad's house around 12:30am and arrested him, he said.

The arrestee was produced before a court yesterday that sent him to jail, said the OC.

Couple jailed for killing schoolboy

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A Rangpur court on Tuesday sentenced a man to jail until death for killing a 10-year-old schoolboy for ransom in 2011.

The convicted, is Maruf Hossain, 33, of Boalia village in Naogaon Sadar upazila.

Additional District and Sessions Judge Chand Mohammad Abdul Aleem Al Razi also sentenced Maruf's wife Bristi Begum to three years' imprisonment.

According to the prosecution, Maruf abducted Himel Hossain, son of Abdul Karim Bhola, also a Class II student, on November 11 and demanded Tk four lakh from his father for his release.

adversities. Those who do farming on land, somehow manage to survive. The people on the boat have a very different life and a world of their own.

I found 130 families here. They were born and raised on boats. Many of their family members have died on the boats. One of the Mantas, Bibi Hazera shared her views about living a life of a Manta.

"I spent my whole life on the boat," said Hazera.

"We don't get the basic necessities -- food, cloth, house, health services, education, even for our children," she continued.

Kohinur Begum started cooking in the stove. She was surrounded by her family members.

Pahela Baishakh paper flowers transform Naogaon village

BY KONGKON KARMARKER with ANDREW EAGLE

Of bright petals and basic design, paper flowers are, at first glance, the essence of simplicity. But on festival days like Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla New Year celebrated on 14 April each year, these elegant decorations bring added joy to mark the occasion and there's nothing humble about that. Indeed in the tiny village of Jamgram in Bhopara union of Naogaon's Atrai upazila, paper flowers signify yet more. There, flower making is a cottage industry that has made an entire far-flung village unexpectedly bloom.

Jamgram used to be underdeveloped and forgotten. It was a crime-prone area. Thankfully, such days have been left behind, the future looking up. "Many people in Bangladesh know about Jamgram nowadays," says resident Rukhsana Akter, proudly.

"Our village has become renowned for handmade flowers." According to locals, at first a few Hindu families began to craft the flowers from paper, cloth and the sponge wood of shola trees, as a means to generate income; but as few people knew about the product, it wasn't easy to find sales. Over time however, as more and more families took up the craft, the village's reputation for quality handmade flowers gradually grew.

"The craftsmanship is very good here, and demand for the product is high," says Azhar Ali, a buyer from the port city. "I often travel to Jamgram ahead of festivals in Chittagong to buy their handmade flowers."

"These days, nearly a thousand families from every community within our village are directly involved in flower making," says Atahar Ali, an elderly man from Jamgram.

It takes the efforts of all family members to meet the high demand in the lead up to Pahela Baishakh. Rose, sunflower, water lily, daisy or hibiscus: in a room or under the shade of a tree in the yard, many people across the village are busy at this time, decorating replica petals, leaves and stalks.

"Demand is also there at village fairs across the country," says Chitta Roy, another paper flower artisan. "It's a profitable business. We can make up to double our usual income ahead of major festivals."

Another flower maker, Joni Islam, says that many locals took NGO loans as a means to enter the business. "We have to pay a good proportion of our profits in NGO interest at the end of each month," he says, wishing that government interest-free loans were available. "With a little government help this industry could truly flourish."

Local lawmaker Md Israfil Alam agrees. "Jamgram's artwork is gradually becoming famous nationwide," he says. "People from every strata of society appreciate the beauty and skill inherent in these craftworks. I hope the government can arrange training and financial assistance to encourage further development of the industry." Indeed, while talking with local journalists recently, he pledged government support.

Yet paper flowers might best be seen as the start rather than the completion of Jamgram's transformation. Still now villagers have no grid electricity or sealed roads. "The dirt roads are particularly hazardous during the monsoon," says local Md Asadul Islam. Should such infrastructure development occur, it will be in no small part thanks to the simplicity of the paper flowers that have put once-forgotten Jamgram firmly upon the national map.



Artificial flowers prepared at Jamgram village in Bhopara union of Naogaon's Atrai upazila are on display as demand of the impressive handiwork sees rise ahead of Bangla New Year Pahela Baishakh.

Schoolgirls save fellow from early marriage

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Seven courageous schoolgirls saved one of their fellows from early marriage in Nandail upazila of the district on Tuesday.

She is Nadira Akhter Panna, a Class IX student at Nandail Pilot Girls' High School, and daughter of day labourer Chand Mia of Dashedalia area in Nandail municipality.

Tuli Devnath, Sanjida Islam, Sneha Barman of Class IX and Jebunnesa Khanam, Shyama, Jannatul Islam, Rezwana Tabassum and Jerina Sultana of Class VIII, also members of an association called 'Ghashphool', along with government officials went to Nadira's house at noon and stopped the marriage function.

Abdul Khaleque, headmaster of the school, said after finding Nadira absent in classroom for three days her classmates informed "Ghashphool" members of the matter on Monday.

The association members came to know that Nadira's parents fixed her marriage with a local pickup-van driver and the func-

tion was scheduled to be held the next day. They later went to Nadira's house and tried to persuade her parents to stop the marriage but the latter did not pay heed to their request, said the headmaster.

"Hearing the news, I informed Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Hafizur Rahman to take necessary steps in this regard," added the headmaster.

Later, the UNO sent Upazila Women Affairs Officer Romana Akhter to the spot.

Romana Akhter said she along with the schoolgirls reached Nadira's house at noon and save her from the early marriage.

UNO Hafizur hailed the effort of the girls and said they have done a tremendous job by foiling the early marriage bid.

He will have a discussion with the 'Ghashphool' members soon and inspire them to continue their effort in future.

Four years ago they formed 'Ghashphool', an association that works to create awareness against early marriage and eve teasing among local girls, said Tuli Devnath, one of the association leaders.

7 cops hurt as villagers clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

Seven policemen were injured while dispersing two clashing groups over a disputed land at Pashchim Jhalurchar village in Baksiganj upazila yesterday.

To bring the situation under control, the law enforcers fired seven rubber bullets and detained five people from the spot, said OC Aslam Hossain of Baksiganj Police Station.

The injured are sub-inspectors Taizul Islam, Abdul Aziz and Nayan Das and assistant sub-inspectors Rezaul Karim and Mahfuz and constables Sohrah and Enamul of the PS.

There was a longstanding feud between Faruque Mian and Anwar Hossain over the land.



Four cubs of Indian civet, found at Sadhugram in Nazirbazar of Sylhet on March 29, are being taken care of at a house in Sonapur under Moulvibazar Sadar upazila.