

SPECIAL FEATURE

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However, Rukhsana is never hired due to her husband's previous profession.

"I cannot deny that my husband was a dacoit. But he is leading an honest life now. Many of my neighbours who now hate us were once saved by my husband in the forest. They still buy things from my husband's shop on credit but when they reach the village from the bazaar, their attitude changes. They continue to harass me and my daughters," shares Rukhsana.

Mansur, who is now a *muezzin* of Chila village mosque, has also become victim of such social stigma. In fact, he started to face newer types of threats after surrendering his arms. He states, "The day I surrendered my arms and returned to my home, I found it locked from outside. I went to a village elder and learned that my family had been ostracised and my wife along with my children were sent to my in-law's village. I was enraged because I clearly

During Eid festivals this year, 243 pirate families have been presented with sewing machines. However, social stigma and poverty are still impeding these rehabilitation initiatives.

"Many of the pirates are still jobless. Most of them had to spend all of the donations just to pay their debt back. Even after surrender, they are again infiltrating into the forest for catching fish and collecting firewood as they don't have any other livelihood. As a result, there are possibilities that they might return to piracy if the law and order situation deteriorates in the future," says Rabindranath Bairagi, a member of Batiaghata union council. According to him, the union council is providing VGF cards to the rehabilitated pirate families but the donation received through this card is so meagre that it can hardly support their families.

Lack of sustainable rehabilitation initiatives and fear of social stigma might be the reasons behind persistent existence



Bandits are finding it difficult to reintegrate with society.

PHOTO: COURTESY

understood that my villagers were taking advantage of the situation because when I was a pirate they never would have dared to do so."

However, with intervention from the local police station and union council, the ban against Mansur's family was relaxed. And after a few months, thanks to his Arabic knowledge, Mansur got a job as the village *muezzin*. "I actually applied for the post of imam. The officer in charge of Mongla police station recommended for me to the Chairman of the union council. But the villagers did not agree to offer daily prayers behind a former dacoit. So, they gave me the job of a *muezzin*," utters Mansur.

According to Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)-6, 264 pirates of 26 different groups have already surrendered their arms.

Every month, 20 to 25 pirates have been giving up their arms every month as the last date of surrender was just yesterday, on November 1, 2018. To rehabilitate this increasing number of former bandits, RAB has taken up a rehabilitation initiative called *Shunarbaner Hashi*. Under this project, every surrendered dacoit has been given a mobile phone set, Tk 20,000 in cash, which has now been increased up to Tk 1 lakh and gifts in the two Eids.

of several bandit groups despite the declaration of the deadline to surrender. At least five groups of bandits and poachers called *Tayebur Bahini*, *Anowerul*, *Alamin*, *Sattar*, and *Siddique Bahini* are still operating in different parts of the Sundarbans.

According to Wing Commander Hasan Emon Al Razib, Commanding Officer of RAB-6, "If the rest of the pirate groups do not return to normal life, they will face tougher actions in the near future. However, the government will provide them with legal assistance, donations, and employment opportunities if they surrender and stop their criminal activities." RAB has demanded 12 acres of land inside the Sundarbans to establish four camps to eradicate the existing pirate groups. However, if sustainable rehabilitation initiatives cannot be implemented by ensuring employment opportunities and a decent life for the family members, chances are little that piracy and poaching in the Sundarbans can be stopped just by the exertion of crude force.

*Sohag Dewan, a local journalist of Khulna, has also contributed to this report.*

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CONSERVATION



Bottlenose dolphins at Swatch of No Ground.

PHOTO: WCS BANGLADESH

In conversation with Bangladeshi female conservationists

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Think wildlife conservation and what first comes to mind are men in grey or beige toned outfits and names like David Attenborough, George Schaller, John Muir, and Roger Payne. Women conservationists are few and numbered. But they are true trailblazers as they leave their mark on this male-dominated profession. Jane Goodall,

The Sea Warriors of Bengal

My research led me to some brilliant women dedicating their lives to wildlife conservation. Below are snippets of the conservationists'—Alifa Bintha Haque, Manzura Khan and Shamsunnahar Shanta—take on the lives of female conservationists in Bangladesh.

For Manzura Khan, manager of the Marine Protected Area Program at Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Bangladesh, childhood was spent in Khulna in southern Bangladesh, home to the largest mangrove forest in the world.

Manzura struck me with her wide smile, her wiry straight jet-black hair and her knack to hold a conversation anytime, anywhere.

Despite, growing up in a fairly conservative setting in rural Bangladesh, the support of her family allowed Manzura to nurture her dream of working with nature. She was always geared for a life in the wild. Her degrees in Fisheries and Marine Resource Technology from Khulna University and Master's degrees from Bangladesh Agricultural University (Mymensingh) in Aquaculture and then from the University of Tromso in Norway and NhaTrang University in Vietnam in Fisheries Aquaculture Management and Economics, are testament to that.

Manzura has made a career in working with aquatic animals and over the years, she has accumulated a host of conservation stories to share.

Her absolute favourite is the one where she had to spend more than a month on an artisanal fishing boat smack in middle of the Bay of Bengal surveying for dolphins, porpoises,



PHOTO: WCS BANGLADESH

Manzura Khan collecting data.

Diane Fossey, Sylvia A Earle and Rachel Carson have all influenced a generation of young women with their work with chimpanzees and gorillas facing extinction, and their hard-hitting prose catalysing the modern environmental movement.

In Bangladesh too, the field of wildlife conservation is seeing an overhaul and hopefully an eventual narrowing down of the gender gap, thanks to the ladies conquering the seas and the land of the deltaic plains of Bengal. With international days celebrating the diversity of life both at sea and on land in the next few days, it felt appropriate to talk about conservation and ladies of the sea.

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