

# Married off before 15, kids by 16

**Bede community children stuck in a cycle of early marriage and poverty**

**SHEIKH TAJUL ISLAM TAJ**

Although the minimum age of marriage is 18 years for girls in Bangladesh, this is somehow not applicable to the ones of the Bede community, living on the bank of Savar's Bangshi river.

A large number of Bede people have settled down in Savar municipality near Bangshi river under ward-1. They live in Porabari, Omorpur, Boktarpur, Kanchanpur, Badda and Jamshing. The localities are together known as Bede Para, where only the Bede communities live in large numbers.

Most of the girls in this community are married off before they turn 15. By 18, they are already mothers with two to three toddlers.

For instance, 16-year-old Sohagi is already a mother to two children -- Sakib, currently one year old, and Edarul, who is now four.

16-year-old mother of two.

Juli has never gone to school in her lifetime. But like Sohagi, she wishes to send her daughters to school, so that they can enjoy their childhood. She hoped that her children would break the intergenerational cycle of poverty with proper education.

Unlike Sohagi and Juli, Subbuhun was lucky, as she could complete her SSC from a school in Agargaon. But she too was married off after SSC and gave birth to her son, after she completed her HSC from Savar University College.

However, after her son's birth, she could not continue her education.

Subbuhun's mother Nazma Begum said she worked hard and came this far. "This is a unique example in our community," said Nazma.

Although the representatives of the local administration, through a committee, are supposed to hold a ward-based monthly meeting to create



**A mother and a child take shelter inside a plastic cover to protect themselves from a cold wave. With no bed to sleep in and no home to go to, this photo is the reality of more than seven lakh such children in the capital, who remain the children of the streets. These photos were taken in Dhaka's Banglamotor and Suhrawardy Udyan areas recently.**

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN, PALASH KHAN



Sohagi was married off when she was only 10, to a groom of her community, who was 12 back then. Her husband who has been unemployed since the beginning, cannot make any financial contribution to the family even today.

Sohagi takes care of the family members, including her elderly mother who has a speech impairment. Although earlier, she would entertain people with snake charming, nowadays, she is mostly surviving on alms.

With her meagre income, she pays for a room, rented at Tk 1,500, where her entire family lives.

"Being a mother has become a curse for me. I don't want any other girl to suffer from such poverty," said Sohagi. "We have been living from hand to mouth and keep fighting with each other all the time," she added.

Sohagi promised herself that she will never let her sons get married in their teens and aspires to send them to school.

Sohagi is not alone in this ordeal.

This correspondent interviewed almost 50 girls in the Bede community and found that almost every one of them was married before 15 and some, were even younger.

Nearly all of them are living below the poverty line.

"We married off our daughter Juli at an early age, as we could not support the family in absence of land, food or a permanent income," said Rahima, a

awareness on child marriage and collect information on the number of child marriages in the respective areas, Md Ramjan Ali, councillor of the ward, failed to give any satisfactory answer on the activity of this committee.

He could not provide any instance where they stopped the marriage of the underage girls of the Bede community either.

"Unfortunately, the committee remains only on paper and needs to be monitored well by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs. It would be appreciable if more and more NGOs could come forward for the welfare of the Bede community," he said.

Researcher Philip Gain, director of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), who worked extensively on the Bede community, said, "These marginalised groups need to be settled permanently. Children can't continue studying while roaming. The government should provide land for them."

"There must be special attention for the children of this community and the local administration must do their job properly. The allocated budget for them is currently insufficient and needs to be expanded. At the same time, social safety net programmes must be widened," he added.

National Girl Child Advocacy Forum Secretary Nasima Akhter Jolly, however, emphasised ensuring economic stability, political commitment and education for the Bede community children.

# Nobody's children

**The dire state of disadvantaged children on the streets**

**AHMAD ISTIAK**

Just past midnight on Manik Mia Avenue, some children were seen taking the opportunity of the traffic light turning red. While some carried flowers, others had balloons of different colours. They were seen taking these to the passengers of private cars stopped at the signal, requesting them to make a purchase.

"Sir, please take some flowers. I have to go home," a young boy of six to seven years of age, was heard saying.

This young boy named Jisan had a bunch of

He said he lost his father when he was five years old. His father was a CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver, who was hit by a truck. Jisan and his mother were brought to the streets to earn a living.

Jisan's mother makes flower garlands throughout the day and sells them at Dhanmondi 27 and Manik Mia Avenue. Since the restrictions of traffic police usually get relaxed after 11:00pm, Jisan starts to run after the cars to sell flowers.

He lives with her mother at a polythene-made shanty on the footpath near the Adabar

currently 9,79,728.

By 2024, the number is expected to reach 16,15,330, according to the study.

During a recent visit to Kamalapur Rail Station, this correspondent met Shamsul from Sunamganj, who makes a living by begging at Sylhet's rail station. He came to Kamalapur four days ago and was going back to Sylhet the next day.

Sometimes he goes to other stations by train and often sleeps at the platforms. Akash and Limon had similar stories.

They got an opportunity to study at a temporary school at Kamalapur rail station run by LEEDO Bangladesh, where some 25 children are enrolled. They attend school from Monday to Thursday for two hours. The school also provides food to these children.

For the rest of the week, they have to beg to get even one meal, and mostly depend on leftover food from local restaurants.

According to a study published by a private research institute in September last year, 79 percent of street children have been subjected to mental, physical and sexual abuse at some point in life. Around 62 percent of these disadvantaged children have been subjected to physical abuse.

This correspondent recently met two other street children, who were eating restaurant leftovers out of a polythene bag on the footpath of Farmgate at midnight, with a pile of garbage nearby. After finishing the meal, they started removing the plastic and papers from the garbage dump.

They said they both work for a city corporation cleaner, in exchange for Tk 50 each. After working till 3:00am, they usually sleep on the footpath and survive mostly on begging.

A report published in 2016 by the Social and Economic Enhancement Program (SEEP) found that 41 percent of children living on Dhaka's streets do not have a bed to sleep in, while 44 percent are addicted to drugs, 40 percent do not take a bath daily, and 54 percent have no relatives to visit during sickness.

Around 35 percent defecate in the open and 75 percent cannot seek medical advice during illness.

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roses with him, which he was trying to sell to the passengers in the cars. Just then, the lights turned green again and he had to retreat, only to wait for another turn with the red lights on.

Finally, he was able to sell of his roses to this correspondent and agreed to talk to him for a few minutes.

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truck stand area. Although he was enrolled in school, his education continued for only three months till his father's death.

Jisan is a reflection of the reality of more than seven lakh children in Dhaka. According to a Unicef study published last year, the number of street children in Bangladesh is

## CIVIC MANAGEMENT DNCC partners with Detroit to exchange ideas

**UNB, Dhaka**

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was inked between Dhaka North City Corporation and Detroit city in the state of Michigan, USA to exchange knowledge and experience to build a better city.

DNCC Mayor Md Atiqul Islam and Detroit City Mayor Michael E Duggan signed the deal on

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**Long queues were seen at the Agargaon metro rail station yesterday as many wanted to board the train to experience first-hand what the hype is about. Most people along with their family members went there to have the trip for fun rather than the purpose of commuting.**

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## Next nat'l polls as per constitution Says law minister

**STAR REPORT**

The next general polls will be held as per the constitution, said Law Minister Anisul Huq yesterday.

Bangladesh has a constitution and how the national election will be held is clearly written in this constitution, he said while replying to questions from local journalists on the Akhaura Railway Junction premises in Brahmanbaria in the morning.

Any political party can carry out its activities in a democratic country and the government led by Sheikh Hasina has no objection to this, said the minister.

## SHAH AMS KIBRIA MURDER 18 years gone by, justice still eludes

**UNB, Dhaka**

The 18th death anniversary of Shah AMS Kibria, a former finance minister and senior Awami League leader, was observed yesterday.

Kibria and four others were killed and many injured in a grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Baidderbazar area of Habiganj on January 27, 2005.

However, the trial of the murder case is yet to make any significant progress. Due to the non-appearance of regular witnesses, the date of recording depositions is being deferred repeatedly.

Two cases -- one for murder and another under the Explosive Substances Act -- filed over the incident are currently pending at the Sylhet Speedy Trial Tribunal. On January 21, the trial was deferred to February 19 as there was no witness present before the court.

Sarwar Ahmad Chowdhury Abdal, the official



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PRAYER  
TIMING

JANUARY 28

| Fazr    | Zohr  | Asr  | Maghrib | Esha |      |
|---------|-------|------|---------|------|------|
| 5:35    | 12:45 | 4:15 | 5:46    | 7:15 |      |
| JAMAAAT | 6:10  | 1:15 | 4:30    | 5:50 | 7:45 |

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION