

THE LAST MONKEYS of Sadhana Aushadhalaya

YSTIAQUE AHMED

In Gandaria, one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Puran Dhaka, two unlikely legacies are fading together: a century-old herbal medicine company and the monkeys that once thrived in these streets. For generations, Sadhana Aushadhalaya was both a medicine factory and a sanctuary. Established in 1914 by the chemist and nationalist Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, it symbolised rebellion, resilience and compassion. Along with it, the monkeys became part of the area's residents, swinging from trees, scavenging for food and wandering into the courtyards.

Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry and a member of the American Chemical Society, sought to popularise the use of affordable herbal medicine amongst the poorer population, which led to the creation of Shadhana Aushadhalaya after the Swadeshi movement. His efforts advanced the practice of Ayurvedic medicine and modernised the process of medicine production. What started in Dhaka later expanded to Kolkata and other parts of India. They even began exporting products to Africa and China.

The character of Sadhana was defined not merely by commerce, but also by acts of



A troop of monkeys gathers for a feast at Sadhana Aushadhalaya, once a renowned ayurvedic pharmaceutical in Gandaria, Old Dhaka. As demand for ayurvedic medicine wanes, the company's ability to care for the monkeys has also diminished.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

rooftops. Our labourers collect the dead bodies, and at times the municipal authorities have taken them away."

Somit Dash says, "The monkeys around here are not in Sadhana's care. What we provide for the monkeys is voluntary work."

Asim Mallik, a wildlife inspector from the Forestry Department of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star that most of their work involves rescue missions and treating injured animals. "We have worked on monkeys in that area before. After rescuing an injured monkey, we took it to Mirpur Animal Hospital for treatment and later released it in the wild. And in the case of dead animals, we take a sample from them and then bury them," he explained.

A local resident explained that with food sources dwindling, clashes between people and monkeys have become more frequent. The animals now steal food and even clothes from houses, and many windows in the area have been reinforced with steel bars to keep them out. Since Covid, residents have also reduced feeding, leaving the monkeys even more vulnerable.

According to Sohag Mohajon, president of the Dhaka Youth Club International, his organisation tries to feed the monkeys at least once a year, usually in winter when survival is hardest, as a gesture to ensure they are not forgotten. In 2021, the group submitted a memorandum to Dhaka City Corporation requesting food support, but the official feeding programme, he noted, appears to have been inactive for the past two years.

Sadhana Aushadhalaya itself is now overseen from afar by Nila Ghosh, the founder's granddaughter, who lives in Kolkata and visits only briefly. Also, the export business has ceased, not for lack of demand, but because the transportation process has become too costly and time-consuming.

The story of Sadhana's monkeys is not merely about a dwindling troop of animals, but about memory, compassion, and survival. For over a century they have lived alongside a factory that symbolised both scientific pursuit and human kindness. Their decline is a reminder of what happens when we neglect the fragile balance between people and nature. If they vanish, it will not only mark the end of a community of monkeys but also the loss of a living fragment of Dhaka's heritage.

Ystiaque Ahmed works at The Daily Star.

The decline of Sadhana has had a direct and tragic impact on the monkeys. The lush trees that once provided food and shelter for them have been felled by rapid urbanisation. The factory's dwindling capacity means less food to spare for the monkeys. Somit Dash, a guard at Sadhana Aushadhalaya who has worked there since 2009, explains, "There was a time when we needed 20-30 different types of trees for one drug, but now only five or six of these trees remain."

and most of the company's assets were looted. This severely hampered Sadhana's operations and triggered its gradual decline. After the war, his son, Dr Naresh Chandra Ghosh, continued the company's legacy of providing natural remedies.

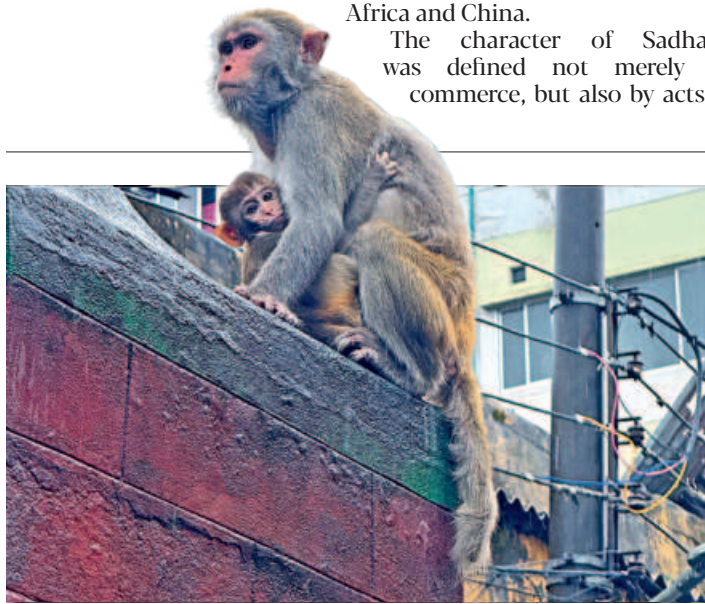
It was in this environment of compassion that the monkeys found their anchor. As the British rulers developed Gandaria into a residential hub in the early 20th century, the trees planted by Sadhana provided the perfect habitat. In a characteristically generous act, the medicine enterprise welcomed these monkeys and even dedicated a room in the factory to feed them. The monkeys became an ever-present part of the community, a symbol of Sadhana's symbiotic relationship with its environment. Even a century later, Sadhana still maintains this practice, albeit on a much narrower scale.

Chitta Ranjan Dash, a doctor who has been working at Sadhana Aushadhalaya for the past 16 years, spoke to The Daily Star about the decline of Sadhana. "Of

the 72 sales centres that once operated in Bangladesh, only 65 remain active today. The range of medicines has also shrunk—from about 450 types to just 120 currently in production."

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Their population has now dwindled to a meagre 100 to 125, according to local estimates. Chitta Ranjan Dash laments the matter: "The number of monkeys has declined sharply in recent years, with no signs of recovery. We frequently hear of their deaths—caused by electrocution, disease, or falls from



At Sadhana Aushadhalaya in Old Dhaka, a mother monkey carries her baby while high-voltage wires loom dangerously overhead. Many monkeys have fallen victim to electrocution in this hazardous setting.

PHOTO: ORPON H KHAN

profound courage. During the 1964 riots, Ghosh sheltered Hindus from the neighbourhood in the factory of Sadhana Aushadhalaya. Seven years

later, during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, Jogesh Chandra Ghosh was tragically killed by the Pakistani junta for sheltering freedom fighters,

Where safety NEVER REACHES

Vulnerabilities of women in Dhaka's low-income communities

SAUDIA AFRIN

Behind the walls and the daily chaos lies a harsher reality for the marginalised communities living in Dhaka's bursting slums. Here, life is reduced to cramped quarters, scarce access to clean water, shared and often unsafe sanitation facilities, and virtually no privacy. These settlements are breeding grounds of vulnerability, especially for women and girls who are systemically ignored.

Mina, an informal domestic worker, begins her day long before her husband wakes. After preparing his meal and serving him, only then—at 7:30 a.m.—does her formal workday begin, though her labour never truly ends. One night, returning home from work at around 11 p.m., she was met with lewd remarks. When she told her husband about the incident, instead of sympathy, he beat her for daring to work late.

Never-ending gender-based violence

The indifference of men in these low-income neighbourhoods is striking. Women are seen bearing immense burdens, working tirelessly both at home and outside, often with little recognition, no shared responsibility, and grave concerns about safety for themselves and their children.

Dr Sanzida Akhter, Professor at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka, shares: "Poverty, gender-based violence, and lack of opportunities reinforce one another, particularly for adolescent girls and women working in garments or as domestic help. Returning home late only increases their exposure to risk. But they have no choice. They must work."

Findings from the SAFE programme,

implemented between March 2012 and October 2013, revealed that by 2015, 54% of ever-married women had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV (intimate partner violence) by their husbands. The situation was particularly dire in urban slums, where 35% of women reported experiencing IPV in 2014 alone.

Recent figures are even more alarming, leaving us wondering whether any change has happened in the last decade. The 2024 Violence Against Women Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), based on interviews with 27,476 women, found that IPV disproportionately affects women with no formal education—80% had experienced it in their lifetime, and 42% in the past year.

Dr Anwara Begum, Research Director at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), underscores the role of entrenched patriarchy, poor law enforcement, and poverty-driven vulnerabilities that limit women's ability to advocate for their own safety.

"Women in Dhaka's low-income areas face significant risks due to a confluence of social, economic, and infrastructural factors. Victim-blaming attitudes and a culture of silence often dissuade women from reporting incidents, perpetuating cycles of violence," she says. Verbal abuse, sexual harassment,



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non-consensual photography, groping, and rape are disturbingly common, whether in public spaces, at work, or even within their own homes.

Lingering impact of poor sanitation

In a dimly lit alleyway in Dhaka North, 14-year-old Sultana was going to the toilet when a man suddenly embraced her from behind. A witness misconstrued the situation, and within days, rumours spread. Her family, already marginalised, was evicted, cast out by the weight of shame and societal stigma. This is not an isolated incident.

"In slums, fetching water or bathing often happens in open, insecure areas. Shared toilets are dominated by men, poorly lit, and

lack locks," says Bulbul Bala, Programme Lead at WaterAid Bangladesh.

Morning routines often see women and children queuing behind male elders for limited facilities, delaying school or work. Menstrual hygiene is another challenge jeopardising women's health and dignity.

According to WaterAid Bangladesh's Gender Assessment under the WASH for Urban Poor Project - Phase II, 9% of women reported experiencing violence during water collection. In Dhaka North City Corporation, over 70% of women reported encountering gender-based violence while accessing sanitation facilities.

This increases the vulnerability of adolescent girls, children, and women, especially those left home alone during the day.

When children become victims

That vulnerability was painfully clear for a 10-year-old madrasa student living in a small attic in Baridhara. With her father deceased and her mother away at work, she was left alone when a 40-year-old family acquaintance entered the house and raped her.

In many of these homes, children are left with a neighbour or fend for themselves, as mothers endure long, exhausting shifts. The threat of abuse is constant. A piece of chocolate, a false promise—these become tools of manipulation. And the scars, both physical and emotional, last a lifetime.

"The environment itself enables perpetrators," explains Dr Sanzida. "Girls are exposed, both physically and emotionally. And with mothers working long hours in the informal sector, often without any childcare support, the vulnerability increases tenfold," she further adds.

NGOs and grassroots organisations are working on installing streetlights, community toilets, organising self-defence workshops, and running awareness programmes, but their reach is limited. Moreover, infrastructure is only part of the solution.

A streetlight can stop working. A toilet can be locked. What women and children need is not quick fixes but lasting change—one that dismantles the invisible power structures keeping them vulnerable. Unless government, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and community leaders come together, these stories will keep repeating, and countless women and girls will continue to slip through the cracks.

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