

Innocent victims

The women of Bangladesh are paying a heavy price for resisting the powerful interests in the shrimp farming industry

Paikgacha and Batiaghata are not the most famous of places in Bangladesh. Only local people have heard of these remote areas in Khulna, a district located 350 km south-west of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. In the early 1990s, however, these names kept cropping up in the local newspapers as violence related to commercial shrimp cultivation erupted.

From 1995 onwards, these villages have achieved national prominence, following several reports of a number of violent incidents and indiscriminate abuses of human rights in commercial shrimp cultivation areas. In the minds of local people as well as other citizens of Bangladesh, these incidents have raised serious questions about human rights, sustainable human development and the obligation of the government.

The problems have been compounded by the fact that the local administrative officials and the police, who are supposed to maintain law and order, and implement their own stated policy of “protecting the innocent and punishing the criminals”, have allegedly done just the opposite: protecting criminals, while punishing the innocent.

Violence erupted in Horinkhola village within *polder 22* (a *polder* is an embankment) of Paikgacha in the early morning of 7 November 1990. Wajed Ali, a rich shrimp farm owner and businessman, arrived with his armed hired hands, intending to forcibly breach the embankment and establish shrimp farms there.

Polder 22 had been maintained as a shrimp-free zone at the insistence of local people, who wanted to protect their environment and agriculture-based,

traditional livelihood. When Wajed Ali and his hired hands arrived at the *pokier* in speedboats, the villagers mobilized and rushed to the area to resist. They marched to the river-bank, women and children in the lead, believing that this would ensure a peaceful, bloodless confrontation.

Instead, Wajed Ali’s men hurled bombs and opened fire with rifles and machine guns. Fifty women and men were injured. A 45-year old woman, Korunamoi Sardar, was killed in the firing.

Ali and his men had to subsequently flee in the face of the strong resistance by the villagers. The body of Korunamoi Sardar was taken away by Ali’s men, while a tuft of her hair and a portion of her brain remained on the battlefield for two days.

Rahela Khatun, a landless woman from Paikgacha, describes what happened: “On 7 November 1990, on learning that Wajed Ali had arrived with goons to breach the embankment and flood land for shrimp cultivation, we rushed to the spot to resist the attempt.”

“As we were marching toward the embankment,” continues Rahela, “with the women and children in front, the hoodlums opened fire and hurled bombs at us. Korunamoi Sardar was killed on the spot and more than 50 men and women were severely injured.”

Police lethargy

“The body of Korunamoi Sardar was taken away by the attackers,” recalls Rahela, “while a tuft of her hair was hanging from the nearby *babla* tree and a portion of her brain remained on the ground for two days, until the Paikgacha police finally took these away for examination. Korunamoi’s body was never found.

We have built a memorial on the spot she died. Every year we organize a large meeting on 7 November to remember her martyrdom. People from various areas come and pay respect. They are encouraged by our struggle and some managed to liberate their land from the illegal occupation by the *gher* owners."

Rupabhan Bibi, a 46-year old widow and one of the 50 injured on 7 November 1990, was also taken away by Wajed's men and later left on the river-bank, on the assumption that she was dead. When the *gher* owners came with their hired hands and firearms to forcibly gain control over land for shrimp cultivation, about 4,000 women and men of Korias village gathered on the river-bank. This joint protest forced the intruders to leave.

Later, in Korias village, police and armed guards came looking for villagers who were in hiding. They entered households where there were only women and children. They used obscene language and assaulted the women. This enraged the women, who started to fight back with brooms and sticks. The police were stunned by this unified resistance and fled.

Amina Khatun, a woman of Korias, was asked later about her courage in resisting police and armed men with her broom. She remained silent for a while, then replied with tears in her eyes, "My husband has been in hiding for the last few days and I have no food in my house. On top of everything else, the police came into my household, used obscene language and pushed me around. I have no place to hide. I have been pushed against the wall. I have no choice but to defend my children and myself with whatever I have. So, I picked up my broom and beat the policeman with it."

After the news was flashed in the national newspapers, the police finally arrived at the scene. Although the villagers filed suits against Wajed Ali and 34 others, Ali's membership in the ruling political party ensured his immunity from prosecution.

Wajed Ali filed suits against 50 villagers. Some of them were arrested in their

hospital beds, as they recovered from the wounds inflicted by Ali's attack, and placed into detention without bail.

At the time of the incident, Nijera Kori, an NGO, was working with landless women and men of Khulna. Nijera Kori's legal aid cell helped the arrested villagers obtain bail. Though the villagers' murder suit against Wajed Ali is still pending, they have won one battle of environmental justice through their activism and sacrifice of *life—polder 22* (surrounded by shrimp-cultivating areas) is still a shrimp-free zone.

On 17 September 1994, Jabber Sheikh of Batiaghata Thana was seriously injured by bombs, thrown at him by unknown assailants. He died in the hospital four days later.

Jabber Sheikh was a member of the Amirpur union council. He was against commercial shrimp cultivation in his area and had mobilized the local people to resist such aquaculture. As an elected official, he tried to get help from the local administration, and was a targeted enemy of the shrimp cultivators.

The murder of Jabber Sheikh enraged the villagers, who mobilized and repossessed the lands illegally occupied by the shrimp farmers. The shrimp farmers attacked the villages many times to reoccupy the shrimp ponds, but the villagers successfully resisted these incursions.

However, valuable land areas still remain barren, as villagers try to cultivate agricultural products, but are foiled by shrimp farmers, who forcibly breach embankments to flood land with salt water and ruin crops. The villagers allege that the local administration and the police do not protect them. Instead, they side with the shrimp farmers. Thus, the people's movement for basic rights and environmental justice goes on.

Indelible mark

The violence from shrimp farmers has left indelible marks on the bodies and minds of the people in the coastal area. In one incident in the Buzbunia village in Botiaghata, the shrimp farmers forcibly dug into Sadiq Ali's courtyard and family graveyard to take out soil for constructing

embankments around shrimp ponds. When Sadiq Au objected to this sacrilege, the armed guards beat him as well as his wife and adolescent son. Their bodies still bear the marks of the beatings. Violence left grievous wounds in the minds of Hameeda Begum, Manjira Akhtar and Anjira Akhtar of Buzbunia village, who were also assaulted by the armed guards.

Violence by armed guards and harassment by police forced the men of Korja village into hiding between February and April 1995. The men were afraid and could not participate in the prayer for Id-ul-Fitra - one of the biggest and most important religious festivals. When a child died in the violence; only children attended the funeral as a sign of solidarity. Even the activities for national immunization day on 16 March 1995 had to be cancelled because of the violence by shrimp farmers.

As a result of Bangladesh's current development priorities, the majority of the people tend to lose access to, and use of, the common property resources appropriated by wealthy corporate and individual interests.

Often, the State has supported influential business interests through legal, illegal and/or violent means. It is ironic that enhanced production of these food crops has contributed to decreased food security at national, local and household levels;

deteriorated human and environmental conditions; escalated social injustice and violence.

In recent years, commercial shrimp cultivation has increased tremendously in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. About 2.5 million hectares of coastal land have potential for shrimp farming. In 1995, a total of 124,000 ha of coastal land in Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Cox's Bazaar were under shrimp cultivation. This represented an increase of about ten per cent per annum since 1980.

Export earnings from shrimp have increased from 145 million taka in 1977-78 to 6,997 million taka, or close to \$175 million, in 1992-93. Thousands have found employment in the shrimp cultivation and processing industry. This has had some impact on the economy of Bangladesh.

Livelihoods destroyed

Unfortunately, profit-driven, unplanned, indiscriminate and illegal shrimp farming is destroying the livelihoods of small, marginal farmers, fisherman, dairy farmers and the landless poor. The law and order situation has deteriorated in these coastal areas and the long-term environmental consequences of unregulated shrimp cultivation include the irreversible degradation of land, water systems, biodiversity, forest and vegetation.

It is unfortunate that while, nationwide, leaders of the women's movement are mobilizing for gender equality and empowerment of women in every aspect of their lives, the women in the shrimp cultivation areas are deprived of even the basic human rights provided for by the Constitution of Bangladesh and different United Nations Conventions. These women regularly face physical and sexual violence and abuse from the *gher* (shrimp farm) owners and their hired hands.

Like in other rural areas in Bangladesh, the communities in Batiaghata and Paikgacha are fairly conservative. The women usually remain secluded within the household. However, due to the atrocities committed by the *gher* owners, especially the murders of Kornnamoi Sardar and Jabber Sheikh, women are forced to come out of seclusion to resist the *gher* owners.

This new attitude was typified by Maimon Bibi, a 60-year old woman who testified at a public hearing. She described how she had picked up the broom and run with the others to the riverbank to resist the goons. In a tearful voice, she asked again and again, "Is Batiaghata truly a part of Bangladesh? If yes, why are the government and police not protecting us from the *gher* owners?"³

This article is by Nilufar Ahmad of Nijera Kori, an NGO working in Bangladesh