

Village life in Bangladesh



Cha-am Jamal, Thailand, 2006
All rights reserved

We are in a small village on a strange planet far far away. The village is surrounded by rice fields and seasonal wetlands. The wetlands turn into lakes in the rainy season. There are many fishponds and fruit trees throughout the village. There are about a thousand homes here and more than ten thousand people mostly children. Many of these children can be seen bathing and swimming in the fishponds or running naked through the fields. In addition to rice the villagers grow potatoes, wheat, sugarcane, onion, garlic, hot peppers, and vegetables. Most farmers also keep cattle, goats, ducks, or hens. There are two primary schools and one high school. There is also a Muslim religion school called "Madrassa". The villagers are mostly Muslim. There is no manufacturing, there are no doctors, and there is no electricity. Nightfall is a significant event. On moonless nights the entire village disappears into darkness.

Socially, the village is gripped by interpersonal conspiracies and intrigue that often involve land, sex, dowry, murder, and suicide. Many a husband has been known to have beaten and tortured his wife to death in the act of extracting additional dowry money from her parents. In the last nine months alone, six teenage girls aged 14 to 17 have committed suicide or have been killed by their family for reasons that have to do in one way or another with their reproductive function.

A pretty schoolgirl named Bibi used to live in this village. Tall, slim, and strikingly beautiful even in her dowdy Muslim garb, Bibi began to attract attention even in her pre-adolescent years. By the time she turned 14, her parents had reached a point of desperation to get her married off because they feared for her beauty. If she goes astray or she is raped the family will be disgraced. It is axiomatic in this planet that sexual disgrace must be avoided at all cost, even at the cost of life itself. There were plenty of applicants for her hand in marriage. She was after all a super-model still in her early teens. The problem was the dowry. It is required in this planet that upon marriage the bride's parents must pay a sum of money to the bridegroom to compensate him for feeding their daughter for the rest of her life. Bibi's parents were dirt poor. They could barely muster 10 percent of the amount being demanded by the potential suitors. All the while, Bibi's beauty and sexuality were opening out like the petals of a flower with the bees hovering menacingly nearby. Tension and stress multiplied by the day in her household. By the time Bibi had turned 14, the tension had reached a fever pitch. Just then, a new suitor arrived.

He was a young man of about 26 who lived in the same village. He would take the girl for the 10% dowry that the parents could afford. He had some drawbacks. He was completely financially dependent on his parents. He was illiterate and unable to speak clearly. He had hearing problems. He was also blind. And he suffered from a certain birth defect that would prevent him from ever having sex. These difficulties were overlooked by the parents because of the urgency of the matter and because his family had agreed to accept the lower dowry amount. Bibi was quickly married off to Kana when she was barely 14 years old and still in 8th grade in school.

"Kana" was a mean-spirited nickname given to Kana by the villagers to make fun of his blindness. After the wedding Bibi acquired the equally mean nickname of "Kanarbou". Meanness is pervasive here and appears to come naturally to the villagers. Meanness probably played a role in the beatings and torture that Bibi began to receive at the hands of Kana's family soon after the wedding. On the day of the wedding, Bibi's parents could pay only a portion of the dowry demanded. They asked for a few weeks to come up with the rest of the money. When that time passed and the balance of the dowry was not paid, Kana's family employed a bill collection method that is customary in this planet. Every few days Bibi was beaten with a stick for hours until she was black and blue and bloody and then she was sent in that state to her parent's house to collect the balance of the dowry. Her parents did not have the money so each time, they had to send her back to be beaten again.

In the meantime, the meanness of the villagers found reason for greater expression. As time passed without signs of Bibi's pregnancy, Bibi was taunted for being barren. These incidents became so frequent and severe that Kana's mother took matters into her own hands and hatched a plan for conception. She told the villagers that she would take Bibi to the doctor for treatment so that she could conceive. She took her to the city and locked her in a room. The only window was shuttered and also locked. She then hired some hoodlums to rape her so that she can conceive a child. Bibi fought the rapists until she fainted from the beatings. Thus inseminated, she was brought back to the village and the villagers were told that she had been treated at a city hospital and that she would now be able to conceive. Bibi was kept under lock and key for fear that she would spill the beans. The bill collection procedure continued. Bibi was beaten so the neighbors could hear the screams and demands for dowry payment were sent to her parents soon thereafter.

All farmers in the village have a supply of an insecticide called Indril. Kana's family kept a good supply in a place that was accessible to Bibi. I guess we will never know how all that Indril got into Bibi's blood but I imagine that she took it herself. She was 16 years old. The next morning, her body was bathed and prepared for burial. Muslim clerics came and special prayers were held and she was laid to rest in a pauper's grave and soon forgotten. There was a small note on page 12 of the newspaper in a nearby city that a village housewife had committed suicide because she was frustrated by her inability to conceive a child for her husband. In March 2006, High School graduation examinations were held throughout the planet. Bibi was to have been one of these examinees. She was listed as a no-show.

Indril was also the poison of choice for Saba, a childhood friend of Bibi and one year her junior in the same school. When Saba was 14, she noticed that a man waited outside her school every day and followed her home. One day he came forward and said that he was in love with her and wanted to marry her. He was 24 and lived in a nearby town where he attended college. The two began a non-sexual romance that involved little more than holding hands and whispered words of love behind the bushes by dark of night. Rumors and gossip about them swept through the village. There was much indignation. The old adage to "love thy neighbor" is practiced in this village is a slightly modified form. What they practice here may best be described as "destroy thy neighbor". Saba was accused of meeting secretly with a man. "Autele autele gudur gudur kore" was the charge. Without any evidence whatsoever she also stood accused of having illicit sex. Some even claimed that she was pregnant. The trap was set to destroy Saba and her family.

Saba's father responded by locking her in a room so that she would be unable to meet with her man. She was of course also unable to go to school or meet with her friends. She stayed in solitary confinement for days without food or water. The villagers were not satisfied because the room had a window and her boyfriend had been spotted in the village. They accused her of continued "Autele autele gudur gudur" through the window although no one had actually seen this man anywhere near Saba's home. Humiliated and destroyed, the family locked her window. They continued to deny her any sustenance but placed a bottle of Indril in her room. Saba must have taken the Indril. She died the next day at age 14 and was properly buried with incantations from their holy books about the greatness of god and his love and mercy for his creation. She made the newspaper. It said in three or four lines that a lovelorn teenage girl had committed suicide in a nearby village.

Saba's classmate Silbi was given greater coverage in the newspaper for hers was a sensational police case. Her badly deformed body was found in the woods and the police from the nearby town became involved. A postmortem showed that she had been very severely beaten and then strangled to death. There were traces of indril on her lips and in her mouth but none in her gastrointestinal system. It is alleged that she was beaten to death by her family. The family claims that she committed suicide. Her crime was that she had run away from home. She returned after a week and told her father that she had been to town with a man who had promised to marry her and when he failed to do so within a few days she had chosen to return home. That decision turned out to be a fatal error. It's not easy being a woman on this planet.

Cha-am Jamal, Thailand, <http://munshi.4t.com>