

THE TIMES OF INDIA, BOMBAY, 22 JUN 2006

Bengal's watery grave

Nilanjan Dutta

This is the time of the year when front pages of newspapers are full of smiling faces. Successful secondary examinees are featured in their moment of joy. In the inside pages, however, one may find a morbid story of some unfortunate unsuccessful teenager attempting to end his or her life.

This year, there was a small news item on a failed suicide bid on the day the Madhyamik results were out. The incident occurred in the Panchanandapur area of Malda district in north Bengal. But, it was not the same old story. The boy, Nasim Akhtar, had nothing to complain about his scores. With his star marks, he would normally have an occasion to celebrate. Then why did he take the drastic step?

Nasim went home with his mark-sheet and told his grandfather that he would be able to fulfil his dream of pursuing science studies. The aged man, perhaps hiding his happiness behind a pragmatic facade, told him plainly that he did not have resources to support his studies any longer and that Nasim should look for a job instead.

Nasim's father was a well-to-do peasant. He lost his home and land in the erosion of the Ganga riverbanks in 1998 and went off to Mumbai as a labourer. His mother brought up Nasim and his sisters with much hardship. After marrying off two daughters, she placed her son in the custody of her father, who had some property and could support his studies. Staying at his grandfather's house, Nasim kept up his reputation as the first boy of Nayabazar High School, year after year. On August 24, 2005, his grandfather's house went under the waters. The family has been living in a makeshift hut beside the high road since then. People like Nasim's grandfather cannot be blamed if they do not see much prospects for their future generations.

Riverbank erosion takes place routinely in large parts of Malda, Murshidabad and Cooch Behar districts of north Bengal. Disaster-induced displacement has become as "natural" in these places as the calamities themselves.

A long 174-km stretch along the Ganga, from Bhutni in Malda to Jalangi in Murshidabad, has been facing erosion. The number of displaced persons in these two districts is estimated at 6,00,000. The river has engulfed not only homes, but also many schools, banks and even police stations. There are families that have been displaced up to 16 times.

In Cooch Behar, the otherwise docile Saltiar Khal has become known as a canal of misery. Flooding its banks every monsoon, it has devastated 27 villages so far. Around 183 hectares of land have been engulfed by the river, 250 hectares have become mere sand banks and 20,000 hectares have lost fertility. As many as

10,000 to 12,000 farmers have become landless labourers.

The Calcutta Research Group, on behalf of National Commission for Women, conducted a study on the condition of displaced women. The researchers, Krishna Bandyopadhyay and Soma Ghosh, found that displaced women are often left to fend for themselves and their children

as their male members migrate to distant lands. Many, like Nasim's mother, roll bidis but are paid less than the union rates. In the fields, too, they are less paid. The other major occupations are fetching huge loads of grass or working as couriers in clandestine cross-border trade.

There is no tangible official programme to provide alternative and long-term means of livelihood to the displaced women. A public health disaster is waiting to explode. There are no toilets for the thousands of displaced families living in temporary shelters on the roadside or occupied fields. For the women and girls, it affects their very biological cycle. Learning to remain silent to nature's calls during the long hours between daybreak and the dead of night is no easy task. Going to deserted orchards, fields or canal-sides in unearthly hours is dangerous. Domestic violence and various forms of trafficking are on the rise.

Little wonder then that Nasim tried to end his life.

The writer works on development issues.

