

# **ACCESS TO NATURAL PRODUCTIVE RESOURCE AND JUSTICE**

**Defending Human Rights  
of the Marginalized  
in Southwest Coastal Bangladesh**



**Uttaran**

Access to Natural Productive  
Resource and Justice:  
Defending Human Rights of  
the Marginalized in Southwest  
Coastal Bangladesh



**Uttaran**

**Overall Supervision**

Shahidul Islam  
Director

**Editting**

Maliha Shahjahan

**Researcher**

Shakila Ruma

**Translation**

Abdus Saboor

**Contributions**

Brian Davies  
Fatima Halima Ahmed  
Zakir Kibria

**Cover Design**

Sayeem Rana

**Layout**

Shekhar Kumar Biswas  
Anckur, Khulna

**Photo**

Uttaran

**Print**

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42 (third floor), Satmasjid Road  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka – 1209, Bangladesh  
Phone: +88-02-9122302  
E-mail : [uttaran@bdonline.com](mailto:uttaran@bdonline.com)

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## Preface

Human Rights most often reminds us the extremely important task of defending people from torture and degrading treatment. Uttaran has been on the forefront of protesting violations of rights, protecting the survivors and ensuring justice. In a turbulent world this has never been more urgent. But we also need to keep in mind that human rights also includes basic civic, economic, political, social and cultural rights and freedoms that all individuals or group of individuals are entitled to regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, language or any other marker of difference. Rights to livelihood and living a life out of poverty cannot be realized unless people have rights to productive resources through legal-judicial protection.

The obligation to respect, protect and implement human rights rests on the state. In Bangladesh, the state is constitutionally enshrined with the responsibility to ensure rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice. The state, however, has failed to uphold its obligations to ensure these rights of the majority of people who are poor and marginalized. The state's systematic failure to bring the majority of the citizens out of poverty has been a glaring lacuna. It is simply not possible to ensure a life of integrity unless they have access to basic needs in life or to put in a different way, only poverty eradication will ensure human rights to majority of the people.

The public development expenditure often bypassed the needs of the poor to uplift their living standards to a decent level. The government has made many significant progresses in improving health, education and livelihood of the marginalized poor and initiated many efforts. There have been positive changes in the lives of poor but the level of change has not been proportionate to the amount of resources allocated to economic development. There remains much more to be done.

Uttaran has been working together with government institutions and other stakeholders to bring necessary changes for poverty eradication. Our major strategy has been facilitating a process where landless marginal poor people, especially women, can access khas land. According to government statistics, the total amount of khas land all over the country surmounts to around five million acres and total number of landless families has been numbered at fifteen million. If all khas land were to be allocated properly among the land less, then each family would receive at least 1.5 bigha land. Enough to feed a family of five mouths. Even where land less people does receive khas land, they often fail to maintain control because of limited or lack of legal support.

Uttaran, in close cooperation with government administration and other stakeholders of the society, has developed a model called Tala Model. Through successful implement of the model Uttaran has facilitated distribution of around 8000 acres of khas land among marginal poor. In the next three years, Uttaran, in cooperation with government administration, will distribute around 12000 acres of land. Uttaran also has been providing legal support to the land less people who receive land, so that they can maintain their control over the land. We think distribution of khas land among land less families, specially, women, should be on top of priority list of any poverty eradication strategy. This booklet briefs some case studies of landless people and they received khas land as well as legal aid support from Uttaran through its partner Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Rape, dowry, acid throwing etc. are the regular incidents of southwest region of Bangladesh. Uttaran provided such types of legal aid support to the oppressed group of southwest Bangladesh by getting support from its partner Misereor Germany. This booklet also describe some case studies those were supported by Uttaran through its development partner Misereor Germany.



**Shahidul Islam**  
Director, Uttaran

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## Human rights – legal instruments and state obligations in Bangladesh

Human rights are basic civic, political, social, cultural and economic rights and freedoms that all individuals or, in some cases, groups of individuals, are entitled to regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language, or other status. The contemporary understanding of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the interdependence of social and economic rights on one hand, and civil and political rights on the other. Rights to livelihood (social and economic), for example, cannot be realized unless the people have land rights through the protection of the judicial system (civil and political). The obligation to respect, protect and implement human rights rests with the State. In Bangladesh, the state is constitutionally enshrined with a basic and focused responsibility to ensure the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice. Yet the state has systematically failed to uphold its obligations to ensure the fundamental individual and group human rights of the majority of the population (80%) that are the poor and marginalized groups, including women, children, minority groups (i.e. religious/ethnic minorities) and persons with disabilities. Such denial and violation of rights fundamental to individuals' and groups' well-being causes a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability. The power relationships by which a certain ruling class dominate the poor and people of marginalized groups prevents access to and control over resources (ownership), political institutions and even basic services.

The public development expenditure has always bypassed the needs of the poor to uplift their living standards by devising a segregated and exclusive mechanism. Many efforts were initiated by the government to make significant progress in improving health, nutrition, education and livelihood. There have been positive changes in the lives of the poor but the level of change has not been proportionate to the amount of resources allocated to human and economic development. Still more than one-half of all children are chronically malnourished. Few government hospitals are designated exclusively for children and ensure equal access of boys and girls to medical care in government hospitals. One child in every three remains 'non-literate' or 'semi-literate' after five years of schooling in Bangladesh. Also, one out of five children cannot enroll in primary schooling while one in every three of those enrolled drops out before completing the five-year course <sup>1</sup>.

The unjust power structure and inequity over resources are legitimized by the State's political, legal, economic, social, ecological, and technological system, condoned by our cultural or psychological condition. In theory and legal practice, a woman is entitled half of a man's entitlement in inherited property. However, access of property by religious and ethnic minorities has not yet been so successfully achieved by the State. The continuance of the Enemy Property (Custody and Registration) Order II of 1965 of the then East Pakistan Government albeit, under a new name, for about thirty years in independent Bangladesh

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed, M. & S. Nath. 2005. Quality With Equity The Primary Education Agenda. Education Watch Report 2003-04. Dhaka: Campaign for Popular Education, Bangladesh (CAMPE).

testified to this deplorable trend. The infamous Vested Property Act was repealed after three decades of independence. Furthermore, the controversial 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord, which ended 25 years of insurgency in the CHT is only a continuum of these human rights violations.

Women and people of minority groups not only face limited power to resource accessibility but can also fall easy prey to different social problems and injustices. Half of all women are victims of domestic violence. Despite being underreported a total of 5816 women and children were reportedly raped and another 1884 fell victim to violence across the country within a time span of two months in 2007. Most of these disputes are over dowries and issues related to access to property. The participation to reclaim rights over asset, particularly land, is relatively low among female members of poor landless families and from ethnic communities. They have very limited access to quality services from the local government.

Moreover, the Local Government of Bangladesh does not have capacity and also lacks the willingness to engage issues regarding redistribution of means of production like khas land to poor landless people in a systematic and participatory manner.

According to government statistics, the total amount of khas land all over the country surmounts to around fifty lac acres, and landless families have been numbered as 1.5 crore. If all khas land were to be allocated properly among the land less, then each family would receive at least 1.5 bigha land.

The lack of support (in terms of mobilization, organizational and education) available to the poor, landless, distressed and marginalized people to help them reclaim their rights and access to natural resources make this situation grimmer. Accordingly, those (mere numbers) who received land from the government failed to establish their control over land due to lack of legal assistances. Transparency International in Bangladesh conducted 'Corruption in Bangladesh: A household survey' to find out the nature of corruption, the broad spectrum, depth and losses made by corruption between September 10 and October 24, 2004 in approximately 3,000 households of 55 districts. TIB identified land and land-related departments, police stations and lower courts as the most corruption-prone sectors. Due to corruption, landless people become and remain the worst victims of deprivation.

The unjust power structure causes persistent denial and violation of individual and group human rights that produces and reproduces the conditions of poverty, where regional geographical, socio-economic and political aspect might append vulnerability; as it does in the Southwest region of the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Khas land usually refers to the vast areas of land in government possession and managed by government appointed managers or agents. It can be Char Areas (accretions) appeared from the bed of big rivers or sea by way of new formations, large chunks of land acquired by the government any big land-based projects, like-railway or even Abandoned Property or enemy properties specially after the independence.

## The Southwest Region Context

Southwest region of Bangladesh is considered to be a disaster prone area that has been regularly visited by calamities due to its geographical context and severe ecological devastation induced by interventions such as the Coastal Embankment Project (CEP), the Khulna-Jessore Drainage Rehabilitation Project (KJDRP) etc. most often financed by international financial institutions (IFIs), without considering their impact on regional ecology and bio-diversity, livelihood and economy. The regional bio-diversity has been drastically harmed and reduced significantly due to these projects undermining indigenous river basin management knowledge and practices resulting in the water logging crisis which has engulfed a huge area of the region for a decade. A consequence of this has been the wiping out of a significant number of the estuarine river networks in the area and this makes people more vulnerable too, this depletion of assets portrays a harsh scenario of scarce resources. Due to such discrepancies and exposure to calamities many of the once permanent settlers migrated to other regions of the country. This form of migration resulted in family disintegration, sexual exploitation, child labour, child abuse, etc. Significant portions (42%) of cultivable land in the region have now been converted into popular venues for shrimp production - a highly capital-intensive and export oriented form of investment. Shrimp farmers, inspired by rapid high profits, are aggressively violating and manipulating the land rights of the small landholders to their advantage and aggravating environmental degradation. In order to execute their purposes, several forms of oppression and force are used to exert influence on the community and abuse especially the women. The massive shrimp farming operation in the region has threatened thousands of landless inhabitants over their claims and rights to the government khas land.

In Khulna Division 1,50,214.64 acres of agriculture, non-agriculture, water body, vested property and water development board owned khas land are available. Furthermore, there are unidentified khas lands and water bodies in this region. However, the existing land management institutions and legislative systems do not promote equitable access and distribution of assets like land. No specific authority or institution at grassroots other than the Upazila Land Administration exists to address the issue of khas land distribution and landless people have limited access to the Upazila Level Committees. The existing regulatory framework has no unified or organized direction to distribute or provide khas land which are under the possession of various government departments like the Forest Department, the Bangladesh Water Development Board, the Railway, etc. Lack of information and awareness on khas land, absence of transparent processes to identify khas land and landless families and prevailing corruption in land administration brings the agenda of redistribution of khas land to the resource poor landless people to a standstill.

A complicated and severe scenario awaits the situation of women where justice for them is unvoiced and is still in its developing stage. The political atmosphere is not conducive for establishing social justice; rather it encourages conservativeness and backward looking that

<sup>3</sup> Amiruzzaman, Prof. SM (undated) Assessment of an Alternative Model with the LEBs under the Democracy Partnership Project of TAF/Brac.



seriously affects women in their everyday life. The close and somewhat easily accessible land border with India in the region creates a much more vulnerable situation with rampant women and child trafficking. Almost every village has at least one case of a missing young woman who has most likely been trafficked to India, Pakistan or the Middle East.

In rural areas, the Union Parishad (UP), the component of the judiciary system, conducts arbitrations against violence and conflicts and disputes including both minor civil and criminal disputes under the Village Court Ordinance and Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1976. Decisions at the UP-run village court evolve through arbitration based on the opinion of the majority of members. The court constituted under this ordinance has limited civil and criminal jurisdiction. Moreover, the judicial power of the Village Court, locally known as Shalish, in civil or criminal cases is restricted to a penalty of Tk. 500, and compensation of Tk. 5000 – both amounts are usually rated as very low and are hence ineffective as a deterrent factor.

The Village Court is formed with a chairman, who is generally the UP chairman, and 2 representatives from each party of the case. Of the representatives, one from each side is a UP member. The other members' individuals are required to be people who command a certain degree of respect in that community. The complainant and defendant select the members and the elites as judges, women members are very rare in Village Courts. Although, the parties possess the liberty to choose either male or female members, due to the conservative attitude of the society and male dominated UP council, by and large, the male members are selected as judges, who make it extremely difficult for women victims to narrate the atrocities or oppression in full length without being looked down upon. The constitution of the judges panel is created with a patriarchal perspective thus resulting in bias against women. Yet they have no option but to rely upon the Village Court, as the rural poor are not in a position to gain access to the judicial system.

People of the southwest are battered out with ups and downs, a myriad challenges and uncertainties marked by political concerns, poor governance and leadership, economic and social unrest; alongside this is the putrid law and order situation and the after-effects of calamities, which continue the agony of millions.

## Historical Journey of Uttaran:

The seed of the organization was first imbedded as a group of progressive youths stood alongside the struggling women oppressed by the landlords around Jatpur village. The unified efforts and dedication of the youth strengthened as the rich landlord farmers' unleashed torture, eviction from the homestead, arson, and rape on the landless and powerless women with the sole aim of grabbing their only land. In this prevailing context of the Southwest region, Uttaran (meaning empowerment) evolved as a development institution and started its

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<sup>3</sup> Amiruzzaman, Prof. SM (undated) Assessment of an Alternative Model with the LEBs under the Democracy Partnership Project of TAF/Brac.

campaign to uphold the rights of the poor and underprivileged since 1985. In the beginning, Uttaran concentrated on working for social empowerment of the rural poor. It focused on landless especially women, outcastes, untouchables and religio-ethnic minorities who are victims of socio-economic classification, hierarchic caste system and the male-dominated society. Uttaran aimed at capacitating these individuals with tools like group formation needed to deal with their social, environmental, health, economic and cultural predicaments and encourage self-reliance making them responsive agents of their own development. From 1985 to the present, Uttaran has expanded its initiatives by implementing diversified social development programs reflecting the changing needs and context of its target groups and communities. To maximize impact, the organization implements programs adhering to an integrated development approach, providing other supports as required. Uttaran promotes a right based approach, by setting up alternative institutions for women, religio-ethnic minority communities and the functionally landless people as well as savings programs to generate seed money for setting micro enterprises, credit programs, technical and occupational skills training and social sector training. Organization of the program participants to create vertical and horizontal networks of leaderships of the socially deprived and marginalized people with gender balance in practice is one of the core areas that Uttaran seeks to address.

With recognition and acceptance as the leading organization in the southwest region and with its increased capacity and capability, strong organizational setup and networking with the NGOs, CBOs, media and civil society, Uttaran has gained respect as an institution in the social development field of Bangladesh. Today, Uttaran is actively present and operating in five strategic districts of the region namely Satkhira, Khulna, Jessore, Bagerhat and Pirojpur with 21 branches covering 44,600 direct partner-beneficiaries. Of which 70% are women and 33% are outcaste, untouchables and religio-ethnic minorities. Among the religio-ethnic minority communities almost twenty (20) different religio-ethnic minority communities (REMCs) who comprise nearly 30% of the population of this area (Munda, Bajondar, Behara, Bhagobene, Buno, Dai, Dhopa, Hazam, Jele (fishermen), Kaiputra, Namoshudra, Nikari, Pundra-Kshatria, Paroi, Patni, Rajbongshee, Rasua, Reeshi, Shahaji, Shikari and Teli, etc.) are the target groups.

Uttaran has been successful in establishing a strong link with (a) “social movement” of the area of its operation. A socially identified common issue can help to mobilize public opinion and develop an effective UP-civil society alliance. On being a leading local NGO, Uttaran has the added advantage to provide leadership in the NGO movement in the region. Such a leadership role has helped Uttaran to run the project relatively successfully to a great extent. Uttaran has also successfully maintained a strong link with national and regional level networks and alliance groups. Such networks and alliances have also positively influenced the role and performance of Uttaran in running the project. Civil society and UP can actively work together to address a “common issue”. NGOs can play a catalyst role in bringing them together. Uttaran has set such an example.<sup>3</sup>

Uttaran has initiated its activities to ensure access of land to landless people and socio-politically underprivileged groups based on its self devised 'Tala Model' since March 2004. The Tala Model is a pragmatic demonstration of how to redistribute land among landless people. The process has three phases: i) identification of the landless eligible for khas land, ii) identification of khas land, and iii) recovery of khas land for distribution and settlement to the landless households.

Uttaran provided economic, technical (legal assistance) and other capacity building support to form and sustain two thousand landless organizations, targeting forty eight thousand landless families with the help of another seven associated organizations.

### The Tala Model

Uttaran has initiated its activities to ensure access of land to landless people and socio-politically underprivileged groups based on its self devised 'Tala Model' since March 2004. It was implemented by the collaborative effort of government administration of Satkhira District and Tala Upazila including land administration led by District Controller (DC) and Uttaran, where Uttaran will play a role of facilitator by providing legal assistance, financial and other necessary support for capacity building of the stakeholders. After a long process of consultation on 11th August 2005 the UNO formally announced the inauguration of the state's khas land settlement program, which will be jointly executed by the government and Uttaran.

The Upazila administration and Uttaran jointly prepared an operation manual for the selection the landless households of Tala Upazila and published it by the end of August 2005. Based on the agreed action plan both by the Upazila administration including land administration, and Uttaran, Union Bhumiheen Bachai Committees (UBBCs) and Ward Bhumiheen Bachai Committees (WBBCs) were simultaneously formed, immediately. The UBBC was composed by twenty three members, including - the Union Parishad (UP) chairman as the ex-officio convener; 12 UP members with 3 female representatives; a freedom fighter; a well reputed teacher; a BRDB-BSS member; one NGO representative; and six representatives from different political parties. The WBBC comprises six members: the ward UP member as the ex-officio convener; a female UP member as the advisor; one primary or high schoolteacher; two spiritual leaders from Muslim and Hindu religion respectively (1 imam and 1 purohit) etc.

After a brief orientation jointly organized by the Upazila Khas land Committee and Uttaran, all the UBBCs and WBBCs developed their own management plan and initiated the process of identifying landless applicants for Khas land. Though at the end twenty thousand application forms were gathered, it required immense publicity campaign initiatives involving popular indigenous modes like miking, dhera (a sort of indigenous drum) trumpeting, popular theatre and folk-song shows, posters and banners etc. Then the public scrutiny of the application took place in presence of the wider audience, especially the community people. The identification process followed several benchmarks as, under Category A: Fifteen poor freedom fighters families at Islamkati Union; Category B: 124 families affected by river erosion at Jalalpur Union; Category C: female-headed families; 133 at Nagarghata and 132 at Khalilnagar; Category D: 766 landless families at Khalilnagar; and Category E: 1176 families at Nagarghata with less than 10% land.

After the primary scrutiny by the UBBC, the applications are re-examined by the WBBCs and then finalized by the Upazila Khas land Committee. The final list is then publicized to ensure the accountability, transparency, participation and democracy of the selection process. After making all necessary changes and corrections the lists are sent to the concerned authorities both at Upazila and Union levels and the distribution process commences following these lists. Despite all these efforts, some flaws remain:

- ❑ Some 70 - 80 households on the list were not eligible landless households.
- ❑ Some 400 - 500 landless households didn't apply despite matching all the criteria.
- ❑ Corruption in settlement of khas land still prevails but to a lesser extent than before. As informed, 20 - 25 recipients of khas land had to bribe a sum of Tk. 500 - 1,000, which previously amounted to Tk. 3,000 - 10,000, as speed-money.

However, 17178 households were selected as eligible landless applicants for khas land in Tala Upazila complying with all the required policy guidelines of the government. Meanwhile, Uttaran collected the map of villages of Tala Upazila from District Record Room and distributed the duplicate copy to every Union office by the association of Upazila administration.

On 27<sup>th</sup> August 2006, 218 landless households from one of the 12 unions of Tala Upazila namely Islamkathi Union got 78.48 acres of khas land leased out on Duplicate Carbon Receipt (DCR)<sup>4</sup>. Sixteen landless households from three Unions namely Islamkathi, Khesra and Jalalpur got 10 acres of khas land permanently. Another 660 applications for khas land are under process. Despite some irregularities, shortcomings and constraints, process of selection of eligible landless applicants for khas land has been characterized by both accountability and transparency to the general public.

The Tala Model is being implemented by Uttaran and Tala Upazila Administration without any formal agreement. Though the initiative accomplished its first phase only, the uniqueness of the initiative in terms of realism and innovation is appreciated and acclaimed by the public officials at Upazila and District levels, civil society groups, newspaper reporters, and the wider community people including beneficiaries.

By forming committees like UBBC and WBBC with representatives from all sections of the community including women, religio-ethnic minorities, local community organizations, opposition political parties and NGOs etc, the Tala Model strategically constructs a mutual cooperation among different stakeholders to reduce the complications, irregularities and corrupt practices ingrained within the khas land distribution and settlement process. Favourable social mobilization activities coupled with legal aid provisions and financial support provided by Uttaran created a conducive atmosphere for the landless people to uphold and raise their voices and also to gain access in other means of production. Support of the Civil Society groups as pressure groups by Uttaran, helped to create a public voice for the landless people fighting for khas land.

<sup>4</sup> This is a renewable temporary settlement of khasland initially made on yearly basis.

### **Khas land Movement and its beneficiaries- Uttaran's Achievement**

Over a brief period of five years from March 2004 to September 2009:

- 9830 landless and land-poor households have got access to 7411.49 acres of khas land.
- Among 9830 recipients, 7611 have got 5610.16 acres of khas land under temporary/yearly but renewable settlement, and 2219 have got 1801.33 acres under permanent settlement.

Uttaran has been dealing with the legal access to khas land for the underprivileged mostly in the south-western location of Bangladesh and has brought about radical results that have improved thousands of lives. The dichotomy of power and poor has been contradicted through the outcomes of Uttaran's efforts to help the vulnerable people of Southwest Bangladesh to attain their well-deserved rights.

## Laily Khatun, trafficking tragedy



Laily, who was smuggled into Mumbai by a group of professional women traffickers craves the return of a healthy and normal life and above all – her dignity. She wants to see those who are responsible for her present situation behind bars and put away for good. Laily Khatun is no longer as beautiful as she was. She cries for the return of her health and her physique because she can no longer work like she used to. Laily Khatun is the daughter of Mofez Gazi from village Panchpada of Patkelghata Upazila under Satkhira district. Laily was trafficked along with her sister Shahida Khatun. Laily recalls those days of constant horror.

Laily's mother said that her husband was a day-labourer. With three daughters and two sons, poverty was a common scene of the household. In order to help her father out and pull her family out of such poverty, Laily took up work in the construction and rebuilding of roads. She served there with several other men and women who were looking for work and that took her to several places such as Jhikorgacha in Jessore. Laily was at that time only 14/15 years old. She started to bring home money through her hard earned labour but the family was quite astounded when one day she brought a man named Ershad (30) to their home. When the family members asked her who he was, she stated that he was her husband. Upon hearing such a tale Laily's father was very angry but began to accept it on account of the fact that it was his daughters choice and happiness that was important.

Laily said, *“When I was working at the construction sites, Ershad was working at a brick kiln almost adjacent to us. That is where I first met him. Ershad comes from a village called*



*Kolarowar Batra. We struck up a very good relationship within a few days and Ershad had told her that they had a lot of property, wealth and business and along with that he proposed marriage. When I told him that I needed consent from home, he constantly gave excuses to avoid involving family members saying that his family would not accept a girl who came from such a poor household. Not for a moment did I think that he was lying. My father is truly a very poor man and I was naive enough to go with his decision. One way or the other he managed to convince me and we went along with the marriage without telling our parents, or that is what I thought.”*

Laily said that she and Ershad set off for a brick kiln in Satkhira, Debhata to get married where a man named Wahab, also from Satkhira, acted as a witness to their marriage. Although there were other people present, Laily could not name any of them. She then returned with her new groom to her parent’s house. She had gone to her in-laws place only once after marriage but did not stay there. Ershad took up a job in a brick kiln in Debhata and for a while they lived together in that area. She lived quite comfortably for around three months during which time she went to visit her parents’ house once or twice. She had then given up work in the road construction and rebuilding. One day out of the blue, Ershad proposed to take Laily to his sister’s house in India for a visit. Within a few days of the proposal she went to her parents’ house on the way to her sister-in-laws’ house. Staying there for a night she left the house very early the next morning. Crossing the border she was taken to Mumbai. Although she was told that they would only stay for a few days, the few days turned into several days. She lived there miserably in a shanty with her husband shocked at what was happening.

Laily has trouble talking after she returned from a devastating experience. Her mother says that she has recovered considerably from the situation she was in when she was first returned. When asked about how Laily was saved from the clutches of the traffickers, the story went on. Laily’s mother said, “*We knew Laily was going to India on a visit with her husband but when she had not returned for months we felt very anxious. When we went for information at her in-laws house, they said that they could not provide an information of Laily. Laily’s father started gathering information regarding Laily and Ershad from several people. We were then informed of the fact that Ershad is involved in women trafficking and that probably Ershad had smuggled Laily into India.*”

Laily’s mother continued, “*After we got to know about Laily’s fate we broke down considerably but we weren’t going to give up our search for our daughter. At one stage we got to know from another source that was related to Laily’s fate that she had died. But we wanted our daughter back in one piece whether she was dead or alive. A few days later we were told that Laily was very ill in India and that we were suggested to go to her. We – Laily’s father, I, Laily’s sister Shahida and a man from the next village named Akhtar found ourselves at the Chanduri border near India. Akhtar then took Shahida with him across the border to bring back Laily from India. During this time we took refuge in a house belonging to a friend of Akhtar’s. The next day Akhtar came back empty handed without any of our daughters giving the excuse that Laily was extremely sick and that it was impossible to bring Laily over the border. He then advised us to return home on which we realized that we had just tied a larger knot in the web of trafficking.*”

When asked why Rabeya Khatun had not informed the police of all the incidents, she stated that the traffickers had threatened to kill Laily if they informed the police or any other authority. And thus they spent the next 3-4 days at that house near the border. Suddenly one day, the police surrounded the house that they were staying in and Rabeya Khatun and her husband took the opportunity to inform the police of all that had happened. Consequently they arrested Akhter and later when they pressurized Akhter, he returned Laily and Shahida to Bangladesh.

Rabeya Khatun gratefully said, *“It was through the police that we managed to get our daughters back but what a sore sight Laily was when she returned. The daughter that had left healthy and normal came back a living walking skeleton. She could not walk or talk nor could she recognize anyone around her. We directly admitted her to Satkhira hospital. When the news was released in the newspaper, Uttaran came forward. After treating Laily for one month twelve days, Laily was brought back home but her treatment continued at home. According to the doctors who nursed Laily, a certain form of poison had been pushed into the blood of Laily that prevented her from recalling the events that had happened to her regarding the trafficking. Uttaran took the responsibility of filing a case against the traffickers, and providing all the expenses for Laily’s treatment. The doctors say the chances of Laily’s full recovery are bleak but at least a few who were associated with the trafficking have been jailed. The real culprit Ershad is still absconding and we will be satisfied when all the guilty have been tried and sentenced appropriately.”*



## Sazzad Ali Mollah: the leader who led the landless



Fourteen families of Krishnakati village of Jalalpur Union, Tala Upazila under Satkhira district have successfully established their rights on khas land surpassing the ill intentions of the local influential. The landless have created a “landless committee.” They have kept their stand and with their will they have stood united against the influential and one man should be paid respect for having led them through this battle – leader Sazzad Ali Mollah.

Sazzad Ali Mollah narrated a story that talked of all the struggles that they faced. He says, “*Our financial situation has perpetually been wanting. I never had the opportunity of going to school and we had the tendency to take poverty for granted. Above all, we had no idea regarding the ownership and right towards khas land. It was from the Chairman of Jalalpur Union Parisad that we got to know that landless people like us were entitled to khas land. With the assistance of Chairman Karim Ali and Member Gazi Omor Ali we got a permanent settlement for fourteen bigha khas land through seven legal documents for seven landless families. The land was a portion from the village Krishnakati that was a filled up piece of the river Kapotakkho. We cultivated crops on that land for a few years without any predicaments. But one fine day a local influential popularly known for grabbing land named Kasim Morol’s son Moktar Morol, Kabir, Moshir, Nur Ali together forcibly cut and took away the paddy of our fields.*”

Before the land had been filled, Kasim Morol had a portion of land beside the land settled in our names. With the filling of the river, Kasim kept on occupying the land that increased with the sand or soil. After this had been going on for a few years Sazzad Ali and others got to know that during the period when the landless were being granted permanent settlement of land, Kasim Morol secretly created two legal documents in the name of two local women named Aleya and Bhono of which the two ladies were unaware of. After seven years, when the time was right, Kasim betrayed the women by signing a legal document in his own name that gave him the ownership of Aleya and Bhono’s property. Finally he illegally occupied the

remaining khas land beside his already occupied portion through fake documents.

When Sazzad Ali Mollah got to know of these proceedings he filed a case in the land office against Kasim Morol and his son's actions to illegally occupy the khas land. When the case went to trial and they were deemed guilty they gave up their ownership of the land that they had occupied. During this period, the landless along with the assistance of the Chairman of the Union Parisad and Member Sazzad Ali and others started to occupy the land and started to cultivate crops on it in 1999 but on the advice of the Chairman and Member these landless people divided the land among another seven families and started to live on it. After almost five years the Union Parisad Member Gazi Omor Ali demanded Ten Thousand Taka from the landless people from the paddy that they would cut. On refusing to do so, he would stand as a barrier to cutting the paddy in due time. When the people refused to pay him the amount, the Member took a large payoff from influential Kasim Morol and used it to cut away their paddy. He also brought in skilled ruffians to break their houses and feed it to the river. When they tried to protest they were beaten up severely and were forced to leave the land and they were left as refugees.

Sazzad Ali Mollah continued, *“We had lost a lot of hope once the land had been grabbed from us but we hoped and prayed in our hearts that justice would be served to us and we would be returned our land. Then we discussed our problems with one of the representatives of a local non-government organisation called Rupali. On the basis of his advice we strengthened the unity amongst ourselves and created a committee. The name of our committee was Krishnakati landless committee. At the moment our committee has 40 members. Then members of Rupali and Uttaran went to view our land. The legal documents were collected from Tala land office for the years 2007-2008. When we reported the illegal occupation of our land to the Thana Assistant Commissioner (AC) LAND . They started an investigation on behalf of the land office. The land surveyor measured and notified the portion of the landless people in the presence of the AC Land and Nayeab. On the same day Kasim Morol claimed that he was the rightful owner of the land and the AC Land called for the obligatory presence of both parties who wanted to claim the land but when the opposition party failed to turn up, the AC Land gave the verdict in favour of us landless people according to the legal documents.”*

Sazzad Ali Mollah and the other landless people are grateful to Rupali for their assistance as it would have been impossible to bear the expenses of all the cases, lawyers etc which Rupali took full responsibility of but they acknowledge the fact that a lot of credit goes to Uttaran who remain a significant helping and financing hand in such matters. Now Uttaran has created a new initiative with the Tala Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO) office where they have created a process of listing down the landless people from the landless committees that have been formed. Only landless are allowed to book khas land. Sazzad Ali thinks it's a wonderful process of targeting the landless and answering their problems of poverty. He believes if others adopt this method, there will be less “authentic” landless people in the country. He says with great pride that his children attend school and can eat three meals a day. Leader of the landless Sazzad Ali Mollah believes that the landless of all places need to unite and claim their rights as citizens of this country.

## Sakina's stern dream: land grabbers will never reign while we live



Sakina Khatun's husband's homestead of a few shatak (decimal) of land has been under a tug-o-war for 7/8 years. Sakina Khatun and her son Rabiul Gazi come from Tala Upazila of Satkhira under the Keshra Union of Baliar. Although she did receive two bigha of land she is persistent in gaining ownership over her entitled homestead.

Sakina's husband passed away 7/8 years back. Milon Joddar and Omor Joddar of Srimantakati bought some land beside Sakina's and started living there. As soon as her husband passed away these two Joddar's tried to forcibly occupy her lands. After consistent harassment for 3-4 years, Milon, Omor along with Kajol and Mansuf Gazi launched an attack on her in 2004. They beat up the mother and child mercilessly after which the nearby people admitted them to the hospital in critical conditions. After the tragic incident the hoodlums filed a case against Sakina and her son.

Sakina went on, *"We had to leave our home at the intolerance of the land grabbers. I had some connection with the local non-government organization Rupali. Being a member of Rupali I saved 5 Taka per week. With the assistance of Rupali I filed a complaint to the Tala Thana Officer in Charge (OC). On investigation, representatives of the thana called on both parties for an obligatory presence with the legal documents at Tala. The opposition failed to*

*show the documents. Seeing our papers, Moslem Daroga took charge of occupying back our house personally and destroyed the fencing they had created around our land.”*

Sakina then related how within a month or two a man named Nur Islam Morol with the identity of a sand businessman used a fake document to occupy their land upon which they were again severely beaten. After this incident, she filed a case in the Satkhira court. Nur Islam occupied a piece of her land and started living there by building a brick house. When they tried to protest they were confronted with severe rebuking and at one point physical abuse after which they had to be once again admitted to hospital. To this very day, Sakina can feel the burning pain of those ruffians who have handicapped her strength to the extent that she can hardly work and is mostly ill-stricken.

Sakina also stated that it was through Rupali that she got to know about Uttaran. All the expenses were borne by both Rupali and Uttaran. Her son works as a day labourer and with the help of Rupali she has gained ownership of two bigha of khas land. She grows paddy and a portion of her land falls in the shrimp hatchery. She receives four thousand Taka for the Hari that is produced through the shrimp hatchery every year. Altogether she is a lot better off than she previously was when she was facing so much trouble regarding the land.

The khas land that Sakina has received is a water body and is not fit for habitation. And the land that she has was bought out of the hard-earned money of her husband. He (Rabiul's father) bought the land from Anando Mohon the son of Bishto Harir. And now there are people who want to forcibly occupy the land with fake documents. Sakina will not let that happen and will ensure that it does not disrupt the comfortable life that her son and his family will likely gain in the future through her husband's purchased land.



## The landless of Borea finally start reaping the harvest of their long movement



It has taken the landless of Borea Purbapara village of Kaliganj Upazila, Tarali Union under the district of Kaliganj 18/20 years to establish their rights as the rightful owners of khas land against influential land grabbers, they have achieved this through their united movement. The man who has acted as their leader is Mahadev Chandra Sarker. Many of landless of Borea have started to reap their harvest and the benefits are felt in their homes but Mahadev Chandra Sarker says that there will be no conclusion in the movement unless all the landless have gained ownership of some khas land.

According to Mahadev Chandra Sarker, most of the people living in his area have been farmers or fishermen. His forefathers left behind very little for their successors to live on and all that was left of their homestead seemed to be insufficient for habitat after dividing it among all the other brothers. Even with work as a day labour and sometimes as a fisherman, there is a constant need for more in the family. There are a large number of families in the area that live in this condition.

Years back the government made a rule that in order to take a lease of any water body a count of 10/12 people had to jointly appeal for it. On hearing of the rule the landless in Mahadev Chandra's area united together to form a discussion session. They separated into a few groups

and appealed to the Upazila Fish Office after which they were granted lease of the water bodies and consequently started fish farming there. Three times a year, every year for five years they used the water bodies to fish farm and the landless created an embankment for the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA). They lived comfortably by farming shrimp and fish. Within fifteen years most of the water body had been filled and converted into high land and in 2004 the government declared the water body as khas land.

Due to the water body being converted directly into khas land it was no longer possible to book the land from the fish office. Thus the landless appealed for a Duplicate Carbon Receipt (DCR) for 20 acres and 4 shatak of land to the Upazila land officer. Unfortunately a local influential named Jahangir Sarder had already booked it in 2006-2007. In addition to this booking of the khas land, Jahangir harassed the landless and threatened them in several ways intimidating the landless people. They then went to Advocate Siraj for help and they filed a case to temporarily postpone the DCR's land appeal.

Advocate Sirajul then advised them how to proceed and recommended that they contact Uttaran. The landless grouped together and in the presence of the Advocate informed the Kaliganj Uttaran office about their troubles. After being informed of the details, in May and June 2007 Uttaran took the responsibility of handling two cases for the landless. In order to postpone a DCR by the influential Jahangir, Mahadev Chandra Ghosh travelled to Dhaka with the Advocate Sirajul and appealed to the Dhaka land board. All the expenses regarding the case were borne by Uttaran and the landless received both verdicts in their favour.

Mahadev also added that after the verdict Uttaran provided Fourteen Thousand Taka interest free for 28 landless people so that they could cut a DCR for ten acres and 5 shatak of land and they are still trying to settle a DCR for the remaining 37 people within 2007-2008. However, the landless were incapable of occupying the land that Jahangir had occupied. Jahangir filed a complaint against the landless in the form of an appeal to the TNO office and tried to file a suit against them for the remaining 10 acres and 45 shatak of land. None of the law enforcing units took Jahangir's side against the landless and apparently there is no one who is willing to take such an immoral step in Dhaka or Kaliganj.

Following the advice of Uttaran the landless formed three committees called Doyel landless women's society, Agragati landless women's society and Landless protestor's women's society. The women of the landless families have taken the initiative to form these committees. They are now living on the land they have acquired and are able to grow paddy, vegetables and farm fish. Almost everyone has established a small business such as selling fish larva, establishing crab depots, selling shrimp etc. Mahadev's family is living a good and fairly content life. His children go to school and he can provide three meals a day for his family. The only unfinished business is the movement to materialize the settlement of khas land for the landless and to gain permanent settlement.

## Parul Bashak believes that the verdict will go in her favour



Parul Bashak has been struggling against a local influential for the past three years. She lives in the principal city of Debhata Upazila under Satkhira district. It is through the strength of her own will and with help from Uttaran that she continues to fight for her rights.

Being a barber Parul's husband could not make much of a living and they were constantly slipping into poverty. Her family members comprise four members – two daughters, two sons, husband and wife. One day, her husband fell sick and eventually passed away., Parul was left as the sole bread winner of the family, helpless as her husband left behind nothing but the fragment of a homestead.

After her husband's death she faced a daily struggle and her family started to live a life of extreme poverty and sometimes starvation. She then received a temporary settlement for fifteen katha of land around her homestead from the Debhata land office. This land meant that she was capable of using her own energy and labour to cultivate crops and with what she reaped she gained enough profit to feed her family better than she had been able to since her husband had passed away. She admitted her sons and daughters into school and a few years passed in this way.

Unfortunately her peace was disrupted in 1997 by the sudden illness of her daughter who was studying in class 8. After she fell ill, she was struck by paralysis. Although she was treated for her illness it did not bring her back to her former healthy state and when all hope seemed to have been lost she decided to take her to India for better treatment, Parul has some brothers living their which made it easy for her to settle and start for her daughter to start her treatment. Her sons were still very young at that time and so she gave a neighbouring man from the adjacent village a temporary lease on her property and left with her daughter for India. Within a year, her daughter was better and she decided to return home to Bangladesh with her daughter.

When she returned her share-cropper had been regularly cultivating crops and he gave her an appropriate share but the doctor expenses for her daughter were still large and she had to go to India occasionally. For this reason she could not take back her property from the share-cropper. She married off her elder daughter during this crisis but her little piece of land became a centre of attraction for a local crook named Matlob Ali. In 2005 Matlob Ali forcibly occupied the 15 katha of land that she had acquired through a DCR settlement.

After the land had been occupied by Matlob Ali, Parul filed a case against him in June 2005 and she informed the Uttaran office in Debhata. Members of Uttaran visited the location and then took responsibility for handling her case.

Parul was euphoric when the verdict of the court was in her favour but the opposition brought back a postpone order from the Khulna Superior Division Commissioner's court. This verdict was once again in Parul's favour. Following this she fought against the opposition and once again her case was successful in the land appeal board. At present a writ petition case is proceeding in the present high court.



## One life, a new village name and establishment of the Jayedanagar's landless



Landless people of Jayedanagar

The united landless in nine villages of Kaliganj Upazila under the Satkhira district have established ownership of their land at the cost of a life. The glory of dying in the struggle to establish one's rights goes to deceased leader Jayeda – after whom the village has now been renamed. This is a unique case in the history of the movement to uphold the rights of the landless.

The landless struggle committee related the sad but victorious tale of battle in their lives. Being poor and uneducated most of the people in this area have been dominated, tortured and harassed by local influential persons denying them of their rights for a very long time. These influential persons would exploit and manipulate the labour and conviction of the landless. Many years back the Bera and the Sharnakar families were the true owners of 8,000 bigha of land. According to the government policy in 1973 per capita possession of land was limited to 100 bigha of land. Later in 1982 in parallel to the 330 number case in the Supreme Court the remaining land became khas land and from then on only the landless were entitled to the ownership of this land. The landless people of this area had no idea about their legal rights.

The landless people of that area stated, *“On this side the notorious influential Moni Thaju, Shubhash, Karim Parr, post parliamentary member Mansur Ahmed, BNP leader Wazed Ali Biswas settled a DCR in a clandestine fashion in the name of the landless and thus occupied the lands. To make up for their guilt they congregated the 380 landless families and informed them that they had spent a hefty amount of money to acquire DCR in their own names for the landless families. As if they had bestowed grace on us, they said that because they had used our names we should be grateful and let them use the land to establish fish farms after which we could use the land to cultivate paddy.”* Since they had nothing, the landless naively thought that this was a golden opportunity for them and a gift from the elite – they were being granted the chance to use the elite’s land to cultivate crops although it must be noted that it is quite impossible to do so in land that has been polluted by exposure to high levels of salinity.

2/3 years later in 1986 during the monsoon season the Chairman of the government land board came to view the khas land personally. It is natural to find comparatively more water bodies during the monsoon season and lower areas are usually filled with water. The influential advised the landless to show the landless people more of the water bodies and to even measure it in front of him by wading in to the water. By the end of the day, the Chairman had declared these khas land to be water bodies. Influential shrimp cultivators already had an upper hand and thus they gained lease of the khas land easily. They then informed the landless that they could no longer cultivate paddy in those fields. The landless were still so naïve that they failed to realize they were being woven in to the web of the influential and later all the khas land being declared as water bodies were totally occupied and manipulated by the influential.

In 1995, a severe conflict over the division of wealth began amongst the shrimp cultivators Alauddin Biswas, Wazed Ali Biswas and Moni Thakur. To punish the others Wazed Ali Biswas informed the landless of their rights. He told them that the landless were the only ones who were entitled to the khas land and that he and the other shrimp cultivators had been illegally occupying the lands all these years. On hearing this, within one night the 350 landless families occupied 1100 bigha of land in Bhanganmari, 300 bigha in Jheyamari and 1100 bigha in Baburabad (later known as Jayedanagar), set up their fences, houses and crops and started living there.

In 1998 after the occupation of khas land the landless of nine villages - Bhanganmari, Jayedanagar (Baburabad, Jheyamari, Kalabaria, Kaminibas, north and west Dhebukhali congregated to form the landless struggle committee. The landless occupied and used the khas land for their own living purposes. They said, *“But this year on 10<sup>th</sup> May, in order to gain control and possession of the khas land the influential led an attack on the landless people on which they were unsuccessful in grabbing the land. Even the locals took our side to help us against the influential attack. In the same year on 27<sup>th</sup> July, the influential used the help of the police to stage an attack on us again. One of our landless members’ - housewife in profession Jaheda died from a bullet while 29 others were injured.”*

The landless grew more restless and agitated after the death of Jaheda and grew in unity and strength. The name of the village Baburabad was changed and changed to Jahedanagar. They

crossed their souls on the death of Jaheda promising never to give up their land. Uttaran then joined these landless people in their movement along with Nijera Kori, Shushilon, Ideal and several other grassroot organizations. On behalf of all the voices of the socio-cultural organizations, individuals and the landless the 'Debhata-Kaliganj landless prevention of eviction movement committee' was formed. What started off as a little movement became a citizens movement. On account of this movement the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina distributed khas land among the landless at a public meeting. At the order of the Prime Minister, a taskforce was established under the State Minister of Land. With the help of Uttaran a list of the names of the landless was produced and alongside this a land survey conducted. The land of this area was identified as agricultural land.

Many years passed after these incidents. Finally in 2006 the landless have gained booking of khas land through legal documents. Uttaran has provided the landless interest free 5,000 Taka per acre of land. Every landless individual of this area has gained permanent settlement of one acre of khas land. Some of the land has been used for fish farming and some for paddy. The people of this area are quite content with their lives and are living in tranquillity but the evil doer is never at a loss for plans to create problems in the lives of these innocent people. They are constantly trying to harass these people by filing fake cases against them. Uttaran provides all the necessary financial assistance to deal with all these court cases and trials. To break the spirits of the landless committee will take more than false cases and harassment; it is true what Abdul Bari said, *"Not while we have blood running in our veins will we give up our right to khas land."*

## Moslem Gazi finds strength in life after receiving occupation of DCR of land



Moslem Ali has fought for 9/10 years against local land grabbers, finally receiving permanent settlement of khas land through DCR. Moslem Gazi hails from village Arar Kadakati of Kullya Union under Assasuni Upazila of Satkhira district. Inherited from their forefathers, many people in the area come into the ownership of land as it is divided among many members of the family and this is how Moslem gained a portion of his families homestead. Unfortunately the portion that he received was so meager that it was impossible to live on that with his family. He was thus compelled to seek a DCR settlement of government khas land.

Moslem started his story, “9/10 years back the land that I received after distributing it amongst us brothers was too little for habitat and cultivation. I earn money as a labourer which is why it is not possible to purchase land and start living there. That was when I got to know from my neighbours that landless people like me could appeal for DCR settlement of khas land. I went to the comparatively educated people of our area for assistance in cutting



*the DCR. I even gave Wadud of Kullya Union 8,000 taka in cash in two instalments in hope of getting the DCR. After a few days I started to lose hope. Wadud said that he could not cut the DCR and he had spent the money I had given him for assistance.”*

The next year Moslem Gazi gave Ruhul Amin of Kadakati 3500 Taka with a heavy heart in the hope of acquiring the DCR. Moslem’s wife interrupted to say that they never heard or saw the money again. Still, Moslem refused to totally give up. He knew that being landless he had a strong chance of acquiring khas land and consequently gave money to Bimal Member. Although he promised with great confidence that he would manage the DCR for Moslem, after a few months he also displayed his failure. When he had lost almost all hope Moslem got to know from a neighbouring landless who had cut his DCR that there is no need for a third source in getting a DCR. He was told that a small fee and an application to the Thana land

office was enough to get the job done. Moslem pointed to his land and said, *“In 2001 I received DCR settlement of this land.”*

Moslem added that a portion of his land fell amid the 60/65 bigha of the neighbouring shrimp hatchery. Although initially the owners of the hatchery promised him a certain amount of hari at the end of the year, later on they totally denied their pledge to do so. He could not retrieve this hari nor could he attain his rightful land and so it was almost pointless him having gained the khas land in the first place. Although he had the legal documents to prove that he was entitled to a share of anything that was gained from the land, he needed more power to prove his point. The next year when Moslem went to renew his DCR he was acquainted with a Anowar Bhai a field worker of local development organization Palli Chetona. During a lot of discussion Moslem informed Anowar of his troubles. At the suggestion of Anowar Bhai, Moslem formed the landless male committee of his locality. Members of Palli Chetona encouraged him and gave him constant hope of victory. Uttaran strongly suggested Moslem try to regain his land even if it was by force. They ensured him that they would help him if it triggered any trials or attacks but that they needed him to occupy the land first.

Moslem said that with the encouragement of Uttaran he built a house through day labour but within a few days the owner’s of the land hired gangsters raged an attack on Moslem destroying his house and beating him and his wife up severely, they were only saved from this when two women nearby came to protest. They were both admitted in the hospital and Uttaran took information regarding their treatment. Moslem then issued a complaint against the attackers at the Thana Nirbahi office. Due to the complaint mediation was staged where the landless gathered in solidarity, however, the Thana sub-inspector arrested Moslem and his landless supporters. His wife was very ill at that time and in hospital and there was no one to watch over his four little children. Fortunately the members of Palli Chetona always remained on watch and informed of Moslem’s family of his situation.

Moslem went on, *“When I was arrested my elder daughter with the help of Palli Chetona arranged a journalist meeting in Ashashuni. I was released on bail after one month and seven days. When I returned home I once again piled the bricks atop each other and started to rebuild my life with my family. But when I wanted to gain full possession of the land, the fish farm owner Nowsher Shanar attacked us with 7/8 hoodlums. But I always went to Uttaran*

*during these times of need and kept in touch with them. They have always supported me and given me faith to carry on. Months later a police report revealed the innocence of all the landless people. A final report of the police contained the same details and there was no clause that referred to any complaint against us.”*

Moslem Gazi says that he has now gained possession of the land that he had to struggle so hard for. He now farms fish in his pond and grows paddy in his fields. His elder daughter faced a few troubles related to her education recently but will sit for her S.S.C exams this year. His second daughter Kakoli is studying in class four. His youngest daughter Rupali is in class 3 and one of his sons’ studies in class 5. Unfortunately his eldest son fell very ill and had to be sent to India for better treatment but he passed away due to medical complications. Moslem Gazi dreams of educating his remaining children for a better future – something that he says with sheer thrill and confidence.

## Nazma Begum of Kulia learns to protest against wrong

Many view second marriages as only failures of the first but Nazma Begum has given second marriage a new name – one that projects a new and better life. Nazma Begum (21) who hails from Debhata Upazila under the district of Satkhira in the village of Kulia finds plenty of joy and happiness in her second marriage. She purchased two cows with the loan money of five thousand and seven hundred (5700) Taka from the Uttaran committee and sold them on at fifty-two thousand (52,000) Taka. Yet she has had to struggle hard for this happiness.

Nazma Begum talks of how happy she is. She has no miseries nor does she have to listen to the angry and appalling words of people around her. She does recall the days when torture was inflicted on her but she is glad that she possessed the courage to protest against what she considered wrong instead of remaining silent like most women. It is her courage that has brought an end to all her miseries. Through her protests she managed to gain justice and punish the guilty. Nazma's education only stretched to grade four which she completed in the local Ahsania Missionary School. Before she learnt the facts of life, she had to give up school to help her mother in domestic work due to the poor state of her father and family. She was just a child then longing to play with children of her age. Within a year of leaving school, Nazma was married off to Abbas of Chandkhali under the Satkhira Kaliganj Upazila at an approximate age of 12 years.

Nazma narrated the fact of how little she knew about domestic responsibilities, let alone marriage. After a year of her marriage she was taken to her in-law's house. Initially things went well; only to turn to horror for her later. As days went by she started to face rude scoldings from her in-laws, only on account of the dowry her parents were supposed to pay the groom's family. When she could no longer stand the pain of these rebukes and the persistent demands for dowry did she return to her parent's home. Her family and neighbours initially tried to convince her into returning to her in-laws counselling her that hiccups do occur in families and women have little to do except to accept this common fate in life.

Nazma stated that while living at her father's home she, on account of being a member of the Uttaran committee, had started building up some savings. *“I saved what I could every week from 10-15 Taka.”* Her mother Masura was also a member of this committee. Over the following days there was no news from her husband's home. When she informed some members of Uttaran about the torture, they asked Nazma to hand in a written complaint. Once it was done, a shalish (informal village court) took place comprising of both parties – Nazma and her father's family and her groom and his family. Other notable members present at the shalish were the local chairman, member, a college teacher (Professor Sirajul Islam, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah College) and others.

Nazma narrated how her husband and in-laws confessed to their guilt and according to the decision of the shalish, she returned to her in-laws home. For around six months it was as if things had really changed for the better but she was wronged as their attitude slowly once

again returned to its nasty form. When the torture started again, another shalish was called. In this way Uttaran arranged for three shalish's to take place on account of Nazma's torture and every time her husband, mother and father-in-law confessed their guilt and returned with her to their home. *“When I returned home and informed Uttaran, one representative from Uttaran told me to file a suit against them. I did so upon which my husband faced jail for 25-26 days.”* When the case had been going on for a few months and a solution was sought, with the help of Uttaran, Nazma Begum signed the divorce papers in return of 25,000 Taka.

Nazma remarried at the advice of her parents. Her husband, who is a mason, married her knowing about her past life. She smiles jubilantly when she compares her past husband, who she refers to as inhumane, to her present husband who works hard and takes care of her. She has bought land close to her parent's house so she can live close by. Life is a lot better when you do not have to kneel before the maltreatment of others.



## Ancestral property of Turi Bibi is restored to her - the rightful owner



After several years of running to courts and lawyers, Uttaran has finally helped to draw a line under Turi Bibi's problem with her ancestral property. Kamaluddin Gazi's wife Turi Bibi from the village Kulia under Debhata Upazila in Satkhira district told the tale of her life.

Turi Bibi is in her 50's. She says, *"I have been a member of Uttaran Committee for 11 years. The name of my group is Begum Rokeya. By opening a savings in the committee I was granted a loan with which I peddled several products from India such as fruit, sugar, clothes, etc. my husband used to sell vegetables at the Kulia Bazaar. I purchased eleven shatak(decimal) of land beside the ancestral land I had inherited. Although small and meagre, we – husband, wife with our three sons and two daughters lived a fairly content life.*

*Raisuddin, a neighbour was the root to all our miseries. My husband's purchased land and father's inherited properties are adjacent to each other. When he wanted to create a*

*boundary for these two pieces of land with the help of a fence, he faced a lot of protestations. One thing led to another, and when the fighting got physical Raisuddin hired people to get rid of our fence. Raisuddin did more than violate the boundary; he filed a suit against us instead of vice-versa. My husband and sons had to go into hiding in fear of police harassment and in the meantime our business started to crumble. Losing all hope and finding no other source of rational or solace, I decided to ask Uttaran for assistance. Uttaran arranged for a shalish where both parties were present but the problem could not be solved at this first session. On account of this the local chairman on behalf of Uttaran bestowed the members with the authority to produce a solution. But the problem was twisted more when the chairman ordered a land surveyor to measure the land and the opponents did not turn up. What was worse was the member himself was not present at the scene when required.*

*After the passage of about 2.5 years with no solution, Uttaran took the initiative of measuring my land. Notable people such as the Union Parisad Chairman, Member, Professor Sirajul Islam of Shakhipur Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah College and many others were called on to witness the land-measurement. In addition, Raisuddin was also called for presence there. Pillars were erected notifying the land boundaries that had been sketched out on pen and paper with all these people as acting witnesses.”*

Turi Bibi says that she is happy that the opposition accepted the process and have not created any predicament after that.

## Parvati Dey gains khas land with Uttaran's help



Widow Parvati Dey dreamt golden dreams based on a little piece of khas land. Widower of late Subrata Dey who comes from Golappur of Islamkati Union under Tala Upazila of Satkhira district is 23 years old. Her struggles revolve around bringing up her only child – daughter Deepa Day (8). Parvati Dey spins a sad tale with visions of happy days in future

Parvati started, “My father's house is under the Kheshra Dumuria Union of Tala. My father Dhirondra Nath Halder married me off at the young age of around 12 years. My husband Subrata Dey worked as a day labourer on other's agricultural land and from afternoon to evening he ran his little tea store in the Tala Bazaar. With what he earned, we led a simple but content life and at the end of three years I gave birth to a beautiful daughter.

My difficulties started when my daughter turned three months. Her father fell from a coconut tree injuring his head and shoulders. The doctors at Tala hospital advised us to take him to Khulna without delay. Being a day labourer, my husband had almost no savings but luckily

*many relatives, people who worked at Tala Bazaar and even a non-government organisation Mukti Parisad provided us with financial assistance. But at the end of six days my husband passed away due to medical complications resulting from his hard fall.*

*At the time of my husband's death, my husband's elder brother was already separated and my mother-in-law lived with us. My husband being the only earning source turned into a major problem. The first support came from Mukti Parisad. On their advice I became a member of the group called Laboni for landless women. I had no idea whatsoever that I would come into the ownership of khas land. After becoming a member of the committee, the brothers of Mukti Parisad told me to get an application written from their office and submit it to the revenue collection office after which I would luckily get a DCR for khas land for a year. Accordingly, I received DCR for 11.5 shatak land from the land office for one year.*

*I received all sorts of assistance starting from writing the application for land to submitting the fees from Mukti Parisad. I have been informed that the angelic hand behind all this aid belongs to Uttaran. I have also received interest free financial aid from Uttaran to cultivate agricultural crops. I have seen paddy shining in the fields – the only crop that thrives beside the Kopatakkha due to the rising water level during the monsoon season. I was granted a DCR the following year too although I didn't receive it this year due to government's refusal to legally grant DCR's. But the land remains within my possession. My father sometimes helps me in the agricultural work where I hire day labourers; sometimes I spend my time working in the field too.”*

*Parvati's daughter now studies in Class Two and there are always expenses behind her. “I stay at my husband's home where I've taken up rearing ducks and hens with occasional assistance from my father. Uttaran and Mukti Parisad members eagerly stretch out their hands to aid people like me during our difficult times. In my husband's absence life is quite tough but I continue to work because educating my daughter is the foremost intention of mine.”*



## Night guard Abdul Aziz Morol fights for justice



Abdul Aziz Morol of village Shahzadpur under Kleshra Union of Tala Upazila in Satkhira is by profession a night duty guard. He has had to pass many hurdles to bring in to possession the land and wealth he inherited from his forefather because of local influentials who have tried to prevent him from doing so. Following a friend's advice, he joined the landless committee for which he is now reaping the benefits of possession of the land that he is entitled to. He says, *"I have no idea where I would have been had I not gained possession of the land."*

Abdul Aziz recalls his past, *"This was my paternal grand father's property. When my father and his two brothers were young, my grandfather passed away leaving almost 91 shatak of land behind for his children. But since my father Lokman Morol, uncle Babar Ali and uncle Emon Ali were young, several influential people were successful in taking over the land. The sons of Ansar Morol – Insaaf Morol, Mujibur Morol, Kader Morol, Gaffar Morol and a local influential person Elahi Box Morol took illegal possession of the land. My widowed paternal*

*grandmother ran the family by working in other's homes while slowly her sons crept to adolescence into adulthood and started working as day labourers.*

*Meanwhile several attempts to retrieve the illegally occupied land had gone in vain. Later my mother bought 15 katha of land on which she started her livelihood. My uncle Emon Ali suddenly went missing from the house. We were informed of his presence in Jessore but never found him when we went searching for him. Consequently my father passed away while the members of the household had already increased. We were four brothers. Uncle Babar Ali had sons and we all lived lives of hardship with the meagre earnings we made from being day-labourers. The irony was that while we had land that could have comfortably supported us, we almost lived the lives of beggars.”*

Abdul Aziz says that they carried on in a miserable state with the hope in their hearts one day they would be given justice. Abdul Aziz continued his story, “In 2005 some members of Uttaran suggested that all the landless develop a committee which was then materialised into “the landless of Shahzadpur.” Among the 33 members in the committee, I was assigned as the general editor. Members of Uttaran came regularly to our committee meetings where they would participate in our discussions talking about our problems and possible solutions and through this they got to know about our landless problems. In 2006 they (Uttaran) encouraged this committee to forcibly occupy our lands. Following that advice the present shareholders of that land set up their houses by occupying 44 shataks of land and surrounded the area with barricades. They also occupied the rest of the 47 shataks of land. But their opponents raged an attack on them on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2006. They destroyed the houses, fencing and even injured the women, children and elderly of many families. A suit was filed in the court of which Uttaran took full financial responsibility. During the same time under the administration of Rupali, the Chairman of Kheshra Union Parisad Gazi Mahatab Uddin arranged arbitration with the obligatory presence of both parties where it was decided that the party which would be favoured by the informal court would receive the land. “Although the verdict was in our favour and we won the case and gained back our lands,” states Abdul Jalil, “the opposition party filed five various harassing and frustrating cases against us; here again we were fully assisted by Uttaran.”

Abdul Aziz says that most of the court cases have been solved. He works as a night guard from which he is paid 1400 Taka monthly. Of his three children his daughters Khadija studies in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and Marium in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and his son studies in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. His wife Rehana Khatun works as a day labourer in other's homes to support the family in times of financial struggle. The times are good but Abdul Aziz has had to struggle to reach this level of peace.

## My child would inherit my ancestral property- this provides me peace



Stopping our three-wheeler at the Herring-bone brick-built road of the Murakulia village of the Tala Union we descended from it and reached the courtyard of the freedom-fighter Mohammad Ali, son of Md. Abdur Jabbar. It was a thatched house with earthen walls. It had one door with verandas on both sides. Cyclone Sidr had left marks of its devastation on the house of Mohammad Ali. Sitting on a madur, Mohammad bhai started narrating his story. *“This is my inherited property. Yet I have to sue at the Court for getting its ownership to this very day.”*

Mohammad Ali was young during the War, about 20/21 year old. He could not recollect the exact year. He heard that one had to register one's name as a freedom fighter at Bashirhat (in India). Then he went to Taki and got admitted. After having training for a month, he started fighting under the commandship of Major Jalil in Sector 9. He encountered combat several times in many areas including Shamnagar, Kaliganj, Parulia under Satkhira district, Satkhira Proper, Jessore, Rajarhat and so on.

Having returned home from the War, Mohammed Ali used to work as a day labourer or a woodcutter (felling date trees); he used to do whatever work was available at that time. With the homestead inherited from his father and his daily earnings, he was passing his days somewhat comfortably. At that time, the neighbours Shamsur Morol and Ansar Morol, who were *razakars* (representatives of anti-liberation forces), wanted to occupy Ali's homestead. They had money as they were involved in the politics of the Jamayat-e-Islami and the reason for the dispute lies there. They attacked Ali's family and burned down the house. They broke the bones of Ali's chest and hands and tortured his wife.

Mohammed Ali informed us, *"I filed a case against the attackers with the assistance of Uttaran. Whenever we attempted to take possession of our land upon getting the verdict of the Civil and the Judge Court, the defendants brought the Stay Order from the High Court. The case is now lying with the High Court. Uttaran has been providing the expenses of running the case."* The defendants have crippled Ali for which he is incapable of doing anything. His only daughter, Akiron, was married off after having passed the matriculation (S.S.C) Examination. His wife works as a day labourer. They can hardly make both ends meet. In addition to these troubles she cannot get work every day. Sometimes, Mohammed Ali goes out begging for alms. While talking about the difficulties he and his wife face, Freedom Fighter Mohammad Ali hangs down his head in shame. He continued, *"When one of my well wishers sees me begging, he takes out money from his pocket and says, Mohammad Bhai, you are a freedom fighter. Why would you beg while I am here? If you beg, I am disgraced."*

Last year Uttaran provided some money and with which Mohammad Ali and Jahanara bought 5 ducks and 4 chickens. The poultry of Mohammad Ali and Jahanara are fully grown up now. Jahanara gave a smile of deep satisfaction and said, *"Last year they laid eggs. This year also they have matured enough to lay eggs. The hens would soon lay eggs."* Freedom-fighter Mohammad Ali also hopes for a better future. He said, *"I have given away my land to my wife. When my wife would pass away, my daughter would inherit that property. No one would dare to snatch the property. It is a matter of great peace that my child would inherit my ancestral property"*.



**“Men and Women, be aware. We shall realize our rights”**



Chapala Rani Das of Kismotghona village of Tala Upazila fought for long 15 years to protect the homestead of her husband against the land-grabbers. Not only did she undertake the struggle to save her own property, she played a crucial role in the movement for achieving women's rights by removing social prejudices against them.

At the age of seven, she came to her husband's family. It took her six to seven years to realize what a family is. Then she gave birth to three sons and a daughter consecutively. As the number of family members increased, so did their needs. In time she came to know from a neighbour about the co-operative societies and formed a society "Bichitra". Uttaran provided Chapala 1500 Tk as loan. She bought a cow with that money. She along with the other women also joined the school for the elders established by Uttaran within a few days of forming the co-operate society. They were trained on several issues including prevention of torture, rights of women, how the husband and wife can work together, the problems and plights of women at different stages of their lives starting from their childhood at their fathers' residences to their husbands' residences, to sons' residence and so on.

Chapala Rani said, *“I have been able to bear the expenses of the education of my three sons by joining this co-operative society. I could marry off my sons and daughters by this co-operative society. My younger son Satya Das has been working in a Missionary Organization after having passed S.S.C. My second son works as a day labourer. My elder son stays at his in-laws’ residence and works at others’ houses. He cannot stay at his own house as a case has been going on concerning my land.”* Then Chapala Rani began another tale of her life about the land belonged to her father-in-law.

An influential neighbour, retired Subedar Akkas Ali Sheikh, and one of her husband’s distant relatives secretly auctioned the homestead and the adjacent paddy field. She added, *“If my father in law cultivated this land that relative of his would call Akkas Ali and take away the plough. We could not cultivate. I was very young during that period but I tried to understand. At that time, when we went to the court for staying the auction, they with the local headmen relinquished their claim on the homestead.”* However, not many days have passed since the two groups reached a settlement, Akkas Ali and his gang keep harassing Chapali Rani and her family. Once they picked fruit from coconut trees without informing her and as Chapala Rani tried to stop them, they beat her up along with her daughter and daughter-in-law. Then with the assistance of Uttaran, Chapala Rani filed a suit. The case has been going on for the last 15 years and is on the verge of being over. In the meanwhile, childless Akkas Ali has also died. Although his nephews had been running the case after his death, they are now willing to come to an agreement with Chapala Rani. Meanwhile Chapala’s husband, Balai passed away the year her son appeared at the S.S.C Examination. Chapala does not want many things for herself at this stage of life. Only for the sake of her children she wants to resolve the case concerning the land as early as possible.

## The dream of Buli Sarkar - Raise your granddaughter with the dignity of a human being, not as a 'girl'



Buli Sarkar of the Kismatghona village of Tala Upazila is no longer scared of the threats of the land grabbers, she has realized her due rights after years of struggle.

Several years back, Buli Sarkar possessed only a small homestead as property. Her husband Sukumar Sarkar worked as day-labourer. With that meagre income they raised a family of two children. There were frequent altercations between the husband and the wife due to their poverty which ultimately led to misunderstandings. Tired of the situation Buli Sarkar started looking for ways out of poverty to bring back the happiness in her family. Her neighbour Chapala Rani had formed co-operative society by that time. Following Champa Rani, Buli Sarkar also joined the co-operative society of Uttaran. They kept the name of the co-operative society 'Sandhani'.

*"Do you know why I kept the name Sandhani?" Not waiting for a reply, Buli said, "Sandhani stands for that which provides one with direction for destination. This cooperative society*

*will provide us light and with this hope we have kept this name.*” Initially, everyone had to save 2 Tk per week in the co-operative society. But soon a problem arose with it. Due to acute poverty men did not give any money to their wives. Then Uttaran provided them training at its Jatpur Office on how to save money from the expenditure of the household. In accordance with that they kept saving money.

After a few days of forming the co-operative society, a hired gang of the land-grabbers attacked Buli Sarkar to grab her homestead. At first they attempted to set her house on fire. When she tried to stop them, they attacked her with a shovel and she became unconscious. Then they set the house on fire. The house burnt furiously. Many people came forward to help. But due to the presence of the hoodlums they did not dare to extinguish the fire by pouring water on it. Everything in the house turned into ashes. Hearing this news, people from Uttaran came to her residence and rushed her to the hospital in an unconscious condition. Later, Buli Sarkar filed a case against the perpetrators of this attack with the assistance of Uttaran. Members of all the co-operative societies in the area raised a movement against the attacks of the land-grabbers with the help and confidence provided by Uttaran. While staying at the hospital, Buli came to know that hundreds of members of the co-operative society of Uttaran demonstrated in Tala Upazila demanding justice against the hoodlums who attacked her. They raised the slogan, *“Attackers on Buli Sarkar must be put on trial”*. This news was published in different newspapers. After having fought for years against the land-grabbers, Buli Sarkar won the case.

Buli Sarkar says, *“My elder son works at a saloon. My second son Sanyasi Sakcar has started his studies again although he had to stop in the middle. My husband works at a Missionary office”*. Buli Sarkar herself cooks in the same office. But recently since her leg has broken, she does not work. She also said, *“I have married off my elder son. I have two granddaughters. Now I have dreams about them. I shall teach them how to ride a bicycle. They will study. They will grow up with human dignity. I will not let them stay behind just because they are girls. They would be able to do what I could not do.”*



## The victory of Shukjan is inevitable, however influential the self-seekers are



Shukjan Begum, struggled her whole life. It began for Shukjan at the age of seven when her mother passed away. She grew up first in the care of her grandmother and then parental aunt. She got married when she was only 10 years old to a man from a neighbouring family. At first she could not understand the duties of domestic life and things became more difficult when her day-labourer husband passed away when she three months pregnant. Her old mother-in-law was there as her only parent and there was the inherited homestead as her only property, but there was acute poverty in the family of two and she made a living by rearing other people's goats. The yeanelings were divided between Shukjan Begum and the owner. Eventually she became the owner of five goats.

In the meantime, the young widow Shukjan and her husband's small piece of land caught the attention of Abbas and his accomplices. In order to occupy that land, they started harassing

Shukjan in different ways. She said, *“As I did not respond to his wicked proposal, Abbas hurled stones at my roof regularly. One day he perpetrated an attack with his gang in order to kill my six-month old son. In that dilapidated house, we, two widows and a little kid, were frightened to live there. Then I brought my father in this house. But the conspirators started threatening my father. At one point in time he was forced to leave.”*

Abbas could not give up his desire for Shukjan’s land and the torture he inflicted on her grew day by day. Shukjan continued, *“In these circumstances, one day when a goat was missing, I went to the beel to look for it. Abbas and his gang were lying in wait there. They raped me and beat me up. They also threatened to kill my son if I disclosed this incident to anybody.”* But that night she became very sick and members of Uttaran arranged for her treatment. With the assistance of Uttaran, she filed a case against the culprits. Three months after the case began the opponents expressed their willingness to compromise. The case was withdrawn after having entered into a recognizance through the local people and the people of Uttaran but it was not long before Abbas revealed his true intentions. He started to threaten to torture and beat her and eventually, *“He occupied some of my land. I again filed a case against Abbas with the assistance of Uttaran and I won the case. Afterwards, Uttaran came to my help when I went to take the possession of my land”*.

Shukjan’s eyes sparkle with happiness. She said, *“If I deduct the woeful period, I have gotten many things in life. I have cows, goats, hens and ducks - everything. My son has grown up. He works as a day-labourer. I have married off my son. My daughter-in-law sews kantha (sheet with patchwork). I weave mats with date leaves. We are now in a better condition with everybody earning. I have got two grandsons. Now my only dream is to educate them. But wicked people are never in want of evil plans. Abbas and his gang are still after me. Only a few days back they wounded my nephew with a chopper as they did not find my son at home. I filed a case and I will keep protesting.”*



## Now Rizia Begum no longer sleeps at other people's veranda at night



*“As long as I am here nobody will be able to get their under aged daughters married off in this area. I shall resist. If they do not listen to me, I will inform the night guard or the police or anyone else. Somebody would turn up,”* this is how Rizia Begum expressed her determination. She is not a woman of words; she believes in action. Only a few months back, she stopped one such child marriage but there is a gulf of difference between the Rizia of today and that of twelve years back.

Her husband Ansar Ali was a peasant and they did not have even a house. They had to spend their nights in the veranda of their father-in-law's house with the children. Then Rizia Begum's father-in-law gave them his five shatak land. Rizia Begum and her husband built a hut by excavating earth from the river-bed and started living in that hut. The children were growing up and with that the needs of the family also started growing. Rizia Begum became a member of the cooperative society of Uttaran 'Rupantar'. She started running crop trading

after taking a loan from Uttaran. Later she together with nine other women took loans from Uttaran and started cultivation, working their lands themselves. During harvesting they repaid the loan and kept saving. Rizia Begum gave part of her savings to her husband to set up a business and he is now a cattle-trader.

The influential people of the village wanted to occupy Rizia Begum's husband's inherited homestead illegally which led to a court case. These influential people filed a false case of robbery against Rizia and her husband to cause them trouble. The case was run by the lawyers of Uttaran. The case of robbery has been dissolved but the case of land-grabbing is still going on

Now Rizia Begum is serving as the Chairperson of the Federation Committee of Uttaran. The people of the locality call her for arbitration. Everybody calls her 'Member' as she participated at the Union Parishad election for the reserved seat in 2002. Although she was defeated losing by only 5 votes, her name spread because of her proactive participation at the election. The mother of four daughters and a son Rizia Begum said, *"I have married off two of my daughters. After having passed the S.S.C Examination, my son is now trading fish. However, I provided him capital. Another daughter of mine looks after my poultry and cattle."* However, Rizia Begum's biggest dream is for her youngest daughter, Tania Khatun Maina. She has been admitted to a college after passing the S.S.C with 4.69 GPA. Tania dreams of looking after her mother by becoming a magistrate.

## Encouragement to struggle for a young mother Jaheda



Jaheda Khatun of Baroihati village under Tala Upazila of Satkhira district is not ready to fall back in the fight for realizing her rights. Liaquat Sarder, the traitor has been convicted for a life term after she fought her legal fight. However, this is not the end. A case is going on in the court for the maintenance of her daughter. Jaheda Khatun is fighting for her only child and she is trying to educate her as well as herself.

Jaheda Khatun's (19) father died when she was very young. It was very difficult for her mother to maintain the family of four children. Jaheda's helpless mother sent her to Khulna to work as a maid servant. After working there for three years, she came to her house for a trip. Jaheda said, *"When I came back home Liaqot Sardar (35), a neighbor of ours, attempted to seduce me in various ways and I did not go back to Khulna for work. Then he persuaded me to marry him and with the pitiful advantage of his childless first wife and the story that he would never become a father, he built up a physical relation with me. When I became pregnant he refused to marry me."* Jaheda became lost in the fear of social and family

customs. She was almost confined to her house. After ten months a daughter Fatema was born. Liaquat Sardar refused to admit the paternity of the child and threatened her in various ways.

Jaheda's mother Aina Begum was a member of Uttaran Society and she was employed as a security guard and caretaker of a tree plantation program of Uttaran. Aina Begam informed Uttaran of the incident and sought its help. Jaheda filed a case with the help of Uttaran. Uttaran helped them through counselling sessions so that they could gather power, courage, mental strength and they could face the culprit overcoming all types of social prejudice. In 2004, Jaheda got the verdict in favour of her and the Court awarded the imposter Liaquat Sarkar life term imprisonment.

Jaheda lives in a veranda of her brother's house, she works as a day-labourer or as a maid and with this income she maintains herself as well as her daughter. Jaheda said, *"I earn 50 Taka as a day-labourer and I have to work from 6.00 am to 4.00 pm. The price of rice is about 30 taka and I can not get work regularly. I get work 10 to 12 days in a month. If anyone calls me for household work such as dusting rice, washing clothes, plastering floors with cow dung then I can earn something more. Besides this, work in the field lessens due to water logging. Often I do not get work. Sometimes my health does not permit me to work."* So she has to starve or she hardly manages half a meal. She said that there are a lot of other expenses, such as clothing's for her and for her daughter, medical expenses etc. Sometimes the girl asks for less important things and Jaheda has to try to give her what she wants to please her. Jaheda's daughter is now six-years old. She started to go to school with the other children of the locality. When her education will start in full swing it will become a matter of additional expense. Jaheda's voice got strong. She said, *"I have filed for the maintenance case for that reason. It is the father's duty to bear the child's expenses. I myself bear all the troubles and he (Liaquat) shuns all the responsibilities; I will not allow it anymore."*



## If needed Fatema Begum will fight another ten years to regain her rights



It is now more than ten years since Fatema Begum (36), a day-labourer started her struggle against her greedy, dowry-seeking husband Mosharef Sheikh. Her mother Manik Fakir married her off to Mosharef Sheikh, a madrassa-bred student of Fatehpur under Keshabpur in 1996. Then she gave birth to a dead child and with this unhappiness invaded their home. Her in-laws started demanding dowry using many excuses and they started torturing her physically. Considering the troubles of her poor father, she put up with all these tortures silently. Fatema said, *“At this point, my father went to my in-laws house in order to inform them about the birth of my second child and came to know that Mosharef had gotten married for the second time. Many days passed but nobody came to visit me or my son. However, one day my father-in-law himself came to my father’s house and took me with him to his house. But at their house, my husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law and all started torturing me mentally and even physically. At one stage my husband denied the parenthood of my son.*

*They beat me up and threw out of their house. Then I came back to my father's house along with my son."*

Fatema sought help from Uttaran and they tried to solve the case by arbitration but it was not possible to solve. Then she filed a case with the help of Uttaran and the culprits were arrested and sent to jail. However, the Investigation Officer of the case, the messenger of the Office of the Co-operative Society demanded 2000 Taka as bribe. As Fatema said, *"I then lived from hand to mouth. How could I bribe such a huge amount of money?"* As she refused to pay the bribe the Investigation Officer submitted a fabricated report taking money from the criminals. In accordance with the Investigation Report, Mosharef was released on bail in the second marriage case after eight months.

Fatema was not prepared to give up so early. She said, *"My husband did not render any of his duties as a father. He did not speak even to my son when they met at the Court. He does not keep contact with us to know about our condition. My son does not belong to me only; his father also has some responsibility towards him. At least he can support me to raise the boy. I shall file a case demanding the cost of maintenance of my son. I shall win this struggle of realizing my rights for the sake of my son."*



## Nazma Begum will not sell her dignity anywhere



*“Whatever hard it is, I shall raise my son alone,”* with this firm determination Nazma Begum (28) refused to get married for the second time when her parents brought the proposal to her. Although Nazma of Dhalbaria of Tala Upazila under Satkhira was forsaken by her husband, she could not forget her own family. She has been continuing her legal battle against her dowry-seeker absconding husband with an aim to realize her rights and to punish the culprits.

Nazma Begum’s parents married her off to Amjed Sarcar of Pathorghata in Keshabpur in agreement with him that they would give him 20,000 Taka as dowry. Hekmat Ali, poor

day-labourer father of Nazma, gave 15,000 Taka of the agreed amount as dowry. For the rest five thousand Taka, unhappiness began to visit their home. Her husband started torturing her mentally while verbal abuses also continued for dowry. It increased gradually. Her mother requested they be allowed some more time to pay the rest of the amount but this was treated as an excuse and did not reduce the torture. However, Nazma became pregnant and came to visit her father's residence. At that time her husband disappeared.

Nazma's father Hekmat Ali was a member of co-operative society of Uttaran for men. He informed Uttaran and the Chairman of Dhalbaria Union Parishad about the incident. The Chairman took the responsibility of finding Amjed. After issuance of Notice thrice, Amjed appeared before him. Thereafter an arbitration was arranged where Chairman Mijanur Rahman and Member Shankar, and some people of the locality attended. The arbitration decided that Nazma would be sent to her in-laws residence but at this time Nazma's husband informed them about his second marriage. Then the arbiters decided to investigate the authenticity of her husband's second marriage before sending her to her in-laws' house. At that time it was revealed that Amjed Sarcar got married not for the second time but several times in different places hiding the facts of his previous marriages. By this time, Nazma gave birth to a son but Amjed denied him. Then her father filed a suit at the court. Since it was difficult to run the case with his poor income as a day-labourer, he informed Uttaran about this case. As requested by him, Uttaran took the responsibility of running the case. Police arrested Nazma's parents-in-law since Amjed was absconding. Nazma further informed, *"The case has been running for two years. The main culprit Amjed is absconding. Later, Amjed's parents got released on bail."* Nazma started working. Nazma told us that her only son Mehedi studies at the local BRAC School. Amjed has never seen his son since the boy was born. Although her husband has left her son, she cannot.

## Johra Khatun is determined to claim rights of her intellectually challenged son



A few years back, the shrimp business of Johra Khatun's husband, Abdul Gazi, faced severe losses. To collect capital they sold a part of their homestead to Jalal Hazra of Shriram Pur in Paikgacha, this was the beginning of their misfortune. 4/5 years after selling a part of the homestead, Johra Khatun went to record the rest. She then came to know about the forgery done to some parts of the land which she had bought in the name of her two sons, Md. Abdul Quddus Gazi, an intellectually challenged boy, and Md. Al-Amin Gazi. A case was filed against the land forgery in the Civil Court. To evict them from the land, influential Halal

Hazra attacked the family with his gang, at one stage they threw acid which injured Johra and her intellectually challenged son. As they were severely burnt by the acid they were brought to the Paikgacha Hospital where the staff advised them to transfer to Khulna for better treatment. Another case was filed on acid throwing.

Johra Khatun said, *“I became penniless while bearing the expenence of the treatment for the burns caused by the acid throwing and running the case. My husband could not run his business well due to the crisis. The gang of Jalal Hazra threatened to kill us. Fearing for our life we took shelter in others' houses. Due to dire needs we were forced to beg, being left with no other choice.”* Then Johra's brother who ran a tailoring shop at Tala, advised Johra to go to Uttaran and for three years Uttaran provided assistance to run all the cases at Court. Johra continued, *“In the meanwhile, the conspirator Jalal Hazra again attempted to occupy my house with the help of some corrupt police personnel. They beat my brother-in-law's son and his wife and children, as they did not find me at home. After this attack, they filed a case against us showing us as culprits. He harassed us by bribing the Police.”*

However, Johra expressed her optimism to us. She said, *“The woeful days are almost over. The case of the acid-throwing is being dealt at the High Court now. My husband, Abdul Karim Gazi, has started trading fish. My youngest son Al-Amin Gazi is a seventh Grade student of Kapilmuni Shahachari Biddyapith. I have married off my only daughter Jesmin Akhter.”*



## Struggle is the only way to realize equal rights



Sundari Begum's (40), of Islamkati in Tala Upazila at Satkhira, day-labourer husband Asem Ali died suddenly leaving behind two young children. The son was then 4 years old and the daughter one and a half years old. They have no property. Sundari did not get refuge at her in-laws house. Being almost absolutely penniless she built a hut in a khas land near the local football playground along with her two children. She used to work at others' houses and she became a member of the cooperative society of Uttaran.

However, her small piece of land caught the greedy attention of the local influential people. In order to evict her from the land they at first threatened her verbally and then afterwards they beat her and set the house on fire. Following these incidents she went to the Uttaran Office. A Notice was served to the suspected culprits by Uttaran in order to arrange arbitration. At first, the culprits simply tore up the Notice.. Then when the second Notice was served, Noor Ali Sarder, Santosh Ghosh, Ajit Ghosh, Bidyut turned up at the arbitration and confessed. Although the arbitration laid the responsibility of ensuring security to some

negotiators of the arbitration, the impostors created disputes very shortly. At this time, Sundari Begum filed a case with the help of Uttaran, *“The villagers also came forward to help me in my danger. A distant uncle of mine donated three shataks of land. Building a house, I started living there along with my two children. I ran my household by joining the co-operative society of Uttaran and by working at others’ houses.”* The young widow then married again. Her second husband fathered her two children. Her son Abdul Ahad is studying at a madrassa and her daughter Kasmina Khatun is attending primary school. With a shy smile Sundari said, *“It has been 8/9 years since my husband stopped allowing me to work at others’ houses. He runs the family well with his income from day-labouring, driving a van and so on. I have returned the land that my uncle donated to me.”*

With much enthusiasm Sundari says, *“This 21 year old ‘Shikalchari’ cooperative society is mine. I have done many things in life. I bought cattle with the money I got from the co-operative society. My daughter Shonavan and my son Md. Faruk Ali Sardar were married off after they received some education. However, my son recovered his father’s land and has been living there setting up houses. I have taken one bigha land on lease and cultivated sugarcane there. I have saved 7000 Taka approximately. All these things are mine; I shall not share them with anybody.”*



## Hashima's mother, sister & neighbours gather inspiration to struggle recalling Hashima's struggling life



Hashima sacrificed her life to the lust of her dowry-seeking husband but did not compromise. She fought against the wrongdoing and she has become a source of inspiration for those who are struggling. Still now her mother, sister and others remember the active, laborious Hashima's gathering of power to struggle. Hashima's mother Dubal Begum of Kasha village of Kumira Union Parishad under patkel ghata, of Satkhira district described the struggling life of the joyful and restless Hashima.

After suffering from fever for two days Hashima's day-labourer father died. The only property of theirs is a piece of land where their house is. Two daughters out of seven children were already married. Hashima's mother became helpless with the remaining five children and the crisis of the family increased day by day. At the age of only 10/11 years old Hashima was married off but her dowry-monger husband divorced her. So Hashima came back to her father's residence before even having the chance to understand what family life should be.

Hashima took a job in a local rice mill with the help of a neighbour Momena Begum to help her mother and the rest of her family. The rice mill was a quite far away from her house and wicked people of the locality noticed her on the way and teased her because of her divorce. Helpless, Hashima left the job but she did not sit idly in the poor family of a mother, three brothers and two sisters. She sent her mother to the rice mill for work and she took the responsibility of the household duties. Five years went by and in the meantime Hashima enrolled herself as a member of "Mukti" an Uttaran Society in 1995.

One day when Hashima and some other girls of her age were returning home after collecting fire wood, a group of local boys made her an indecent proposal to engage in illicit physical

activities. Hashima was not that type of girl and refused, openly protesting. The local boys named Rafiqul, Moshir and some others threatened her. That night they broke the window of her house and threw acid on Hashima while she slept. One side of her face and a large portion of other parts of her body were burnt. She was admitted in the Tala Upazila Health complex. Receiving the information of acid attack on Hashima, the staffs of Uttaran rushed to the hospital and they stood by her side. They assisted her for better treatment at Dhaka and they helped her in filing a case against the culprits. After 15/16 days of treatment, Hashima was taken back home and it took about six months for her fully recover. After recovery Hashima took a job in Ree Shilpi (an Italian medical organization providing service for the disabled).

The case was contested for about six years. Uttaran spent about 2,50,000 Taka supporting Hashima. The accused Rafiqul and Moshir have been convicted for 14 years and they were fined for 5,000 Taka by the Court. On failing to pay the money the imprisonment would increase by an extra one year term. After conviction, the guardians of the accused proposed for compensation and offered money for settling the case outside of Court. A local person named Motiar came with the guardians of Rafiqul & Moshir. The discussion for compensation between the two parties went on for some days. Throughout the process Motiar appeared to be very interested to play the role of the mediator. At one stage Motiar proposed to the guardians of Hashima to marry her. Hashima's family agreed to the proposal of Motiar though they knew everything she had been through.

Hashima did not want to let the accused go unpunished, she wanted them to be punished but her husband Motiar was not happy about her determination about the punishment of the accused. Motiar showed his real character as he failed to get a large amount of money from the accused and he began to torture Hashima. He refused to give her food and physical torture began on Hashima. He began to pressure Hashima to bring money from her father's house. He even asked Hashima to collect money from Uttaran. At one stage of being tortured,

Hashima asked Uttaran to buy her a cow. In the middle of 2004, Hashima took ten thousand taka from Uttaran to buy a cow and gave the money to Motiar who misappropriated the money. A neighbour and sister-in-law of Hashima named Rahima said, “*Hashima constantly faced torture in spite of providing the money to her husband*”. Hashima had to abort her pregnancy twice because of her brutal husband Motiar.

Finally, Hashima was locked in a room for three days without food, then Motiar forced her to eat rice with mashed potato and locked her in the room and left the house. After a while, Hashima started to vomit. One day passed by and when her condition deteriorated a local doctor was called on. The doctor advised to send the patient to hospital as the condition of the patient was worsening but Hashima had died before she was sent to hospital. After this incidence, Uttaran stood by Hashima’s family. Uttaran filed a case against Motiar on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2004. Still Uttaran is conducting the case. Hashima’s mother Dubal Khatun wept several times while talking about this matter. She said, “*My Hashima passed her days with more hardship than I. I want severe punishment for the murderer. I have nothing more to want at this old age.*”

## Anju Mandal of Kapash Danga shall win the struggle of life

Anju Mandal of Naraghata Union Parishad of Patkelghata in Satkhira district wants to turn her life around. Almost all the 150 families in the locality are in such a condition that they have to earn every day for every meal. The inhabitants of the Mandal Para have to live in such squalid and congested conditions that the walls of a house closely touch those of another. Two or three families have to use only one small yard but some have only a small corridor for walking. One day, Khitish Gain, the son of Ranjon Gain an influential person of adjacent Dhalipara village and his accomplices came to dig the very small yard to put up an electric pole to be used for wiring an electric line. Anju Mandal, an unmarried daughter of Nitai Mondal, became the victim of their brutal torture as she tried to prevent them.

Anju Mandal said, *“On that day, Khitish Gain’s men came to dig an electric pole for wiring an electric cable only 8-10 yards away from our house. At that time my father or my uncles were not at home. We, girls and women, tried to prevent them. The logic behind was if they dig poles in that small yard, it would become narrower. Besides this, a few months back, the electric cable was cut down and fell on the ground and some people got injured in the incident. Because of these reasons, we prevented them from cable wiring through the house. As all the women came jointly to protest, Khitish’s men went away after wiring a portion of the cable and they gave various threats”*. After this incident, Anju and two other girls of the neighboring house arranged the cables which were left away and went to hand them over to Khitish's house. This time the people of Khitish's house threatened to get revenge. *“In the evening I wanted to buy some necessary things from the grocery shop of the locality. While I was returning from the grocery shop, Khitish and 7-8 men of his attacked me and they shut my mouth and took me to the garden. They pushed clothes into my mouth. I tried best to get rid of them but they slapped me on both sides of my face and I fell unconscious and I recall nothing after that.”* Anju stopped here.

They left a blood-stained, senseless Anju in the garden. Since the shop was only a few minutes distance from the house and Anju had not returned yet, Anju's mother was worried. She proceeded on the way to the shop. She heard the wailing sound. Following the sound, she went there and found Anju bound and gagged. At night Anju fell seriously ill and in the morning Anju was taken to the Sundarban clinic in Satkhira but as the patient's condition was critical, they declined to admit her in the clinic. After that she was taken to the Janata Clinic.

Being informed, Manager Palash Bhai and other people of Uttaran of Patkelghata came to see Anju. Anju was treated in the clinic for about 15/16 days. It took about three months to attain full recovery. Throughout this time, Uttaran provided all types of medical help, food etc and also assisted to file a case against the perpetrators. Anju explained how after filing the case Khitish Gain, Prashanto, influential local Jagar’s brother Ajoy were arrested by the police. Chakla, the elder aunt of Anju Mandal said, *“Khitish and his gang not only violated the girl, they also ruined the dignity of the whole community. Marriage proposals for the girls of the same age of Anju belonging to our community are also being cancelled. We want punishment for the culprits.”*



## Story of Anowara Begum's struggle



Anowara Begum of Tikarampur of Khalishkhali Union under Tala Upazila of Satkhira District is running the cases for her father's property. She has no brother and her two sisters were married off a few days after the liberation. She was in a good condition in her husband's family but Anowara's husband Ekabbar Sheikh died of Tuberculosis. After snatching her only daughter Masura from her, her father-in-law's family drove away from their house. Anowara's father died and she started to live in her father's house with her widowed mother with her little income as a day-labourer. After her father's death, Akkas Daroga, an influential local, occupied a big portion of her father's property and at one stage, he drove them from the house with the help of rented hoodlums. He torched the house and beat them severely. Following the incident Anowara Begum started to live in the clustered village which is far away from her home.



She became a member of Alor Dishari, a society of Uttaran. Members of the society have to deposit at least five taka per week but most of the time she deposited more than five taka. She informed Uttaran about the occupation of her land and with the cooperation of Uttaran, she went to Patkel Ghata C.A office to Khulna Commissioner Office as well as Civil Court of Satkhira. She contested the case with the assistance of Uttaran and a judgment was passed in her favour. She gained possession of her father's land property of 25 Katha & five Katha of homestead, which is in total one and a half bigha But still she could not get possession of the total land. At the last stage of court proceedings, the opposite party appealed on December, 2007 after the 38<sup>th</sup> day of the verdict which goes against the law. The rule for filing appeal against any verdict is 29 days.

Anowara Begum attempted to bring back her daughter Masura several times but she was tortured and driven away. They did not even allow Anowara Begum to meet her. Now Masura has become a nurse (shebika) after completing her education. She is working in a private clinic in Khulna but she does not have any contact with her mother. Anowara is spending her days in a better condition now working in LGED, as a day labourer, stitching quilt, weaving mats with date leaves. Anowara Begam said, *"I had to go through serious hardships throughout my life. I had to walk on foot from Satkhira to Patkelghata (about 25 km) and back to my home. I did not know how to shop but now I can do every thing such as contesting cases, going to Courts etc. Though I am a woman, it is not a barrier for me. I can do everything like a man. Now, if I were able to take full possession of the land and enjoy the production of the land then I would not have anything more to wish for."*

## The Rishi community of Barat is not ready to compromise



*“We have taken possession of our land. This is our forefathers' property, the influential Babus (successors of the landlords),” said Santosh Das of Baral village of Shujon Shah Union under Tala Upazila of Satkhira District. Laxman Das, Pachu Das, Horen Das and Santosh Das inherited 72 Decimal of ancient ancestral property. The Rishi community was considered socially as a lower caste. Their ancestors did not have any education. Socially, they were not privileged to study. They could not even get the opportunity to participate in any religious or social functions. Under such circumstances the local influential Babus (Ajit Mandal and Pulin Mandal) occupied their forefathers' land .*

*Santosh Das said, “The Babus said that we did not pay our tax. So, your condition of tenancy is violated. The Babus occupied our land through muscle power and threat”. Santosh Das explained, “In 1927, this land was recorded in the name of our ancestors. But our name was not found in the 1962's record. In 1990, we recorded our name on the basis of papers from 1927...We were completely ignorant of the papers. We were considered as the lower caste in the society and humiliated. We also accepted the system and did not protest. In 1988/89 Uttaran came in this Barat Rishi para and alerted us that all men are equal. But as far as we know, there is class among human beings. The selfish wealthy people created this division for*

*serving their purpose. We have to gather strength for acquiring our just rights. Uttaran told us to form a society. The Uttaran office was then at Jatpur. The men and women of Rishi Para formed two separate societies named 'Neel Darpan' and 'Nabin' respectively”.*

Santosh Das along with the others referred the matter of illegal occupation of land to Uttaran in order that they might examine the legal papers properly. From that time on they understood the real situation. That year when they went to cultivate the land the men of Ajit and Pulin attacked and beat them up. They filed a case in the Court of Tala with the assistance of Uttaran and won the case. They again took possession of the land but the opposite party appealed in the Judge Court in Satkhira. In 1994, the judgment of this appeal went against them and they appealed in the High Court against this verdict.

He also said, *“The ownership of the land is legal. We have valid papers. We are in the possession of the land.”* Laxman Das informed us, *“The people of Rishi community of Barat village gave up their forefathers' occupation and engaged themselves in various professions. They cultivated their own land as well as taking over the land of others on lease to cultivate. Some of us deal with goats while some people maintain their families working as day labourers. The children of Rishi Para are studying at schools. After completing graduation or Master, many belonging to the next generation have taken different jobs as their profession.”*



## The story of the education deprived Mamtaz Begum highlights the need for the Women and Children Repression Act



Mamtaz Begum's father's house is in Satpur. She was married off at a minor age with Sheikh Abu Musa, an assistant deed writer of the neighbouring village of Islamkathi, due to her father's poor financial condition. In the first few years after marriage, she spent her days happily in her father-in-law's residence. Two daughters and one son were born one after another. Mamtaz Begum's husband got remarried when the first daughter was four months of age. He married three to four times within a few years.

At that time Mamtaz Begum took training on tailoring and nursery caring supported by Uttaran. She took training on making things (Flower Vase, Candle Stand, Ash Tray etc) from bamboo from Bangladesh Small Industries Corporation of Satkhira with the assistance

of Uttaran. Besides this, she took part in various types of awareness training such as Domestic Violence Law, Women's Right, health, education etc. She said *"With these trainings I came to know that women are not weak. I also deserve the right to live with others with dignity."*

Mamtaz Begum continued her struggle. She worked as a cook in the Uttaran office for about two years. She is a member of Padaddhani society of Uttaran. Her elder daughter has been married off after completing her S.S.C. Her younger daughter would sit for S.S.C examination and her only son is studying in class VIII. The father of the children does not keep any contact with the children. Mamtaz explained, *"My son-in-law expressed his desire for a motorbike for his business purpose. I took some loan from Uttaran society, with some savings of mine, some money given by my father's family and some of my son-in-law's own fund and with all this money a motorcycle has been bought for him."*

*"All of a sudden, one day my husband Abu Musa took my son-in-law's motorcycle. He told me that he would provide the motorcycle for some income. But without informing my daughter, or me one day he mortgaged the motorcycle and eventually sold it. When I came to know of this incident, I protested. As a result, he beat me mercilessly and I fell sick seriously. A relative of my father's family came to know about the incident and took me to Tala hospital for treatment. I was admitted in the hospital for 13 days. With the help of Uttaran a case was filed against my husband under Women and Children Repression Act. The case was run for two years. Some problems arose around the case against the father during the marriage of the younger daughter of Mamtaz Begum and thus, the case was compromised. But she didn't go back to her father-in-law's family. Mamtaz is serving as the Legal Assistant of Islamkathi Union as well as the fact that she is a member of Uttaran Society. She takes care of a local nursery as well and gets 40 to 60 Taka per day. She has built a house on 5 decimal land given to her by her father and now lives there."*



## Tahmina Begum is not ashamed at all to work hard for a living



*"I am also a human being. I do not endure torture anymore. I have two hands, two legs. There is no shame in working for living,"* Tahmina Begum of Khejurbaria village under Debhata Upazila of Satkhira said with confidence. She protested against her husband's attitude to their marriage. So he tortured her physically and mentally and finally she took shelter in her father's house. But she didn't compromise with injustice. She works in a shrimp hatchery and whatever she earns is enough for her and she has no need for others' help, explained Tahmina.

Now Tahmina is about 25 years of age. At this age, she has two children of nine and five years old respectively. Tahmina was married off at a very young age with a man chosen by her parents. She lived a somewhat better life in her husband's family but Tahmina's husband Mansur Ali was a little bit careless about the family. In the mean time a son and a daughter

were born to her. Tahmina's husband's demands shot up day by day. He began to put pressure on her to bring money from her father. When she refused, he began to beat her up. She was driven away from her father-in-law's house after she was beaten mercilessly. After 2-3 months, she went back to her husband's house through local mediation. In this mediation session Principal Riasul Islam of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah College of Shakhipur of Debhata, guardians of two families and representatives of Uttaran were present. As a consequence, the husband's family treated her in a better way only for a month but again they began the torture her. Again she came back to her father's family. After these incidents, on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2004 Tahmina filed a written complaint.

A notice was served by Uttaran on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2004 and a mediation session was arranged with the presence of both the parties. Many local honourable persons were present in that mediation session. In this mediation session Md. Mansoor Ali wanted to take Tahmina back to his family but Tahmina did not agree with her husband's proposal. There was a determination in Tahmina's voice. She said, *"He wants to take me in his house and he will torture me again."* She filed a case against Monsoor Ali in the court with the assistance of Uttaran. Mansoor Ali was arrested, and after 16 days of his custody, the elder brother of Mansoor Ali interfered in the matter. Mansoor Ali agreed to pay 22000 Taka to Tahmina as maintenance cost and Tahmina withdrew the case. Then she was divorced by mutual consent. The two children live with their father and they are studying in school. As Tahmina's father's house is very close to her husband's house, her children can meet her very often whenever they wish.

Tahmina informed, *"It is now three years that I have come back to my father's house."* She helped her Rickshaw puller father by borrowing money from Uttaran. She herself works also. *"Sometimes I buy food and clothing for my children. Thus I pass my days. I hope my happiness will come back when my children will grow up. I go on with that hope in my heart."*

## Aminur and Monira are united in the fight for truth



Aminur and Monira moved back after breaking away all the conspiracy. They had to hide themselves month after month from their own house and they became victims of brutal attacks and false cases for their forefather's property but they did not compromise. *"If one has courage and mental strength, he will win the battle of realizing rights and I am the example of such courage"*, said Aminur.

Aminur had a happy family with an old mother, young nine-year-old brother and his wife, Monira. The dispute rose on a little clash over the walk way which they had used for generations. The new neighbours claimed it as their purchased property and proceeded in fencing the area. While protesting the mother and wife were attacked and beaten. Hearing about this Aminur rushed to the spot and was also attacked. They struck him on the head with a chopper and threatened to kill him.

The injured Aminur was admitted to the hospital. His wife Monira was a member of 'Shangkhalpa' of Uttaran. They took a loan from the society once or twice and they invested it in business. With the support of Uttaran the younger brother of Aminur, Shahinoor filed a



case in the court. Aminur narrated his despair as, *“I was in debt in various places. I could not pay all the dues of my debt by withdrawing the deposit from Uttaran Society. I had to stop my fish trade. In fact, I had to flee from my house due to the pressure of the lenders. I joined a sweater factory in Gazipur after I had gone to Dhaka and the case was going on.”*

On 4<sup>th</sup> June of 2007 Aminur and his younger brother Shahinoor appeared before the court. Tight security measures had been taken in the court area following the incident of a series of bomb attacks throughout the country. The opponent used the opportunity with cunning decisiveness. One of the opponents named Bappy, with the help of a Habilder of Satkhira Court, kept a bag with a pistol under the chair of Aminur’s younger brother, identifying him as a terrorist attacker and got him arrested. However, in the court premises, many protested the event of arrest at once. The news was covered in the print media. Habilder Abdur Rashid and Bappy were both found guilty in the investigation. The conspirator Bappy is still in jail and Habilder Abdur Rashid was absconding and was discharged from his job. The case of occupying property has not been resolved yet but Aminur has staunch faith that they will get justice in this case because they are fighting for a just cause.

Monira was married at a minor age when she was in class eight and Aminur also could not continue his education after completing his SSC. Now Monira hopes, *“I withdrew from the society for not paying off the debt. But I have joined the Society and am again depositing money there. At least 10 Taka is saved per week. I rear hens and ducks in my house. I took training on tailoring. I have the desire to buy a sewing machine if I can save money.”* Aminur said with hope and determination, *“Uttaran played a vital role for the success of my life. No one can overcome struggles if there is no strength in one's mind. Uttaran not only gave me money but also inspired me to gather courage and mental strength.”*

## The struggle of Bahar Ali for land began after the Liberation War



Mohammad Bahar Ali Gazi of Voirabnagar village of Ramjannagar Union under Shamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district became landless after losing his father's property. During the war, members of the anti-liberation force occupied his father's homestead and after independence the occupier made fake (illegal) documents on the property resulting in their state of poverty. After the incident they had to move from one place to another like refugees.

During the eighties he was landless in the list recommended by the local chairman and members and got the permanent settlement on one acre of land in the shoal area of the Jamuna, but he could not get possession on the total land as the allotted land was in the shrimp farm of the local influential folk Moksed Ali and Anora Gazi. While fighting for his just claims to land, Bahar Ali continued to protest against the shrimp farm owners. Mediation councils were arranged several times in the presence of the local UP Chairman and members



for mutual settlement but Sheikh Alamgir Hossain, the local Chairman, could not settle the matter. Disputes took place regularly and with many incidence of physical assault.

Bahar Ali also had to fight the government for the possession of the land. In 2004, the Government took up an eviction program on the shoal of Jamuna while Ali was trying to take possession from the grabbing of Moksed and Anora. Though the government gave them permanent settlement on the land, they vandalized Ali's home. He built a new house on the land in two or three days and filed a case against the influential persons in his locality. At that time Uttaran began to work in this area for assisting the landless people.

Bahar Ali said with confidence, *“I had to maintain my family with the income of a day-labourer and it became difficult for me to bear the cost of running the case. But the situation was temporary. The accused persons of the case were arrested and they were in jail for three months. Though the accused persons of the case did not agree to compromise through mediation at that time, now they are ready to compromise. They agreed to give the possession of the land. Representatives of Uttaran were present in the mediation session. I withdrew the case in 2007. I had begun my fight for land after the liberation period and only last year did I get free possession of this land.”*

## The landless people's society and this land encouraged us



*“We landless people have due rights in this offshore island. We got this piece of land through our hard labour. We had to go to the Chairman, TNO, AC Land Office for this piece of land. Now we grow crops on this land and fish in the pond. Our children study in school and we contentedly have two meals a day for our families. Today we are in a better condition”,* said Sheikh Mojibur Rahman, the leader of the landless people of Ramjan Nagar Village under Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district.

About 14-15 years ago, 18 families started to build their homestead on the banks of the Jamuna. After a year or two the Chairman of adjacent Noornagar Union, Bakhtiar, filed a case for eviction. At the same time he appealed to the government for the allotment of the land to him. These eighteen landless families went to the DC before granting, informing the DC that

they were living on that land and wanted allotment according to the due process. Some years went by and nothing significant happened.

During the term of office of the Awami League, Sarder Fazlul Hoque (Member of Parliament of Shamnagar constituency) served a notice of eviction against those eighteen families with the help of Bakhtiar, Chairman of Noornagar Union Parishad. They attacked, beat up and harassed the landless people by filing cases. The landless people informed the (then) TNO of Shamnagar Upazila and asked for help. The TNO suggested the people file a civil suit with the help of the Union Parishad Chairman so that he could take necessary steps for the landless people land and the landless people followed the TNO's advice.

In 2005, while the case was running, the non-government organization Uttaran started their work for the landless people in this area. At the suggestion of Uttaran in 2005, women of the locality formed a society named Tagar Landless Women's Association. One day when the AC land (Shamnagar Upazila) came to the area and broke down the houses with the landless people, all the women came forward and asked him, *"We are landless people and are the inhabitants of this area. We have just right on this land. If we are not the people of this land, help us to cross the border."* After that the AC land retreated.

Majibor Rahman said, *"This type of incident occurs due to local political rivalry. I was put behind bars three times for this land. Each time I had to stay in jail for two to three weeks."* With a smile he added, *"We eighteen persons have got one acre of land per head. But as I played the vital role in the movement, others gave me one more bigha of land. At first, I did not want to take the land, but they insisted. We do not want more. We cultivate two crops in the land; fish, leafy vegetables, paddy-jute etc can be cultivated in the field and with the income from these crops we can live well. This land and the society are our strength. No evil power can deprive us from our rights."*

**Ashini Munda's uncompromising voice, "I will fight and shall not give up my right!"**



*"This land was created with our bare hands. These are the lands where there were big forests and rivers. Our forefathers cultivated these lands clearing the forest with their own hands. Now we have to fight for this land. We will not give up our rights as before", said Ashini Munda with grievance, but there was determination in the voice of this 70 year old man.*

Twenty seven Munda tribal families have been living for a long time in Kashimpur Village under Ishshoripur Union of Shamnagar Upazila in Satkhira district, along with Ashini Munda. Long ago, the Munda community was in possession of the major portion of these lands. In the course of time an influential person, Kamrul Islam from Kashipur village,

deceived these uneducated people from their rights and encroached the property of the Munda community for his shrimp cultivation. He created fake documents and demanded some property as his own but Ashini Munda protested against this conspiracy.

The dispute started when the Munda people were trying to install a sanitary latrine in Kashipur community school - a school for Munda children. Hooligans hired by Kamrul Islam attacked several Munda people and beat them up mercilessly. However, this was only the beginning. Influential people also filed false cases against Ashini Munda. Mundas fought the legal battle with the assistance of Uttaran and the verdict was delivered in favour of the Munda but the opponent group appealed against the verdict again. The influential groups began to threaten the Mundas as they could sense that they were losing the case. Even on the very day of the case, MP Fazlul Haque (Member of Parliament of Awami League) asked Ashini Munda to withdraw the case at the court premises before the verdict. He filed a hijacking case against Ashini's son and beat him several times. Fazlul Haque was initially on Mundas' side and only later on joined Kamrul Islam..

Ashini Munda with a firmness said, *“Our valuable properties have been taken away by others living in the neighbouring Munshiganj Union deceitfully. But, the government record still shows that these properties belonged to us. Earlier we couldn't speak Bangla as our mother tongue is ‘Nagroe’. Many years ago, the landlords of this area brought us here from Rachi of India for creating habitat by cutting down parts of the forest here. During that time, there was no human habitation in this area. But now we have learned Bangla and we can speak for ourselves. The cases are still going on; but the self-seekers cannot defeat us. We will not give up our just rights; we are fighting for truth and truth must win one day.”*



## None can deprive us of the khas land



Omar Ali Mahajon of Ramjibonpur village under Noornagar union of Shamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district has been fighting for 12-13 years against the injustice that has been inflicted on his family. He is still bearing the title ‘Mahajon’ of his forefathers as a symbol of their once but now lost opulence. Today Omar Ali is landless and is fighting for khas land. They lived for years in an offshore island of the river Madar. In 1996 they applied to remove the DCR but the government granted DCR in the name of influential landowners Nowsher Ali and Amen Ali of nearby Haripur village. The hoodlums of Nowsher Ali and Amen Ali attacked and beat Ali and his family and torched their house reducing it to ashes. Ali called on the people of Ramjibonpur during the attack and as the villagers started to flow in to protest and retaliate the attackers fled the scene.

They struck the head to one of Ali's sons in that incident. A case was filed but it was dismissed. A few days later, Ali's daughter Mahfuja was kidnapped when she went to bring water, tortured and held by the hoodlums of Nowsher. Later Ali filed a case. The investigating officer also gave a report against Ali as per the order of the Chairman. The Court then advised to reinvestigate the matter.

In 2005 Uttaran suggested Omar Ali form a society. Women of landless families of the village formed Bashanti Landless Women Association and filed cases. The hearing of the case was on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2008 in the Civil Court of Satkhira. Ali did not spend even a single penny on this account.

Omar Ali earned his livelihood by working as a day labourer and by collecting date juice. He can only sign his name but he learnt about the steps of law and law related matters from the Uttaran society and a major portion of his learning has acquired because of the struggles in his life. Uttaran lent some money without interest to the landless people to help them in cultivating their land. Omar Ali cultivated paddy on other peoples' land with that money. Marium Begum - wife of Omar Ali said, *"If we got the allotment of this piece of land where I am sitting, we can be certain and we can live here fearlessly and if we even fail to earn our living at least we can sleep here comfortably."*

## Rupia Khatun will prevent the conspirators through legal battle



Ajibor Ali, the husband of Rupia Khatun was a van driver and he had almost no inherited property. Therefore, he started living in the shoal area that appeared in the river Jamuna which flowed by Shamnagar Mohsin Degree College in the eighties. Two children and Rupia's husband were killed in a devastating cyclone which blew on Shamnagar upazila. At that time 10 decimal khas land was allotted to Rupia Khatun..

Yet Rupia, a helpless widow, had to fight against the local influential self-interest seekers for her land. She said, *"Many people helped me after the cyclone and I was benefited most with this piece of land. But some people tried to occupy this small piece of land. Ershad's government helped me to build a house with iron."* She built five houses on her land with the help of other people and gave those houses to the students as mess house on rent. She worked

as a cook in the mess house and she received an allowance from the Union Parishad. Rupia Khatun also worked as a day-labourer when needed.

In 2004, some local influential people tried to occupy a portion of Rupia Khatun's land, building houses in her courtyard. She informed the local community about it and they supported her. She filed a case at the suggestion of Nokshaikantha (a non government organization working for the landless people's right in khas land with the assistance of Uttaran) because the opponent parties did not agree to leave the land. The case went on for three years starting from 2005. In 2006 Rupia Khatun Joined Middle Nokipur Landless Women's Society while the case was still running. Since then, the association has been supporting her with money and lawyers.

Though Rupia became emotional, there was determination in her voice. She said, *"In 2007 after three years the verdict was delivered by the Court in favour of me. Still the opponents did not give up the possession of the land. I am the legal owner of the land. I will get back my rights only after the law enforcing agency delivers their order,"* expressed Rupia Khatun with firm conviction.



**The landless people of the Jamuna Shoal realized the first step of their right after battle lasting for half a century.**



More than one hundred landless people of Shonakhali village under Ramjannagar union of Shamnagar upazila of Satkhira district have been living in the Shoal land of Jamuna for the last fifty years and they are still fighting for permanent land allotment for their future generations. Bazlu Rahman, the leader, said, *“My father Md. Jera Bodi Gazi along with a few others came to live in this area long ago as they were landless peasants. I was born in this shoal and grew up here. This land turned to a deserted land due to saline water produced by the shrimp cultivation although this area was not like that before. There were big trees around the area. Saline water couldn’t enter the area. Aman paddy was grown in these lands. Huge cattle used to graze in the field. We became victims of the greedy profiteers who came here to cultivate saline water shrimp.”*



In 1986, Mohsin of Assasuni Upazila applied to the government for the lease allotment for shrimp cultivation showing this land as a water body. The government officers also approved the lease allotment on the basis of documents alone, there was no inspection or investigation and this was the beginning of the dispute. Conflict arose when Mohsin wanted to take possession of the water body. In 1988, the Jamuna was divided into 5 parts for lease allotment. Old government records showed the lands as water bodies but the reality was a bit different. Those water bodies had been filled and turned into crop fields and this information was not present in the government records. In spite of applying jointly for the allotment of this water body influential people used their wealth and might to get the permit instead of the landless people.

Bajlu Rahma continued: *“Thus the exhibition of power of the wealthy people and struggle of the landless people for their just rights continued.”* Bajlu Rahman was also attacked several times by the hired hoodlums of the influential people and fake cases were filed against him. Yet the landless people did not get frustrated nor did they lose their mental strength. In 2003, the non-government organization Uttaran came to help them and the landless people formed a society at the suggestion of Uttaran. Some government officials also tried to help but as there was ill political influence, they could not do much. Bajlu Rahman expressed gratitude to Mr. Malik who once served as Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Satkhira. Bajlu Rahman could not mention the exact year or date or the full name of the on-duty officer who was cooperative but added that the officer suggested to them that the only way out was to file a case against the ADC so that as a representative of the government there would be investigations.



The landless people of the Jamuna Shoal

Bajlu started saying, *“We filed a case against ADC Malek sir according to his suggestion.”* Primarily the investigation report was given in favor of the landless people but due to pressure from the influential persons the investigating officer gave incorrect information in the final report submitted at Satkhira. At the same time Mohsin Ali Khokan identified the inhabitants of the shoal area as illegal occupiers and claimed himself as the only legal lease taker. Afterwards, in the presence of Md. Solaiman, the-then UNO of Shamnagar Upazila and another magistrate he started evicting landless people without serving any notice to the landless people with the order of the land Ministry. The Ministry did not consider the real situation and the rights of the landless people.

On 11th April 2004, the government’s people destroyed the houses of the landless people to evict them from their land. Receiving the news, Uttaran stood by the landless people. The civil society of Satkhira and Shamnagar lent their support to the landless people and within a few days the landless people had rebuilt their houses. After this incident they collected papers from the land office with the help of Uttaran and they filed a writ petition to the High Court against the eviction. About 75 thousand taka for the writ petition and the lawyers were given unconditionally to the landless by Uttaran. The High Court ordered the raising of the eviction order. It also ordered that the evicted people be allowed to live in the shoal area.

Bajlu explained, *“Earlier I had failed to acquire the DCR of this land. But after the High Court order, we the landless people were able to acquire 72 DCR. There are 247 bigha Khas land in Voirabnagar. Still now, the landless people have not got the possession of these lands. On getting the land from DCR Uttaran lent 5000 Taka without interest one year to each farmer. We cultivated fish with this money. I am trading with the money I have and some portion of the land and I am farming cattle in my house.”*

## Lipa Begum learnt from her mother how to stand up for her rights



Firoza Begum said boldly, *“There is no end to this battle. I have got back my own rights and even for my own daughter.”* 7 or 8 years ago it was very difficult to maintain a family of two children for Firoza Begum with her husband’s income. To improve her situation she became a member of Godhuli Samila Dal Society of Uttaran and began to save at least 10 taka per week. She took a loan from the society on several occasions so that she could support her family. Her daughter’s marriage and a brick-house were paid for the loans. She bought a second hand power tiller with the first loan and with the second loan she bought a new engine for the tiller. She took a loan again for the body of the tiller and she steadily tried to improve the household earnings. Her son is reading in class VII. Sabor Ali, husband of Firoza Begum, supervised the power tiller and he also worked as a helper.

Lipa, the daughter of Firoza Begum, was sitting with a forty two day old baby in her lap. Then she started talking, *“I would not have my child or any household if my mother (Firoza Begum) or Uttaran did not help me.”* Lipa had been married for two years. She lived in a joint family with her husband’s parents but her father-in-law and mother-in-law asked her to bring dowry from her father. While they waited for this dowry they sold her jewellery which had been

given to Lipa by her parents. At first she tried to deal with the situation herself and did not inform her parents. However, when they started physical torture she told her parents everything. Her mother knew that Uttaran gave help to the helpless and tortured women. Then, she filed a written complaint against Lipa's husband. A mediation session was held with both the parties. At one stage, her husband acknowledged his wrongdoings. He confessed his guilt and wanted to take her back to his family.

Firoza Begam pointed at the other girl standing by her side, *"Look at this girl. She also had to leave her husband's house. My daughter is in a better condition now and I am trying for this girl's betterment."* Firoza said, *"I have some dreams for my own family. I have a plan to buy another tally (power tiller) if I can get some loan from Uttaran and with some of my own savings. If I can lend the tiller on a rent basis and if we do some work, then we won't have any more problems."*



## Truth reigns as courage and willpower prevail

Freedom fighter Akbar Ali may have grown old and lost the energy in his limbs but he hasn't lost his mental strength. He constantly emphasizes that the rapists of his two daughters will face justice and a tough sentence. In 2004, two daughters of Akbar Ali hailing from Magurkhali of Tala Upazila were raped on account of their father being a former freedom fighter.

When telling his story Akbar Ali faced an immediate confrontation from his wife asking him, *“Why go through the pain? It's been long enough. Let bygones be bygones. The girls don't want to converse about what happened.”* For Akbar Ali the reason is simple. People cannot expect to trust incidents to remain in the dark. A certain breed of journalists looking for a spicy story will not hesitate to portray the graphic details of a rape case, ultimately colouring the lives of women.

Akbar Ali related his story as a freedom fighter for his country and his fight for his life. He participated as a fighter under Sector 9 in the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Instead of returning to the safety of his home he joined the Bangladesh Rifles Camp in Pilkhana. After 9 years of service there, he suffered an ear injury in a weapon firing practice. In 1981 he was forced in to retirement by the Military medical board.

Akbar Ali had to return home since he was no longer employed. He said, *“the original property that I had inherited from my father was too small to live in so I built a house on the property and started my life newly with my wife and four daughters. When I built the house, the area in which I was living was new to inhabitants and so most of the houses built were far from each other. We hardly had any neighbours. Taking advantage of my old age and my poor financial position a group 10-12 terrorists attacked our residence one night. They raped two of my daughters and beat up my wife and myself. They took everything that we had starting from the clock, shoes, fish net, saris, clothes – everything that we use in our everyday life.”*

*Hearing of the incident, staffs of Uttaran reached my house the following morning. They then organized a conference for journalists present which was attended by renowned people of the area demanding the capture and sentence of the terrorists. I knew three of the fugitives by name and face – Shawkat, Fazr and Latif and I filed a case against them. A brother of these three criminals is still facing a sentence behind bars. A human right's organization called Swadesh took the full responsibility of directing the case. But Uttaran has never let me down when I stretched out a needy hand regarding the case.”* Akbar Ali speaks boldly of how he feels – he knows that the criminals will be justly punished.

**She does not need to ask for monetary help from others - this the greatest mental peace of Jharna Begum**



Asking about her struggle Jharna Begum, aged about 22/23, of Kazi Mahala of Shakhipur under Debhata Upazila of Satkhira district, started to tell her story. Her father Maksu was a builder. There were always hardships in her father's family. Jharna was married to Mukul of Kamta village of Shakhipur at an early age. She was happy in her husbands' family for about a year, but then the trouble began. Her father-in-law, mother-in-law and her husband were all asking for dowry Even though it was impossible for Jharna's poor father to fulfill their demand. As a result, she was tortured in many ways. Her first child Mukta (now 8) was born while all this was going on.

Eventually the torture became unbearable and Jharna had to come back to her father's family. During that time of crisis she met one of the representatives of Uttaran. Her house was in the same village of Jaharna's in laws'. Then Jharna was introduced to Uttaran. Uttaran took an initiative to find a compromise through mediation. Both the parties and local respected persons were present in the mediation session arranged by Uttaran. A consensus was reached and Jharna went back to her husband's family.. At first things were going well but then Jharna's father-in-law and mother-in-law separated her from her husband and her child. This time Jharna's husband got married for the second time and began to live separately.

Another new struggle began in Jharna's life. Her husband stopped taking care of her and she was pregnant again. The situation was getting worse when she asked for maintenance. Her husband even attempted to hit her and drove her away from the house. She came back again to her father's house and informed Uttaran of the situation. Meanwhile, she became a member of the society of Uttaran and started to save money. With the support of Uttaran she filed adultery and dowry cases against her husband. He was arrested and was jailed for 22 days. The husband's family wanted to settle the dispute again but by that time Jharna Begum had fought a legal battle for 3 years.

This time Jharna Begum imposed some conditionality on her husband, under the pressure of the local Chairman, member, Debhata Khanbahadur Ahsan Ullah College Principal Shirjul Islam and other respected persons. The conditions included building a house on Jharna's father's land, providing regular maintenance costs and taking care of Jharna regularly. Her husband already gave some money to build the house. He is visiting regularly and giving maintenance cost now and then. Jharna also works as a day-labourer in other people's cropland and also works in her mother's household. She dreams to educate her children with her limited income. Jharna Begum said, *"I could not do any big job in my life but if I can educate my children that will be the greatest success in life."*

## Jhumur welcomes her new life



*“After nine and a half years of legal battle I have found relief and been awarded dignified rights. I rattled the doors of so many people; where none helped me, it was Uttaran alone that made my problems their own and helped me out. It's almost as if I've been rewarded a new and better life.”* These were the words that rang out of the confident Jhumur's mouth who hails from the village Terchi in Tala Upazila under the Tetulia Union. This is the story of the battle and victory of the daughter of late Mohammed Hatem Ali Morol – Jhumur Sultana.

Life defined as a struggle: this is the story of Jhumur Sultana, staff member of the Video and Documentation Division of Uttaran. At the age of nine, Jhumur found herself in wedlock with Palashpal Shahjahan Sarder of Shathhira. Although her father's financial condition was difficult, she found herself well placed in the safety of a husband who was clearly better off than her father's household. Unfortunately tragedy struck after five months and 13 days of her marriage as her husband passed away in a road accident leaving her helpless and four months pregnant.

As Jhumur continued her story she related the facts of how her elder brother-in-law Jalal Sarder and sister-in-law's husband Yatem Ali fought over her gold ornaments. They sold all



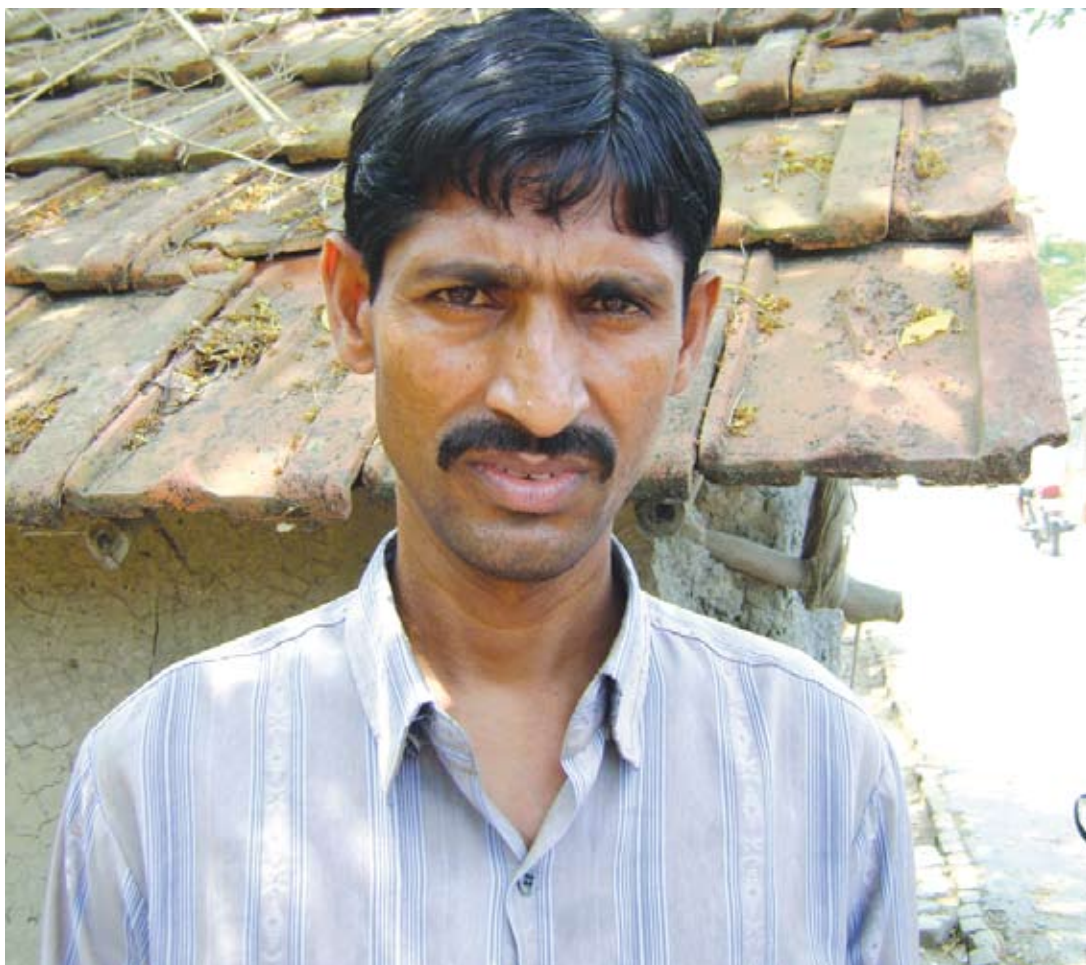
her house furniture to compensate for the rent and even denied the identity of her unborn child claiming it to be someone else's. The conspiracy reached such heights that she got to know that her husband's side had struck a deal with a nearby quack doctor to abort her child in return for a large amount of money. The doctors assistant took pity on Jhumur and informed her and she immediately departed for her father's residence but only chaos, poverty and struggles welcomed her. She had already knew the poverty struck situation her brothers were facing in their households. Jhumur could see that her presence was a burden to the family income as her brothers lived from hand to mouth *"Supporting me became a major issue among my family members and in between all this chaos my son S.M. Abeer Hossain (12) was born."*

Jhumur then related a horrific fact. On hearing of the birth of her newborn child her mother-in-law and other members of her husband's side came to see the child laden with honey, butter oil and pigeon flesh but lurking beneath this façade was the intention to harm the baby with poisend honey. Jhumur learnt of this and confronted her mother-in-law, who bluntly denied the accusation. To prove her words, Jhumur fed the honey to a dog which fell sick almost immediately. She stated that her mother-in-law wished to murder her grandson because according to the law he would later inherit his father's wealth – something they were not willing to share.

The conspiracy and ill-heartedness seemed to have no ending. A few months after this shocking confrontation, Jhumur's brother-in-laws created a false setting, displaying some nearby lady and her son as Jhumur and her son. They then used this deceit to procure a cash advance against a house that belonged to Jhumur's husband. On being notified of this incident, Jhumur's elder brother went to her in-law's residence to protest but this was met with more shock as they locked him up in a single room and called the police claiming him to be a thief. The police arrested him, unaware of the real incident and they soon let him go because there was no real evidence against him. Before this incident Jhumur had already joined as a school teacher under the Uttaran Education Program. Later, the phony lady with her son was found guilty of deceit.

Initially in 1998 the jury settled the case in favour of Jhumur but her in-laws appealed to the higher court against the decision. This was followed by another trial in 2000 where once again the court went in her favour. Until the son has reached the age of 21, the mother has to take the legal guardianship of the child. She would have to give an estimate of all the income and expenditures that were accumulated annually from her husband's wealth and property within the first 7 days of every January of each year and the son was to be given all his living costs for his fit survival. Only at the age of 21 would the son be able to take over all the wealth and property of his father before which all this was to be taken care of by the husband's elder brother. Jhumur claims that today 11 years after the incident she has received 11 tons of rice in two installments. Her son now studies in class 7. That ends the case and trial incident. During this struggle Jhumur did not give up her education. While serving as a teacher in Uttaran Education program she has successfully completed her S.S.C and H.S.C exams and in 2000 joined the Video and Documentation Division of Uttaran.

## United movement restores ownership of Khas land



It has been through the leadership of Ekhlas that 27 landless people of the same area found their rightful land returned to their ownership.

Ekhlas is in his late forties. He comes from Murgacha village in the district of Satkhira of Tala Upazila under Khemra Upazila. His property is nothing to mention except for the fact that it is what he has inherited from his forefathers, but the fight for his inherited wealth is major considering the numerous claimers that Ekhlas declares it as almost impossible to live with. He added that there are people of his area who are totally destitute – having no control of land or necessities, “*Through day labour I ran my family and took my poverty as a matter of fate.*

*In 2005, when I had given up hope on any form of betterment, members of Rupali decided to form a council for the landless. Slowly we – all the landless congregated and that very year established the ‘Murgacha Landless People Council.’ With the assistance of Rupali we got to know from the Thana Land Office that there were 47 Bigha Khas land in a nearby area called Harikhali. In 2005 27 of us landless people appealed to the Land Office for a DCR of the*

*Khas land in Harikhali, which was then granted.*

*The Khas land we had been granted by the DCR fell within the boundaries of a Peer/Dervish of Ashashuni Gonagarkati. For a long period the Peer had taken over the land created by river sedimentation to add to his hundreds of bighas of land used for fish farming."*

Hamidullah was then in charge of all the fish farms. He was informed of the fact that the government of Bangladesh had permitted them DCR within his residential periphery. He was also told to submit hari (the money that he had accumulated from the fish farms) in the khas land since his take over but Hamidullah stood his grounds and avoided the notion of the government authority and denied the rights of the landless people. He also showed unwillingness to submit the hari.

The congregated members of the council appealed to the Tala TNO office. Based on the accusations a Shalish was held in the presence of the two parties. Hamidullah and his gang agreed to pay the hari according to the DCR in the presence of the TNO, ACLAND, the landless people and representatives of Rupali and Uttaran, but later on they denied the hari and a year passed in the struggle to achieve the rights of the landless. The next year influential fish farm owners achieved a DCR through pressure and influence. During this time, with the help of Rupali and through an appeal to the court the landless managed to block and halt the DCR acquired by these fish farm owners.

A registration for 21 bigha's of Khas land was signed in the names of the landless with the assistance of Rupali and Uttaran. Abdur Rashid was then the proprietor of 6 bigha's and Hamidullah of 15 bigha's of this land. After the landless received the legal documents for the khas land, Hamidullah and Rashid let off a pack of gangsters who threatened to beat up and even kill the new owners of the land. Immediately after this the landless in Tala not only arranged for monthly discussion forums but also complained to the TNO office. The responsibility to investigate the matter was placed upon the UNO (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) Jalalpur and the Khesra Union Parishad Chairman. According to the Union Parishad Chairman's investigation report a shalish was once again formed in which the case was settled in favour of the landless. The fish farm owners submitted three thousand taka per year as hari for the khas land although Ekhlash says the actual value surmounts to six thousand taka. He states that in the ensuing years they will not agree to take such a lowly amount.

Ekhlash said that according to the last shalish held as long as the rest of the landless people gain legal rights of the khas land they will renew their DCR. Now the fish farm owners do not deny the DCR of the landless, neither do they go up against the landless.□ He talks of how hard it has been to gain rights over this khas land constantly being harassed through threats, trials, abuse and rebuking but his over-arching theme is how they have stood by each other during all times.

Ekhlash says that he has received 66 shatak of land. *"I have even received hari. I have rented a little shop in Shakhila bazaar and am working as a tailor there. I also have used the fish farm land to reap Baro rice."* This has all contributed to a better living standard for Ekhlash, his wife Rupia Begun and his two daughters Rokhsana Khatun (5) and Meghla Khatun (1 and a half).



## **Zakia Akhter Hossain, Executive Director, Banoful**



Uttaran started their work in the Upazila level and the amount of international fame and recognition they have gained through their work to uphold the rights of the disadvantaged and poor over the years is worth great praise. This has all been possible due to the multi-faceted strategies they use to promote and empower the poor from all walks of life and all colours, races, ethnic background, etc.

Coming to reality, half of the population of this country comprises females and a significant part of the state's populace is upholding the rights of the landless people – an act worth defining as great. Thus, the process of providing tortured women with legal assistance alongside self-independence has been comparatively better due to the nature of activities that Uttaran has implemented. In addition, the activities that revolve around empowering people



with knowledge of their rights regarding khas land and helping them to attain the khas land have been unique in their strategy and implementation in everyday life. Therefore, selecting the appropriate landless candidates, specifying and measuring the land required and providing temporary or permanent lease and settlement and working directly with the government seems to have been an excellent string of decisions and activities.

A lot of south-western organizations work with Uttaran through a form of networking that they have established. My organization Banoful also started working with Uttaran through a network basis in 1999. We have worked in Batiaghata Upazila of Khulna district with Uttaran to provide legal assistance and rightful ownership of khas land for the landless of that area. During this initiative we proceeded to gain temporary and permanent settlement of khas land and provided interest free finance for cultivation of crops. What is surprising is that we managed to go through the whole process without much discrepancy which would not be possible for many organizations, unlike Uttaran that is so well-organised and well-directed in all dimensions of execution.

I strongly believe that Uttaran plays a vital role in boosting the socio-economic condition of the country. Uttaran, through its activities, has been able to empower women socially and personally giving them self-dependence and the ability to realize their rights socially and domestically. Several landless people have been pulled out of their poverty and misery and today they live content lives where their children go to school as significant social actors just by gaining a piece of khas land. This is the scenario that a social worker wants to see in any developing society – something that I am experiencing through Uttaran’s activities.

## Ferdousi Ali, Editor, The Daily Tribune



NGO's started their activities soon after the liberation War of 1971 in Bangladesh but very few except Uttaran have emphasized their work in the south-western regions of this country. Uttaran was established in the 80's through its extensive work related to social empowerment in the southern most regions at the Upazila level. Uttaran has come a long way to fulfilling their aims to distribute social equality at the lower level that requires much admiration.

Uttaran mainly works with poor women and for the empowerment of the landless in the south-western regions. Their work is defined by their intention to clarify domestic and social rights of women in society against all forms of torture through legal assistance, medical treatment and even tenancy. These women are trained to equip themselves with knowledge of their rights as general citizens of this country. In addition to this Uttaran has implemented

several social awareness and training strategies related to health, education and social standing. Women gain the most benefits out of Uttaran's activities where they learn about their rights, and have shown an increase in health and education factors.

On the other hand due to several natural disasters and the government's irregularities, the number of landless is increasing in the country. Landless people have the only and the most rights when it comes to khas land and it is the obligation of the government to see that landless people are receiving it legally and soundly. In this case selecting the appropriate landless candidates, specifying and measuring the government khas land and people's requirement and providing temporary or permanent lease and settlement has been a major incentive of Uttaran which is commendable. The government's role in its procedure of dealing with landless people and khas land has been eyed with negativity. But in the past few years through the joint venture of government and non-governmental organisations the work they have been doing to empower poor people with khas land has been comparatively better and is worth complimenting.

Apart from this the incentives to prevent environmentally disruptive activities such as salt-water shrimp cultivation, promote afforestation, prevent the filling up of the coastal belt and water-logging are all measures that Uttaran has taken for the benefit of society as a whole.

But the route of progression for Uttaran has been nothing like a bed of roses and they had to cross many barriers and disputes when trying to assist the poor. People who are against helping the poor and believe that wealth and property belong only to them have tried to make the work of Uttaran harder at every step. There are so many bumpy roads when one wants to follow the just path but the victorious end is always more satisfying.

## Ashrafun Nahar, Coordinator, Women Job Creation Centre



Judging from a social perspective, a woman believes that she is always better off when she has her own household. A man similarly calls his home his homestead or house. Irrespective of sex, both men and women think that a shelter is one of the most significant elements in social life. In the Bangladeshi context, there seems to be a large number of homeless people. Selling their physical labour brings back only a marginal amount of monetary backup that may satisfy their stomachs and prevent much if not complete social embarrassment, but to purchase a portion of land that will act as their ultimate shelter seems a distant vision for most poverty struck people. Due to this the children of the landless are being denied proper medical treatment, health, education and other basic rights. Finally, I believe that it is through Uttaran's activities of trying to elevate the status of the poor and empower them with these basic necessities that they should be paid tribute.



As a social worker and a woman, what pleases me the most is seeing Uttaran setting aside the traditional boundaries and surpassing them to establish the rights of these poor people. An example that may be put forward is the orthodox view of landless people being solely “men”. Although several regulations limit women’s rights in acquiring khas land, Uttaran has superseded these restrictions to provide women with equal distribution of khas land in association with the government – all of which should be regarded as highly motivating and grand in intention. Coming personally from this particular region, I believe Uttaran plays an important and uncompromising role in promoting women’s rights in these regions towards self-dependence. Before 1985, no women from this area would work outside their home and were limited to the vicinity of their little household. From the very beginning Uttaran focused on women and how to empower them by bringing them out of their shells and making them active participators of society and economic resources of the country. Not only have they gained financial independence but become self-dependent and respected people of the household who are now given a voice and importance in decision making.

Uttaran has employed several approaches to tackle domestic and social torment of women through legal assistance and made them independent actors of society. Women are trained on their legal rights, nutrition, sanitation, hygiene education and health. Uttaran remains one of the very few and unique organizations that has created such a close bonding of people irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender etc. Organizations can take Uttaran as an example to set up their priorities in social welfare for a faster progress in the socio-economic situation of the country.

Coming to the troubling factor of price hikes in the country, it is tasking to determine what can be done to improve the situation for the poor. But some activities have proven to be lasting and sustainable and it is through Uttaran’s initiatives that several poor have been able to improve their economic situation. Many people have changed their orthodox beliefs and become more conscious about treatment, nutrition and education matters. The revolutionary change in views has been the positive attitude towards women working outside their homes and such a change can be seen as the foremost success of a social welfare organization.

## Advocate Firoz Ahmed



The socio-economic framework for Bangladesh portrays an unequal distribution of resources throughout. A parallel prevailing framework demonstrates how trying it is to crumble such a situation which has been existent within the heart of the country's economy. It will take a social revolution to liberate the suppressed women, bestow land ownership to the landless and equip the working class with the proprietorship of production tools. It is a tasking effort to establish a Bangladesh that envisions around Germany's Clara Zetkin reverie of establishing women's rights and Mazda Krupskaya's dream to liberate women from this binding society. The only resort lies in the combined efforts of the general public and the whole transformation of the society.

Several women's organizations have shown extreme rigidity and voiced their protestations

against the constant abuse that is inflicted on women especially in the South-west regions of the country. But authentic and direct involvement through legal assistance regarding this abuse or rehabilitation of these women is still scant and weak.

The political parties that are too busy in their political work do not contribute to the lives of these neglected women and their issue remains suppressed. In this case, the work that Uttaran is employing to tackle this domestic torture inflicted on women through shalish, legal assistance and rehabilitation is indeed praiseworthy. Although this involvement of Uttaran may just be a temporary relief to many, a society that defines women through respect and liberty is still possible through a social revolution.

A positive step by the activities initiated by Uttaran is definitely through trying to determine khas land through all the legal loose ends, setting up committees for legal registration and ownership for khas land of landless people, and financial assistance through gaining lease of land by convincing administrative members.

But the whole package is not provided to those who agree to live a life dependent on production of agricultural products. The landless may receive land but do not receive the tool necessary to start off and sustain their production such as seeds, domestic animals, fertilizers, irrigations techniques, pesticides etc; thus they seem to reap very little benefits from what they gain as ownership of khas land. Bangladesh does not seem to have an established law where farmers receive these benefits in addition to the land they get. Thus Uttaran may not be able to achieve the target of the mission they have put their hearts into. But this streak of light in the midst of such a narrow and darkened road may well be the best start for these disadvantaged people.

## Advocate Shah Alam, Chairman, Lawyer's Society in Shathkira district



Politics is just another version of a concentrated economy. And in a holistic sense to be a bloomer of independent thought requires economic relief and liberty. It is impossible for capitalists to imagine financial liberty in a wide sense due to the fact that they who handle wealth expect to reap the greatest amount of profits. In this case I see no harm in the humanitarian activities Uttaran is doing for these destitute and poverty stricken people. To develop the socio-economic condition of the poor, it is important to start from a grassroots level – the way Uttaran has been functioning from the very beginning.

The influential, self-conceited and radical religious fundamentalists of remote areas all act as barriers in women and landless people in acquiring their rights in several routes. I believe that



legal right of domestically or socially tortured women, a chance of rehabilitation and even opportunities to develop an independent lifestyle can be boosted through the active participation of these so called capitalists which should be done in the form of extensive activities.

The government should show an eager interest and affection towards the landless people and in acquiring their rights. NGO's should take more positive initiatives just as Uttaran has done and come down such a long path in to success. Uttaran deserves every bit of praise for its work in this sector.

But as a legal person I can claim that even if it is unintentional, the activities of the governments legal aid has several loopholes. But Uttaran has directly surpassed those problems and walked further to establish the rights of disadvantaged people. In that case Uttaran can arrange for the official appointment of legal aids to manage and fight these cases.. In doing so, Uttaran can help people with financial lackings and other forms of discrepancies by identifying the target problems, tackling them and also preventing them. It is important to initiate steps to reduce the gap between these underprivileged people and the government by getting the knack of government criminal and civil court rules and regulations.

Uttaran has been working rigorously to fight injustice in the lives of all the underprivileged people by being at their sides during all times. Their work can well be an ideal example to follow and they are perhaps one of the best examples of an organisation in full progress with the intention to climb up the ladder of success.

## Abu Ahmed, District Journalist of the Daily Star, Satkhira



Due to the nature of my work I have been acquainted with Uttaran from the very beginning but I was given the opportunity to work with them first in 1998 after an attack was waged on the landless by the influential land grabbers of Baburabad in Kaliganj. During that time I directed the unification of all socio-political organizations to create a movement for the landless people. But it was Uttaran that provided all the necessary arrangement and financial backup. I was luckily successful in materializing the movement and serving the rightful purpose although I would give credit generously to Uttaran for all its help. But once again, assistance came from Uttaran and the movement came from the people – something that has raised a lot of praise internationally.

Uttaran has been mainly working for long years with poor women and empowerment of the

landless in the south-western regions. The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh mentions the rights of landless people. The government being compelled to grant the landless their rights due to massive movements has not been a rare scenario in the country. But the struggle and movement goes on.

Satkhira is still rich in khas land with 60,000 acres yet to be claimed by the landless of this state. Uttaran is constantly looking for better strategies to help these landless people realize their rights and gain possession over the khas land; but even this is a trying effort. I am a freedom fighter and as a member of this areas khas land management committee I would like to state that it has been quite a hard job trying to settle khas land and hand it over to the rightful landless due to irregularities in the administration. There seems to be a constant fight to attain the rights of these people – it has never been an easy task.

Regarding the acquisition of women's right I would like to state that the legal aid supplemented by Uttaran and their activities to promote awareness and self-dependence in women is worth complimenting. I confess that some women are personally being helped but on a wider scale the state has to set its foot in and provide assistance for it to have full effect. But the fact that even one person has benefited from all these activities of Uttaran – that is the achievement.

## Parvin Akhter, Director, Bhumistho



Many people living in the southern territories of Bangladesh have been denied and neglected by the state itself in a lot of issues. During trying situations it is the women, children and poor that suffer extensively. Not long back this area sheltered perhaps women who were deprived of education, health and nutrition awareness the most alongside social and domestic torture and embarrassment. Uttaran has flipped the coin bringing the negative aspects crashing down and upholding betterment.

Uttaran has helped these helpless women through legal assistance and empowered them by making them self-dependent. As a development worker, I can personally vouch for the education that Uttaran has provided, and we as staffs have gained so much strength and courage from them. During the worst of situations women can now intelligently realize their needs and move according to the situation – they know where to go, what to do and who to



talk to – something that Uttaran has taught them. In addition to this many women have brought themselves out of financial crisis. With this their social and domestic standing as citizens worth respecting has been established.

We have been working with Uttaran through a networking system for several years. The best thing about Uttaran is that it doesn't just follow a map and never walk beyond the line, in addition to the funding that comes from donors and charitable organizations, Uttaran does a lot more. Due to our networking we have had the proud opportunity to become a part of their success which has been noted internationally.

Due to the protracted political instability and emergency situation, it has been a hard task to negotiate and sit with people who are strong supporters of organizations like Uttaran. The society needs to stand up for the rights of the poor which should be conducted through the efforts of the society as a whole. I hope that we can surpass the hurdles of protestation to do good for the poor and that justice bond with the radical activities of Uttaran to keep their success running. Someone has to lead the change in society for the better – Uttaran is doing so.

The unjust power structure and inequity over resources are legitimized by the State's political, legal, economic, social and ecological system. In theory and legal practice a woman is entitled half of a man's entitlement in inherited property. However, access of property by religious and ethnic minorities has not yet been so successfully achieved by the State. Women and people of minority groups not only face limited power to resource accessibility but can also fall easy prey to different social problems and injustices. Half of all women are victims of domestic violence. The participation to reclaim rights over asset, particularly land, is relatively low among female members of poor landless families and from ethnic communities. They have very limited access to quality services from the local government. Concerted effort is needed to redistribute means of production like khas land to poor landless people in a systematic and participatory manner. The lack of support (in terms of mobilization, organizational and education) available to the poor, landless, distressed and marginalized people to help them reclaim their rights and access to natural resources make this situation grimmer. Accordingly, those who received land from the government struggle to establish their control over land due to lack of legal assistance. The unjust power structure causes persistent denial and violation of individual and group human rights that produces and reproduces the conditions of poverty, where regional geographical, socio-economic and political aspect might append vulnerability; as it does in the Southwest coastal region of Bangladesh.



## Uttaran

42 (third floor), Satmasjid Road  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka – 1209, Bangladesh  
Phone : +88-02-9122302  
E-mail : [uttaran@bdonline.com](mailto:uttaran@bdonline.com)