

IN OUR
SUBCONTINENT

The Editor, Le Monde,
With compliments, Jack Dey

DACCA'S DEN OF CHILD SNATCHERS

Kidnapping, child smuggling, adoptions... No matter what you call it, there is big money in small children.

Bharat Dogra

It was a dusty December evening, 1975, near Kamapur railway station in Dacca. A few homeless families had built themselves makeshift stacks of bits and pieces of canvas and were desperately trying to keep away the cold. Some of them had lit a small fire, while others huddled together, rubbing their starved bodies. But the remorseless wind seemed to pierce them through and through. Mothers, with infinite sadness mirrored in their eyes, looked helplessly at their shivering children, many of them ill.

A train screeched to a halt and two men in warm pullovers emerged. As they engaged one of these families in conversation, slowly a small crowd gathered around.

"These are bad days," they said. "Flood and famine have taken their toll. We must do what we can to help our unfortunate brothers and sisters. Not all can be helped, we admit, but an organisation is willing to look after the children till their parents can establish themselves. Then the children will be returned to them."

The thing lingered attentively, fruitfully. Corian exposure to exploitation and deception had made them suspicious of do-gooders who



one hailing from a Western country, are also with PROBE. These statements confirm the charge about the child smuggling.

No less significant is the statement made before a Dacca magistrate by Kamla Bibi, an ayah who had served TDH-N for over two years, saying that the TDH illegally collected children to send them abroad. She pointed out that money was obtained by selling the children abroad, and that this money was then shared by certain TDH-N staffers.

Dr. Preger went to Holland to discuss this (and related matters) with the TDH-N authorities at headquarters. He had a list of 33 children with him, and he wanted to find out where exactly these children had gone. He found that only six of them had reached Holland. In any case, since some of these children were above the maximum age permitted by the Dutch Government for adoption of overseas children, they could not possibly have been settled in Holland. Where, then, did these children go?

To Overseas Brothels

It is difficult to give a definite reply. As domestic servants? To carry out drudgery of other kinds? It



Photography: The top part of an affidavit filed before a Dacca magistrate by Kamla Bibi, charging TDH with illegally collecting children and selling them abroad for money.

has been alleged by a UN anti-slavery agency that there is a market for kidnapped children in Middle-East brothels. Enquiries made by Dr. Preger in Dacca's old city had revealed that the several people believed that some of the missing children had been sent to overseas brothels, and that this was an old established trade.

When Dr. Preger made some progress in uncovering this sordid racket, he was warned to "lay off or else. . . ."

By this time Dr. Preger had taken

help from another organisation, and by utilising the aid received from the International Boys Town, he started two clinics for the poor and destitute—the Khan Saheb Azizul Islam Memorial Clinic and the Vagrant Homes Clinic. A large number of poor adults and children, who otherwise would have remained neglected, were treated in those clinics. Orphans were also looked after. However, as soon as Ali Khan heard of Dr. Preger's efforts to expose the child smuggling racket, he warned him that he would have all his programmes stopped and get him arrested and deported from Bangladesh.

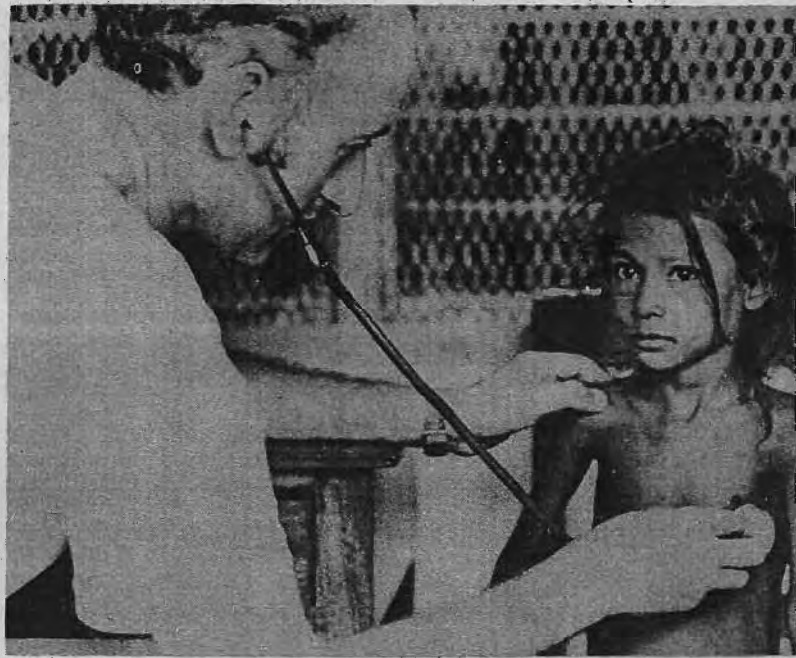
Ali Khan carried out his threat. By exerting influence on the Controller of Vagrancy, he got the Vagrants Homes Clinic closed. Dr. Preger found that he could not carry on his work as the Directorate of Social Welfare officials were under the influence of Ali Khan and his associates. All his work came to a halt and all his property was seized. He was then deported.

Several complaints made to the Bangladesh government finally led to the appointment of a committee to investigate the racket. But those appointed to the committee were the same corrupt officials of the Directorate of Social Welfare, whose collusion with the racketeers was all too evident. It was thus a case of asking criminals to inquire into their own crimes.

Before bringing the parents, who had been deprived of their children, before this committee, they were terrorised by the Tongi police who told them to inform the committee that they had been bribed by Dr. Preger into making false allegations. The committee readily accepted the tutored statements. ■



Victims of a sordid racket.



Dr. Jack Preger: One-man war.

DR. JACK PREGER

Dr. Preger was serving in an Irish hospital in 1972 when he first heard of appeals to doctors and nurses to go to Bangladesh. He decided to enlist himself. From 1972 to 1974 he worked tirelessly, tending the sick in refugee camps set up for Bihari Muslims. He later got involved in relief and medicare work in Bangladesh. He obtained work as medical officer of a Dutch children's organisation in Dacca, Terres des Hommes Netherlands TDH-N from 1975-76.

Dr. Preger was soon shocked to notice that corruption was rampant in the operations of the Terres de

Holmes. Two key men of the organisation with whom he came in contact were a Bangladesh national, Ali Khan, director of the TDH-N, and Alan Cheyne, a New Zealand national, co-ordinator of TDH-Denmark. Both of them, in fact, jointly controlled the destitutes out-patients dispensary which was being operated for TDH-N by Dr. Preger in Kamlapur, Dacca. Both of them lived like rajahs amid the desert of human misery and distress that followed the twin tragedies of famines and floods which struck the country. ■

occasionally descended on their closed-in world. Looking at the questioning faces, the men cited "specific cases" of children they had helped in other parts of the city. They patted the gathered men on their backs and told them that there was nothing to worry about after all, they could have their children back anytime they wanted.

After they had gone, the men and the women talked things over and decided no one was going to take their children away from them, come what may. Then they went back to their hovels only to see their children shivering feverishly. Their confidence crumbled. The next day a child died. Another day,

another child.

When the men in pullovers returned after two days, they found several families willing to send their children with them.

Nearly 18 months later, Dr. Jack Preger, a British doctor serving in Bangladesh, was surprised to find, outside his office, two women whose children had been taken away from them on the pretext of finding food and shelter for them. His local assistant informed him that as the two women had heard of his reputation of helping destitutes, they had come to him seeking help to get back their children.

Dr. Preger was a conscientious man. Early in his work in Bangladesh

he had also come to know of several rackets involving traffic in children. The misery of these women immediately attracted his attention.

Sordid

The most sordid aspect of the activities of child racketeers, Dr. Preger was told by persons working within the organisation, was trafficking in children. He also noticed that though the medicare provided by this organisation was meant for adults as well as children, adults undergoing extreme distress in the streets were often neglected while abandoned children were picked up with the greatest care. Seriously ill or dying persons from the streets of Dacca were seldom picked up—on the ground that vehicles were not available—but no child was left abandoned.

Dr. Preger also learnt that, apart from being the director of TDH-N, Ali Khan was also the Bangladesh representative of the Netherlands Inter-Country Child Welfare Organisation, a Dutch government adoption agency known in Holland as Bureau Voor Interlandelijke Adoptie (BIA), which ran an adoption home for them in Bangladesh. Alan Cheyne also ran an adoption home for TDH-Denmark, and was, in addition, director of the Under Privileged Children's Education Programme.

Dr. Preger was told that some women were bribed to appear before magistrates and swear that they were in fact the mothers of the children collected by the TDH and were willingly surrendering the children to Khan and his associates for overseas adoption. Several of these children were sent out of Bangladesh by KLM airlines, tickets for them having been purchased by Cheyne or Khan.

It was in this context that the appeal of the two women for help in recovering their children attracted the attention of Dr. Preger. He took up their case with the Department of Social Welfare, and when that did not prove very helpful, sought legal help for these women. He also tried to contact other families who, likewise, had been deprived of their children.

Finally, these efforts led to the recording of the statements of 27 such families by lawyers working for the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights. They swore that they had put their children into the temporary care of the TDH-

IN on the understanding that they would stay in a boarding school in Dacca, and that parents would be allowed to meet them whenever they wished. It was also a part of the understanding that the children would be returned to their parents after a stipulated period—ranging from three months to two years. They were shocked to find that their children had actually been taken straight to adoption homes. Some 35 children taken from these 27 families were sent abroad.

Racket

Evidence of this smuggling of children is also available from other sources. A French nurse, who served in Bangladesh in recent years, has given PROBE several definite indications of this racket. She does not want to disclose her identity for

fear of not being allowed to go to Bangladesh again, but is prepared to sign a sworn statement revealing her identity before the appropriate authorities.

According to her, about 100 children living in the Dattapara camp for the destitute in Dacca had been taken away from their parents in 1977 under false pretexts. The parents, all illiterate, were told that their children would be taken to a home at Danmundi, run by the BIA, where they would be fed and educated. Employees of the TDH-N and rehabilitation camp at the Dattapara camp, all of whom were working for Ali Khan, gave the parents blank papers for their thumb impressions, after which the TDH staff wrote that the parents had given up their children "willingly." The children went to school for three months and were then alle-

dly sent to Holland. *Journal*
This ~~has~~ has given a list of people who were being paid by Ali Khan to obtain children for adoption in Holland by deceiving parents or lying to them. Here is her list—

Hussain Ali, accountant in the TDH' (International Div.); a driver called Altaf; a guard called Razzak; a cook at Dattapara; Humayun, a welfare officer at TDH-N; called a Shahabuddin.

Ali Khan has allegedly given 200 takas and one sari each to at least three other girls working in Dattapara for each child they "kidnapped" from a family. The three girls brought children from destitute families in Kamlapur and Tongi stations.

Two other signed statements made by persons who had worked in relief and medicare camps, one of them a Bangladesh national and

POSTER

WAR

IN CALCUTTA

week's After his deportation from Bangladesh, Dr. Preger was seen in Calcutta for some days, waging a "poster war" against child smuggling. One could see him in March '80 near the Bangladesh High Commissioner's office or Bangladesh Biman office on the Park Street.

Dr. Preger's four hand-written posters attacked the child adoption racket in Bangladesh, and one of them read: ILLEGAL EXPORT OF BANGLADESH CHILDREN BY TWO DUTCH AGENCIES—B.I.A. AND T.D.H.N.... WHERE ARE THESE CHILDREN NOW? WILL THE AIRLINES SPEAK?

A silent demonstration also took place, before the KLM Airlines office in Calcutta. It was led by an European lady who supported Dr. Preger's movement. Some of the children, according to Dr. Preger were flown out of the Bangladesh by the Dutch airlines for sale abroad.

—DEVAPROSAD PUROKAYASTHA



Protest: Dr. Preger with his posters beside the Bangladesh Biman's office.



Open charge: One of the four posters.