



star city

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the city that was

In 1875, when Edward VII, the then Prince of Wales, came to Bengal, Sir Abdul Gani of Dhaka ordered 30 yards of the most superior muslin as a gift to the prince. One yard of this fabric weighed barely 10 grams!

Caged kids

SOHEL ISLAM

The bell rang at the Dhanmondi Government Boys' High School at ten in the morning. It's time to put the books in the backpack and head back home.

On Thursdays, the school remains open only for a half-day session. So, it means the students can drop in for some fun.

Outside, rickshaw-van drivers were getting ready to drop students at their homes.

A few moments later, noise and shrill by the children give the ambience around the school a cheerful feel. Many students, especially of the lower section, already rushed out and were happy to see their parents and other attendants at the exit.

A happy mood set in. Some students weren't that lucky to have their parents at the gate to take them home. They needed to get in the van.

"Hey Ongkon...! Come on guys get in. Take your seat. Don't make a mess with anybody and anything. Stay calm and quiet," yelled Mohammad Ali, a rickshaw-van driver of Sohag Paribahan.

Ongkon, a student of class VII, is among those who dislike this van -- all of them actually. "I don't feel comfortable travelling in a van. It is like a case of chicken. Ali Bhai is a grumpy man. He acts like a shepherd. He herds us all on to the van as soon as the school calls it a day. I hate it."

"It's really pity that some of my

friends enjoy playing games inside the van. I wish my parents could pick me up. But they have office. That's why I have to take the van," Ongkon reasons.

Saturday, however, is different for Ongkon. His uncle picks him up because his office remains closed on the day.

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The journey by van is not a bad experience for Mirdul and Shamin, Ongkon's classmates. They rather love it!

"Shamin and I have a lot of fun. As there is not enough space on the van for us to move freely, we just talk away. Sometimes others in the van join us, and we have fun," Mirdul says.

Fahim is not impressed with the arrangement, though.

"When I was in class II, my parents

asked me to use vans, I did not agree with them. I don't know why. My father dropped me off at school. He understood me."

Space constraint sometimes do create a psychological barrier to the growth of children, says Dilruba Afroz, chairman of the Department of Psychology, Dhaka University.

The way urbanisation is taking place, it indicates that urban children have little opportunity to play in the open. And if they are ferried like this to and from school, it may negatively change their psyche. Besides, how will they burn their energy?

Sadly, schools springing up in Dhaka don't have any space to provide them with that opportunity.

"When I see children are returning home by rickshaw-van it makes me feel sad," said the university teacher.

"The whole system is a stumbling block to grooming up their personality. It's a virtual prison."

"Young minds like to observe and absorb. It helps them grow up. When I see these children commuting by van, they don't look normal. They suffer from some kind of inferiority complex. It aggravates when his friends jeer at them."

Dilruba has some suggestions "A child should be brought up with openness. Even if children return home with their parents walking, their inquisitive mind may ask lots of questions. We should let them behave instinctively. It has an immense therapeutic value," she said.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

A student of the Willes Little Flower School looks out the grille of a rickshaw-van. Parents living on limited budget settle for this comparatively cheap transport for their children. Not every child likes the vehicle as it gives a suffocating feeling. A psychologist says commuting to school and back home creates an inferiority complex among them.

The Aslee fight!

CITY CORRESPONDENT

It was a ghastly scene if you were an animal lover. But for the hundred-odd crowd that had gathered for an adrenaline pumping show, nothing could be more exciting than the blood splattered bodies of 'Hercules' and 'Indur'. Two valiant warriors both looking for a knock-out blow.

"Hercules has a straightforward attacking approach while Indur (rat) defends himself by lowering his neck," a tense Hassan was explaining why the cocks were given such names while the two roosters fought like hell inside their 'arena' at the Karwan Bazar Kitchen Market on the occasion of the Independence Day.

"These fighting cocks get these titles for their combat techniques. These are not ordinary cocks, they

are born fighters. They start fighting from the age of one or two months," continued Hassan, owner of Hercules, an 'Aslee' cock.

The Aslee (the real one) are the fighting breed and they have a pretty impressive tradition and history. The 'Shoukhin Aslee Morog Unyayan Shangtha' was established way back in 1972 in Dhaka with 30 members and it has developed into a highly organised group.

The organisation boasts members from all sections of the civic society. Since 1988, it has arranged fights every Friday after the Juma prayers at Karwan Bazar. Fights also take place on National Days.

So what is it that draws the people of this city to this rather unconventional form of entertainment?

"I've been fond of cockfight

since my boyhood. The different battle strategies of the roosters are really exciting. Eventually you get addicted to it," said an Aslee owner Md. Mahub.

The rich history and the originality of the breed also make it special. "The Aslee have existed in the sub-continent for about 2500 years, hence the name," claimed Md. Alauddin, former secretary of Shoukhin Aslee Morog Unnayan Sangtha.

An Aslee has a life span of around eight years and the are at the peak of their fighting prowess at five or six.

Cockfight championships are held every alternate year. A total of 20 Aslees compete in a six-month long tournament within a knockout format.

Wearing specially designed protective caps on their feet, the

cocks attack each other mostly with flying kicks and bloodthirsty pecking and continues to do so until one of them is forced into submission. A bout usually lasts for three to four hours and at the end of it, the majestic looking roosters resemble a bruised and battered wreck.

After a fight is over the winner gets at least three week's rest before his next bout. The time an Aslee needs to recover from the rigors of a fight is one of the main reasons for the tournament to span over six months.

"The cocks need antibiotics and antiseptic cream for their injuries. They need nutritious food like egg, milk etc. just like any sportsman. We also need to be careful of what we are feeding them as rich food can cause heart attacks in some of them and many have actually died

of heart problems," said Shamsul Azam, a pathologist and an owner of an Aslee. "You got to remember, these are precious animals," he added.

Indeed. The price of these fighting cocks ranges from Taka two thousand to twenty thousand-plus depending on their fighting skills. Recently an Aslee, curiously named 'Sharbanash', was sold to a person from Sylhet for twenty five thousand Taka!

But price or the allegations of illegal betting are pushed to the back seat on fight-day as unmistakable thrill take center stage.

As an ecstatic Hassan left the scene with Hercules, who had just knocked the living daylight out of Indur, to a hero's ovation, it became clear why cock-fighting had enthralled generations and will continue to do so in years to come.



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Watched intently by an expectant crowd, 'Hercules' and 'Indur' stand eyeball to eyeball as they bay for each other's blood.

City of fury

ARUN DEVNATH

This is the anger of the street. A new surge of feelings rallies almost everybody to a common cause -- the protest against the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Reverberations of the Iraq war are not confined to the Gulf. Dhaka like other metropolitan cities around the world has been shaking with anti-war demonstrations. Over the past few weeks, it has turned into a city of protests and processions.

Demonstrators carried anti-war banners amid cries of "Death to America" and "Down with Bush and Blair" and formed human chains calling for peace. Protests sometimes took on a violent gait and debates raged, with most cursing the United States and a few blaming Saddam Hussein, but all demanding a quick end to the war that killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians.

The anti-war sentiment has psyched up even the most stay-at-home kind of people like Khondoker Omar Faisal, a college teacher. He found himself shouting slogans last Friday, first ever in his life, against the 'American aggression'. He joined a demonstration at the Baitul Mukarram Mosque, a post-Friday prayers rallying point.

"My heart reaches out to innocent Iraqis not because I am a Muslim. They are helpless. I hate Saddam but now I despise Bush even more," said the teacher of English. "Why will they (Iraqis) suffer for something which they are not responsible for?" he asked.

The demonstration goes beyond the Baitul Mukarram Mosque point. The Paltan Maidan and the Central Shaheed Minar, two other rallying points, have been vibrant with slogans



PHOTO: STAR

and agitation too ever since war clouds started gathering on the horizon.

For the last couple of weeks, the anti-war movement has gathered momentum with local newspapers running extensive coverage on Iraq and splashing pictures of high-tech battles and wounded Iraqi civilians -- mostly women and children.

A human chain formed by physically-challenged children on the south plaza of the Sangsad Bhaban a few days ago was a chilling reminder that thousands of their Iraqi brothers and sisters stand to face the same unfortunate plight while caught in this mindless war.

The left-leaning 11-party alliance and the Islamist party,

Islamic Shashantantra Andolon, enforced a hartal (general strike). The acceptability of the call was spontaneous but the city dwellers mostly decided to stay indoors rather than go out on the streets. "What is the use calling a disruptive hartal when the war is going on in Iraq. A hartal here cannot stop it," said Aminul Islam Pervez, a sales executive.

Along religious lines, a 50-year-old woman offered votive prayers for the Iraqis. Another woman of Tikatuli vowed a month-long fast. Mosques and madrassahs organised special prayers.

As the bombs continue to drop on Baghdad, Dhaka too rocks with the vibration by standing up to the cause of humanity.

hello dhaka

Roads to avoid
Green Road
Digging by DCC underway
North Mugda
BTB installing phone lines
Mohakhali to Banani Highway
Flyover under construction
Khilgaon Crossing
Flyover under construction

Today's tips
Call police if cab drivers try to play smart
0171-000990 0171-000991
0171-000992