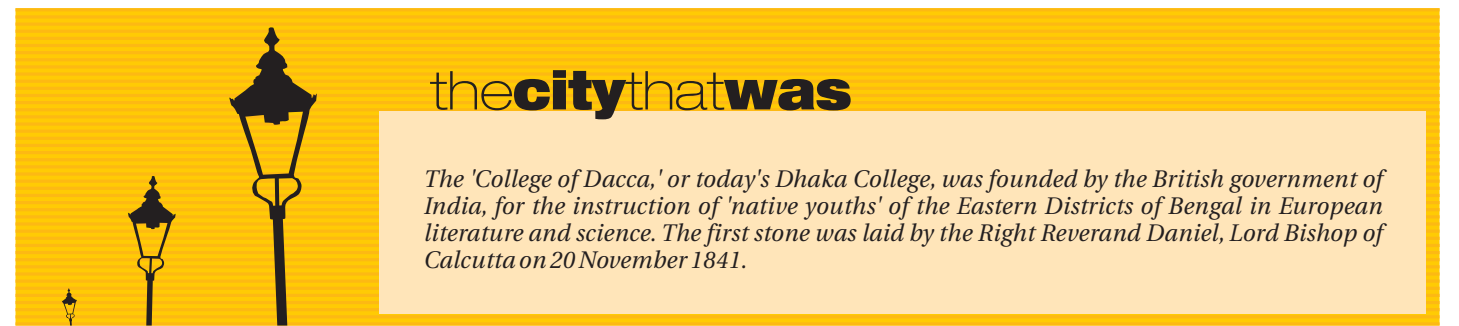




star city

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the city that was

The 'College of Dacca,' or today's Dhaka College, was founded by the British government of India, for the instruction of 'native youths' of the Eastern Districts of Bengal in European literature and science. The first stone was laid by the Right Reverend Daniel, Lord Bishop of Calcutta on 20 November 1841.

Landowners live in fear

CITY CORRESPONDENT

The police suspect that the killing of former Speaker Humayun Khan Panni's wife Sultana Khan Panni on Monday was linked to her property in Dhanmondi. The elderly couple lived in their double-unit house on a one-bigha plot away from their close relatives. Among other things the police are investigating is whether anyone was eyeing her

property for developing it into an economically lucrative apartment bloc.

For many landowners in the city's posh areas like Dhanmondi and Gulshan the towering land price is good news. In the late 1950s each of these one-bigha plots was allocated to government officials and eminent citizens for little over Tk 10,000. Now with the arrival of the apartment-bloc culture the single or double-unit homes in these areas are rapidly being converted

into 20-unit apartment blocs. But for many landowners, who do not want the conversion, the new culture is posing threats not only to their properties but also to their lives.

Zainal Abedin (not his real name) of Dhanmondi, a retired civil servant lives with his elderly spouse in his own single-unit home. Abedin's three children had emigrated to the USA years ago and according to Abedin they might never return. These days the elderly couple are living

in fear.

Every day, real estate agents are knocking on his door and insisting on signing a deal. Some of these agents persistently telephoned his wife and threatened her with bad consequences if she did not comply.

"I was alarmed one day when our domestic help started talking about signing a contract with a particular real estate developer," said Abedin.

Having sacked the domestic, a

worried Abedin rang the real estate developer, who flatly denied having any link. "These agents are totally independent, we have no link with them," Abedin quoted the general manager of the company as saying.

According to sources in the real estate industry, several gangs of brokers or *dalals* are operating in these two areas of the city. The managing director of a real estate company said on condition of anonymity that

nowadays Dhanmondi plots are the prime targets of these 'gangs' because projects in this area are financially very viable.

If someone can convince a landowner to sign a contract, the 'mediator' receives up to two percent of the entire price of the plot. In Dhanmondi a plot situated away from the four commercial roads may cost between four and five crore taka. Each of the one-bigha plots along the Road-2, Satmasjid Road, Road-27 and Mirpur Road might be as

much as eight crore taka.

"You may easily guess why these gangs are so desperate to convince the landowners to make a sale," said the managing director.

Incidents of intimidation are common throughout the affluent areas of the city. Anonymous telephone calls with threats from shady brokers are also common.

"The ones who are old and separated from their children are

prime targets of these gangs and there is enough evidence to suggest that the gangs are linked with developers," said an official of another leading real estate developer.

Similar 'land piracy' is also taking place around the city's peripheral areas, where big real estate developers are forcing villagers to sell their land for housing projects.

Dhaka losing its charm

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Snake charmers who once coaxed snakes out of baskets to captivate crowds in local bazaars have fallen on hard times. The exotic sight of these men enticing snakes to dance to the soulful music of flutes is now a history. Many of them have migrated to the capital in search of money and ended up in begging in streets.

Poverty forced the snake wizards out of their ancestral profession, and they are no longer interested in floating countrywide by boat for a living.

Those who have migrated abroad, especially to the Middle Eastern countries, are better-off, but those confined to the geographical param-

eter have no option but to lead a threatened life. Begging has become the best means for them -- sometimes by force.

"People don't want to spend money to watch snakes anymore. We don't have enough snakes for shows either. People almost stopped coming to our wayside-performances," said Jalal, a snake handler.

Snake charmers are known as gypsies. They have no permanent home, lead an unconventional, bohemian life, charm people with snake shows and sell talismans with assurances of curing diseases.

The Gabtali-Amin Bazar neighbourhood, popularly known as *Baliar Pur Baidya Para*, home to many snake charmers. Some settled in Dania, Jurain and Shoari Ghat areas.

Four to five shops in Baidya Para sell snakes in wooden baskets. Snake charmers buy snakes from them. A *keute* or cobra sells at up to Tk 200. Monsoons are the best season for the snake trappers to go long distance by boat. The snake charmers rent the snakes out to others in summer, as the dry season is the cruellest season for them.

The new generation of snake handlers does not consider it lucrative enough for a living. They hate walking the streets of cities and towns, their cloth-covered baskets hanging from bamboo poles slung across the shoulders.

Use of fertiliser in agriculture and destruction of wildlife habitats for human settlements proved debilitating to snake species.



Snake charmers are becoming a rare sight in the city.

Perfume with a pedigree

The centuries-old attar trade still flourishes in Dhaka

BISHAWJIT DAS

The business of selling *attar* has seen an upturn in recent years partly due to the increasing number of mosques in the country. It is used not only as a perfume; but according to the Muslim community it is also *sunnat* to use *attar*.

Attar comes from the Arabic word 'itr' meaning perfume. In the Western world, they are referred to as 'natural essential oils'. The 2000 years old pedigree and distillation process is credited to the famous Arabian philosopher Avicenna.

True *attar* is the distillation of the pure natural oils of exotic plants, mainly from the world's rainforests. These fragrances contain no alcohol or other medium and have been collected from over 2000 essential oils known to man. They are the pure unadulterated steam distillations and expressions of flowers, fruits, leaves, woods, roots, and grasses. Some have been called essential oils of the soul, or life-blood of plants.

The perfumes of Arabia are a reminder of a glorious past. During the great empire of the Caliphs of Baghdad, science and scholarship flourished, leading to, amongst other mathematical and technical breakthroughs, the control of the perfume trade.

The Caliphs enjoyed perfume and encouraged its manufacture, creating "sweet smells" for mosques and buildings with their esteemed fragrances.



Attar sellers do a brisk business in front of mosques.

Books on perfumery and distillation by the great Arab philosopher and scientist al Kindi around 800 AD, Rhazes around 865 AD and Avicenna around 980 AD, show that, for the first time in history, Arabs made the mass production of perfume possible.

These perfumes and secret techniques became great treasures of the world with Arabian perfumers considered the best-unmatched for centuries, even by the French.

Attar came to Dhaka possibly in the Mughal period or even before that.

"Attar sells mostly on Fridays," explains Md. Atikul Islam, an *attar* seller at Baitul Mukarram. "People use and buy a lot when they come to mosque to say their prayers." The sellers beside the mosques also sell praying caps, *jaynama* (mat/carpet for praying), *tajbi* (beads for counting prayers), Korans, and useful *suras* with rules for saying prayers.

"There are hundreds of kinds of *attar* all around the globe, but we bring the cheaper ones for consumers in the city who are mainly poor and middle-class

people," says Zubair Hossain, a seller at Kawran Bazar. "The fragrances I keep in my shop are Rose, Belle, Kacha Belle (green belle), Jasmine, Rajanigandha, Hasna Hena, Darbar, Gul-e-laila, Gul-e-Mehedi, Biki, Jannat-ul-Ferdouse and Bakul. These fragrances differ between brands and the places where they are produced. The most popular local brand is *Ottis*."

Other foreign countries attar is imported from are Holland, Pakistan and India (particularly Bombay). Though it originated in Arabia, the street sellers do not

sell any Arabian *attar* as the price remains too high for local consumers.

The price differs according to the quantity. The *attarwallas* buy their perfumes from between Tk 200 to 1,000 Tk per ounce and then sell them on in small, unusual bottles known as *sheeshi*. Two sizes of these bottles are used, one is one and quarter inches high and the other one and half inches.

"Small *sheeshi* prices range from Tk 10-20 for the products of *Ottis* brand, and the bigger ones sell at Tk 20-35. Expensive ones, like Darbar of Holland are sold for Tk 60-70 just for the small bottles," explains Zubair Hossain.

hello dhaka

Int'l Radio Timetable
VOA, SW (m)
0730-0800: 16.87, 19.72, 25.4
2230-2300: 25.1, 31.3, 41.1
MW 190.5 (m)
Both sessions available in 97.6 MHz in FM
BBC (All sessions available in FM 100 MHz)
0630-0700: 49, 31, 25 mb
1400-1410: 25, 19, 13 mb
1930-2000: 41, 31, 25
2230-2300: 49, 41, 31 mb

Policeman's plight

SULTANA RAHMAN

Having completed his daily eight-hour shift, Yaar Ali, a constable with Dhaka city's Traffic Department, returns home. His first task is to cleanse himself of the filth and grime that covers his entire body and the revolting black soot that clogs up his nose and ears.

According to Central Police Hospital, at least 90 per cent of traffic police have sinus problems as dust particles and black smoke pollute their working conditions. Many have reduced hearing ability caused by high level noise pollution. Other common ailments of city police are piles, hemorrhoids, jaundice, osteo arthritis, bronchitis and urinary infections.

"The duties traffic policemen must perform are very strenuous and this is combined with an ongoing, daily health hazard. I feel pain in the muscles of my legs and arms. But nobody cares about us, as we are lower category employees. Our salary is too low to survive in the city and provide for a family too," said Ali who has been working in the traffic department for 18 years. In 1985 his starting salary was Tk 244 which has increased over the years to its current level of Tk 3800, including house rent and medicare.

According to the Metropolitan Traffic Rule, 40 per cent of employees are allowed to live with their family for two years on rotation while the remaining 60 per cent must stay in



Traffic police are among the highest risk group for pollution-related diseases

police barracks. The Metropolitan Traffic Police authority also provides food rations for four family members of each employee.

Like Yaar Ali, most of the traffic police employees live with their family in rented accommodation at minimal cost. "I live in a rental house at Kamalapur area, which is hardly better than a slum shanty," said Yaar Ali. "Thinking of my children's future, I rent a house at Tk 1200. I just can't afford anything better with my salary" he added.

Arranging household costs becomes a hand to mouth process, most policemen can not afford to spend money on extra health care or even provide adequate nutrition for their family.

Metropolitan Police sources said, some 2000 officials

including Sub Inspector (SI), Asst. Sub Inspector (ASI) and constable work for traffic control services across the city. Between Tk 1625 and Tk 2905 is the rank salary for a constable throughout his life.

Senior officials of Metropolitan Traffic Police have stated that the government should take initiatives to reform the police department in order to keep up with the changing socio-economic conditions in the country, and firmly establish the police as one of the vital 'emergency services' of the city.

CORRECTION

The lead article 'Louis Khan's Vision Ignored' in our last issue, inadvertently referred to Jatliya Sangsad Complex as the National Assembly Complex. We regret the error.