

## SHAHBAGH UNDERPASS

# A dream yet to be realised



Students of Dhaka University eagerly awaiting the construction of an underpass at Shahbag intersection.

### CITY CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is yet to start construction of the Shahbagh underpass during the tenure of this government as it is waiting for the Planning Commission's approval. DCC mayor, Sadeque Hossain Khoka, had assured Dhaka University (DU) students that an underpass at Shahbagh would be constructed within three months following a massive protest by them after one of their mates Mobarak Hossain, a first year management (Hons) student was run over by a bus at the Shahbagh crossing on May 8 this year. The three months have lapsed and the mayor's promise is still to be kept. DCC has not yet assigned a consultant for a feasibility study, and the project would be pushed back further with only two months left of the present tenure, said a DCC official. "DCC will fund the feasibility study, but the project funding should come from the finance ministry," said the official. "This might not be possible during the last two months of this govern-

ment's rule," he added. The mayor said he could not keep his promise, as DCC does not have adequate funds at their disposal. "We have to seek for funds through proper channels and that takes time. We hope to get the required funds soon," said the mayor. He also said that they received a proposal from a private bank that wants to construct a foot over-bridge at Shahbagh at their own cost and DCC is seriously examining the proposal. "If we find their proposal worthy and they assure us that it could be constructed in a short time we would give them permission. In that case the problem could be solved faster," the mayor said. Following the DU students' protest after the death of Mobarak Hossain speed breakers were set at four points at Shahbagh but vehicles continue to ply recklessly. Shammi Akhtar Happy, a third-year student of psychology was killed at the same spot on May 28, last year and within a span of seven years, eight university students were killed in road acci-

dents, triggering violent protests on the campus. But very little of their demands were met. Students said they would go hard line if the government does not start the construction of the underpass within a month. "If we have to take to the streets this time, we will do so until our demands are met. No fake promises will work anymore," said Bappy a student of management studies. The future of constructing an underpass at Bangla Motor and a foot over-bridge at Paribagh remains uncertain, as these are included in the Shahbagh underpass project. Although public demand to construct flyovers or underpasses at two other risky intersections -- Bangla Motor and Paribagh -- is at its highest, the delay would cause more fatal deaths anytime. After the traffic authority made Bangla Motor intersection off-limit to rickshaws in January 2005 hundreds of people risk their lives crossing Bangla Motor and Paribagh on foot. Besides several minor accidents, senior journalist Yusuf Pasha was killed in an accident at

the Bangla Motor intersection in March this year. The executive department of DCC also decided to set up a foot over-bridge at the Paribagh intersection. It must be mentioned that DCC started constructing a concrete foot over-bridge at the Paribagh intersection in 2003 and cancelled the work after it was half constructed wasting Tk 1.16 million from public funds stating that the site was not suitable. DCC might construct the foot over bridge this time on previously made feasibility study at the same site. DCC chief executive officer (CEO) Saifuddin Ahmed, said the project includes construction of two underpasses at Shahbagh and Banglamotor, a foot over-bridge at Paribagh and reconstruction of the culvert at Gulshan (before the shooting club). The entire project would cost Tk 25 crore. "I do not think getting fund for this project is difficult, but we have to be patient until the fund is approved as everything has a procedure to follow," said the CEO.

# From the fond memories of a great poet...

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

In the 1930s, Ghoragari (horse carriage) was a common sight on the Dhaka streets. A little boy was mesmerised with galloping sounds and brightly coloured carriages with their big wheels. He would sit beside the *kochowan* (the driver) whenever he chanced to ride one. Holding the harness of the horses tight in one hand, he would brandish the whip into the air with the other pretending to hit the horses. His one and only aim was then to become a *kochowan* when he grew up. Five years later, a tall date tree in the front yard of the house at Mahuttuli changed his aim and the man who gathered juice from that tree became his idol. He tried his best to dress like him, even tuck a knife in his waist and make futile efforts to climb up the date tree. Unfortunately for him, but definitely fortunate for the people of Bangladesh the boy's childhood fantasy never became a reality, else the country would have missed a great poet -- Shamsur Rahman. He was the poet, who acquired the tradition and offered his individuality to Bangla poetry; who earned the love and respect of people from all walks of life. The memories of the day when his muse visited him for the first time and he wrote his maiden verses were fresh in his mind. "I was about 16 or 17 years old then. It was midday and the sky was strewn with clouds, when I picked up my pen and wrote a poem titled '1949'. It happened at the fog end of 1948," the poet had recalled. His friend, Sculptor Hamidur Rahman was the first to read his poem. "It was Hamidur who insisted that I should go to the Sonar Bangla magazine office with that poem," he said. "With a pounding heart I entered the office, only to face a grave looking man sitting there. It was Prafullo Kishore Guha, brother of editor Nalini Kishore Guha. He took my poem and read it. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard him instruct: This will be published in the next issue" as

the recollections continued. His mother was delighted but his father's reaction was not very encouraging. I have seen enough of this. Does he have the talent to become a poet like Humayun Kabir, his father had roared. "There was always a distance between my father and I, perhaps because I was a little scared of him," said the poet. "I do not know what, but something came over me and I stood up to my father and said: 'If I ever become a poet, I would be much better than Humayun Kabir,'" Shamsur Rahman recalled the bold words. His father's attitude changed when Shamsur Rahman achieved his first ever award -- Adamjee Award for Literature for his anthology of poems '*Roudra Karottite*'. His youth is associated with a beautiful Dhaka that left fond memories that he cherished watching the hardened city of Dhaka as it had turned during his later years. "I would loiter around the Sadarghat area with my friends. That place was quite nice at that time," he said. "It was at River View Café in Sadarghat that Hamidur Rahman offered me a treat to celebrate the publication of the poem 1949," he said. He could even remember his first day at a *katcha bazaar* (kitchen market). Any man visits such a place all through his life but Shamsur Rahman visited the market just once in his entire life. "We were living at Bangla Motor and I was a student of class six, when one day my mother gave me a small cane basket and some money and asked me to go to the market. I came back with some 'puti machh' (small fish) that were all rotten. My mother was very annoyed and though she did not take me to task, that was the end of my market-visit," the poet recollected. He attributed his memories to his love for the city, but always said that the present Dhaka was not the one he wanted to see. "I still love the city. But this is not the city I wanted to see. This is not the city I ever imagined it would turn out to be." When asked if he enjoyed solitude, he



Poet Shamsur Rahman

answered that solitude was synonymous with poets and he is no exception. "Powerful emotions take over any poet in tranquility. Then it becomes easier to translate the inner urge of creativity into literary pieces," he said. However, he felt that we live in a beautiful social world and cannot always avoid people in a bid to enjoy solitude. He said he tried his best to compromise with it.



The writer talking to the poet in the poet's study (above), an outer view of the poet's house at Shyamoli.

PHOTOS: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



## PHOTO EXHIBITION ON MRO LIFESTYLE

# Life on mountains brought to plains

DURDANA GHIAS

"For a Mro woman getting married is not a problem. She can find a husband even if she has children. She is judged by her working capability and good health" -- these were the words of Pe Suk, a Mro woman framed in Mahmud's camera. It was one of the pictures taken by photographer Mahmud displayed at Drik Gallery at the exhibition 'Life & Struggles of the Mro people in Bangladesh' that ended yesterday. There were small notes written with every picture, which helped the visitors know about the context of the picture. Reading the details the visitors could know more about the life in the mountains. "It's very nice that a story's been told with every picture," said Sunny, a Buet student. Another picture depicts the story of Chek Fa, a Mro man, who got married five times. The frame consists of three pictures, one displaying Fa in his full fishing

gear, where the life of a Mro man is succinctly depicted. Through the picture Fa tells the visitors about his several marriages and how those happened in a nutshell and gives an impression of his life. Mros do not bother about the legal rights on the land by the government. Exploiting their simple belief, some influential people have allegedly taken over the lands through a permanent lease by the government. These lands are being used in rubber plantation and other projects, according to the notes under one of the pictures. "The photos have brought out the plight of indigenous people. I had been to Ladakh in Indian Kashmir where indigenous people are in similar situation. They are also struggling to survive, preserve their culture in the face of increasing pressure of the so-called development," said Channa Jaysekera, a Sri Lankan, while admiring the snaps. "The pictures are simply wonderful. My mother used to work with the indigenous people in Canada. When I see these photos I feel the same story is being told. Everywhere the indigenous people are being dispossessed and living a deprived life," said Julia, a Canadian, working at Asia Foundation in Dhaka. One picture depicts Jhum Puja or the prayer for Jhum. Life of a Mro family is greatly dependent on Jhum -- the practice of slash and burn cultivation on hill slopes allotted by a village head or *karbari*. A family performs this prayer to protect the corps, for continued health and prosperity

of the family and to prevent evil spirits. A chicken, a piglet, eggs, seeds of crops produced in Jhum are taken to the hillside to sacrifice in this prayer. In Bangladesh, Mros live in Bandarban only. Those settled in Arakan of Myanmar are known as Myu. In Mizoram they are known as Masho and in the Philippines, Maru. Researchers think that the Mros settled in Bandarban in late 1500 after a clan war with the Khumis and Sandhus. According to the census by Mro Social Culture in 1995, the Mro population in Bangladesh was 59,748. Photographer Mahmud took these splendid pictures of the Mro lifestyle to give the people of plains to peek at the lives on the mountains. He spent 100 days in Mro villages in Bandarban Sadar, Thanchi, Lama and Alikadam upazilas of the district in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) taking photographs and collecting Mro folk tales starting from 2002 to 2005. "The aim of this exhibition is to introduce the younger generation and the mainstream people to the

lives of indigenous people," said Mahmud. "This is the fourth exhibition of these photographs and we have a plan to do 30 exhibitions around the country. After that we will publish a book on it and try to arrange exhibition abroad," he said. "I made at least 12 trips to the area and in each trip I stayed for two weeks at a stretch. There were not many problems I faced in these trips," said Mahmud. "Other than catching malaria 8 times during the trips, everything was very nice. The Mro people were very hospitable and cooperative. They treat their guests like gods and I felt honoured by their graciousness. They gave me food and shelter. What more could I expect from them?" Mahmud has been a freelance photographer since 1988 and a member of Map Photo Agency, which organised this exhibition with the support of the Embassy of Denmark. The next exhibition will be held at Jahangirnagar University.

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Visitors appreciating Mahmud's photography on Mro community at the exhibition.

STAR PHOTO