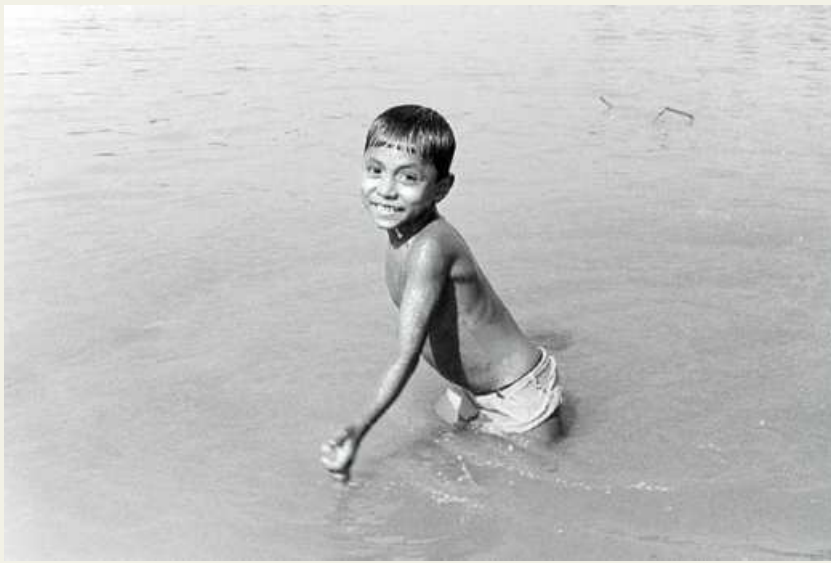


TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



The Joy of Water.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Adventures at the Pond

The pond was irresistible, beckoning me every day.

Across the street from our home in Sylhet, was a police station. Next to this station ran an unpaved path which went some way past the station before curving right. Walking down this path, one unexpectedly came upon a large pond (dighi), hidden away from the street. The pond was square with sides of perhaps 500 feet. At the centre of each side was a small ghat - rudimentary stairs for people of the neighbourhood to enter the pond for bathing or swimming.

I learned to swim in this pond - at Abbu's insistence - when I was eight. For him, swimming was a non-negotiable survival skill. This was before the age of swimming instructors and lessons. Abbu recruited Torijullah Bhai, a tough choulidar, for the job, with the promise of a reward if I swam in a month. Every day I eagerly waited for Torijullah Bhai to show up so we could head to the pond. He stood waist-deep in water and held out his arms. Supporting my chest and belly on his palms, I floated. He shouted "Kick! Kick! Kick!" and I kicked the water till I was exhausted. Gradually he started to draw away his hand and I was able to stay afloat without his help. Next thing I knew, I was swimming across the pond. I had the world's worst freestyle technique, breathing face forward rather than turning my head, but when Abbu watched me swim across the pond, he was delighted.

Torijullah Bhai collected his reward and our lessons ended. In the meantime a young man was hired to work in our house. Bodi hailed from a village of Water Gypsies in Mymensingh. I was, by now, addicted to swimming so he accompanied

me every day to the pond where I frolicked in the water and he squatted patiently on the bank chewing on stalks of grass.

One day Bodi jumped into the water. He swam effortlessly and then disappeared underwater, emerging a few seconds later with a dark roundish shell. A few more dives, and he had collected several shells, placing them on the grass. As we walked home with the shells, I asked him their purpose. "You will see," he replied.

At home, Bodi set down the shells on the grass and got himself a large knife. "Watch this," he said. He carefully opened a shell with the knife and with a deft twist of his fingers flipped over the cream coloured flesh inside. He looked inside carefully, discarded the shell, and picked another. He had gone through several when he shouted, "Look!" It was a miraculous sight: a pearl encased safely within the folds of the flesh inside the shell.

Collecting those shells became my new obsession. Every day Bodi and I went to the pond and dived, filling a bucket with shells. Perhaps one in ten yielded a pearl. Most were small, but one day we scored a large one, about 1/4" in diameter.

I watched Bodi to learn his technique. But there was a trick to turning over the flesh that I could not master. No matter how hard I tried I simply could not reveal the gem. So the secret of finding pearls stayed with him.

Bodi eventually left our house. That was the end of my pearl hunting days. It was much later that I learned that the Water Gypsies of Bangladesh are expert pearl hunters.

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DAMAGE TO DHAKA-MAWA EXPRESSWAY

RHD, Padma Bridge rail link contractor at loggerheads

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Roads and Highways Department (RHD) and contractor of Padma Bridge Rail Link Project are apparently at loggerheads over the use of Dhaka-Mawa Expressway for transporting construction materials.

RHD officials say the contractor and sub-contractors are damaging the newly-built expressway and service roads by operating heavy-loaded trucks to transport materials for the project.

The department has already sought Tk 50 crore to the project authority as compensation for the damage, and vowed not to allow any truck to use the expressway and its service road to avoid further damage, RHD officials said.

On the other hand, the contractor -- China Railway Group Limited (CRGL) -- said the road authority began closing passage between the main road and the service road since June 11.

As the main road allowing heavy vehicles to pass through is completely closed, vehicles transporting materials cannot reach the construction site and the service road that can reach the construction site is not allowing heavy-loaded vehicles to pass through it, the contractor said though its PR organisation on Thursday.

"As a result, all vehicles transporting materials for PBRLP will not be able to enter the construction site, and the construction of the section of CH25-CH81, nearly 56km long, will be forced to face a complete shutdown," it said, adding that 36 local suppliers and sub-contractors, and their employees are suffering enormously amid the pandemic.

In March, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the country's first-ever expressway from Dhaka to Faridpur's Bhanga upazila. The 55km four-lane highway, with service lanes on both sides, is the most expensive road kilometre-for-kilometre in the country.

On the other hand, the Ecneec in May 2016 approved the "Padma Bridge Rail Link Project" to connect the capital with Jashore with a 169km rail line over the under-construction Padma Bridge. The deadline of the Tk 39,246-crore project is June 2024.

WHAT RHD SAYS Sabuj Uddin Khan, additional chief engineer (Dhaka zone) of RHD, said they have already damaged the expressway and its service roads to some extent, by operating heavy-loaded truck, without paying heed to RHD's opposition.

"We've already visited the site and closed the expressway and its service roads on the Bhanga side two days ago, and are closing the Mawa side gradually too. We can't allow our property to be damaged by carrying materials for another project," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He however said they did not close the road from June 11 as alleged by CRGL. Sabuj said the project authority was supposed to build a service road to carry construction materials but did not do that.

Replying to another question, he said "We have already sought Tk 50 crore to the rail link project authority as compensation for the damage. We will seek more after doing further assessment."

Sabuj said they have held several meetings over the issue but the contractor and their sub-contractors are not keeping their promises.

WHAT PROJECT AUTHORITY SAYS Contracted, Project Director of PBRLP Golam Fakhruddin Ahmed Chowdhury also admitted that some sub-contractors operated loaded trucks at night, ignoring authority's directives. "RHD is very unhappy with the issue," he told The Daily Star on Thursday.

He, however, said work is going on although RHD has given some

restriction to use the expressway and service roads.

"We have held two or three meeting with them, the last of them on July 6, and a committee has been formed to resolve the issue," Fakruddin said.

He said the committee, after visiting the site, will give a decision within seven days and hoped to resolve the issue. "Because, the expressway is our asset and we have to go ahead with the project too," he added.

However, CRGL said although a coordination meeting was convened among relevant parties to resolve this issue, where the contractor of PBRLP agreed that they will assign a sufficient number of traffic management staff, provide road protection facilities, and carry out reparation if their trucks damage the road.

"Unfortunately, the N8 road [expressway] still remains closed to trucks carrying construction materials for PBRLP," it said, adding it is understood that the relevant parties have initiated dialogues on this issue several times, but no consensus has been reached as of yet.

"Hence, the PBRLP project is currently facing suspension and heavy financial loss," it added.

RAILWAY ACCIDENTS

113 killed in last six months: report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Although train services remained suspended for more than two months, at least 113 people were killed and 15 others injured in 105-rail related accidents across the country in the last six months, said a joint report of two rights bodies.

Some 20 women and 11 children were among victims of accidents that took place between January and June, said Green Club of Bangladesh and National Committee to Protect Shipping, Roads and Railways (NCPSRR).

They prepared the report based on news published in 24 national and 10 regional dailies and nine online news portals and news agencies, said a press release yesterday.

Lack of awareness and poor maintenance of level crossings and railway bridges, among other issues, contribute to the continuation of rail-related accidents.

The report said 29 people lost their lives in January, 44 in February, 19 in March, four in May and 17 in June.

The organisations identified five major reasons behind the rise in railway accidents, including use of phones by pedestrians while crossing rail tracks, negligence of railway employees and poor maintenance of level crossings.

Ashis Kumar Dey, general secretary of NCPSRR, said since passenger trains did not ply from late March to May, the casualties took place in four months.

Hilsa glut in Barishal

Season sees promising start; officials expect 10-20pc increase in catches



PHOTO: TITU DAS

Fishermen busy unloading wicker baskets full of hilsa at the river ghat in Barishal. The wholesale market in the city's Port Road has been buzzing over the last week.

SUSHANTA GHOSH, Barishal

With the doom and gloom surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic slowly subsiding, the west bank of Barishal's Kirtankhola river has started to see increased activity.

At least 20-30 boats are seen either setting sail on a daily basis or anchoring with their prized catches -- hilsa.

The season is just getting started. At Barishal Port Road's hilsa market -- one of the biggest wholesale hilsa markets in the city -- supplies are higher than that of other seasons.

"Everything kind of clicked this season. The weather has been favourable, rainfall has been great, people did not net jatka as much due to government restriction and strict monitoring. Also, the pandemic forced many to stay ashore. Due to these reasons, the rivers and sea have seen less pollution too," said Bimol Chandra Das, district fisheries officer, Department of Fisheries, Barishal.

"Given all this, we're expecting a 10-20 percent increase in volume of catches this season," the official added.

Ujjal Kumar Das, a wholesaler, said, "This is the first time we're seeing hilsa of this size at the beginning of the season. Most of the catches are turning out to be

around 1kg. I have at least 2,500-3,000 maunds available for the day."

A kilogramme of the fish is going for Tk 800, which is some Tk 200 less due to increased supplies. However, the situation is set to change once the ban on fishing in the sea is lifted on July 23, fisheries officials said.

Over the weekend, huge quantities of hilsa, weighing around 900 grammes to one kg, were seen at the market. From here, most of the fish will be sent to Dhaka and other destinations at other cities on trucks.

Ajit Kumar Das Manu, president of the Hilsa Wholesalers' Association, said most of the hilsa have been netted from Meghna and Elisha rivers of Bhola district.

Wholesaler Abu Bakr Siddik told The Daily Star that they are also selling hilsa below 750 grammes to 950 grammes for Tk 500-650 each. If the fish comes from near the sea, the price decreases by at least Tk 100 per kg.

"The government imposed 65-day ban on netting at sea ends on July 23. After this, supply will also increase in the market," said Azizul Haque, deputy director of Barishal divisional fisheries department.



Three friends share one bicycle on a weekend ride yesterday, making most of a rare opportunity to cruise through a major thoroughfare in the capital. While it is only natural for children to be adventurous, a relatively empty road -- particularly one like Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue -- can be a dangerous place due to fast-moving vehicles.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

RELIEF, HEALTH SECTORS

ACC to ramp up drives against the corrupt: Iqbal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Anti-Corruption Commission will bolster its drive against those involved in corruption in relief and health sectors, said ACC Chairman Iqbal Mahmood.

"Due to the novel coronavirus, we could not carry out regular drives, but for the sake of public interest ACC will strengthen legal drives against notorious corrupt people," he said while addressing ACC's virtual meeting on a report on the implementation of "Strategic Work Plan 2019" on Thursday, said a press release yesterday.

To retrieve money and stop money laundering in the country, the ACC chairman called for filing cases against the corrupt at the quickest possible time.

Mahmood said ACC got verdicts in their favour in 11 money laundering cases filed in 2019. "The ACC was able to ensure punishment of culprits in all money laundering cases filed in 2018 too," he said. Addressing ACC officials, Iqbal said

more than 18 officers have been infected with Covid-19 and two employees died.

Even after that, the ACC is continuing to file cases, arrest accused, issue summon and carry out interrogation, he said.

ACC Commissioner Dr Md Mozammel Haque Khan said focal point officials can play vital role in implementing the National Integrity Strategy.

"It's unfortunate that these officials do not inform ACC about corruption of their ministries and departments. They too need to be made accountable," he said, underscoring the need for appointing honest and bold persons as focal point officers.

Commissioner AFM Aminul Islam suggested increasing detective surveillance of ACC at health institutions. "We've often got allegations that some organisations are failing to provide expected service," he said.

"If necessary, the commission will resume its drives following health guidelines," he added.

1,667 died with symptoms of Covid-19: report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 1,667 people have died after showing Covid-19-like symptoms from March 22 to July 4 in the country, said a report of Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies.

It however, said all the deaths might not have been related to Covid-19 as many deceased tested negative for the virus.

The report said 515 of the deceased were in Chattogram division, 358 in Dhaka, 208 in Khulna, 193 in Barishal, 171 in Rajshahi, 91 in Sylhet, 74 in Rangpur and 57 in Mymensingh.

CGS shared the report, the 13th edition of a series by Bangladesh Peace Observatory, with media on Thursday.

DNCC launching online platform to buy sacrificial animals for Eid

HELEMLU ALAM

This Eid-ul-Azha, those planning to buy sacrificial animals will be able to do so with just a few clicks on their computer or smartphone, as Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) is all set to introduce an online platform for cattle sale in light of the pandemic.

Using it, a potential buyer will be able to view animals on a website, place order and pay, all digitally, said DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam.

"We are going to negotiate with Nagad and some other digital transaction companies to facilitate online payment" he said.

This is not the only service that will be on offer. Customers will also have the option of getting their meat processed from DNCC in exchange of a service charge, he added.

DNCC has already negotiated with Bangladesh Dairy Farmers' Association and E-Commerce Association of

Bangladesh (e-Cab) in this regard, the mayor said.

Authorities have selected five locations for sacrificing animals and processing meat inside DNCC, which will be delivered to customers' homes, he said.

Atiqul said they have also talked to the fisheries and livestock ministry to ensure good health of the animals. Officials of the ministry will ensure animals' health by visiting dairy farms that will sell animals through the online platform.

"We are doing this as a pilot project considering the situation. We will provide the service at a larger scale if we are successful," the mayor said.

He said they will hold a press conference today in this regard.

Md Shah Emran, general secretary of Bangladesh Farmers' Association, told The Daily Star around 3,000 cows will be displayed on the website, and members of the association will

provide 2,500 cows.

"We will not only sell animals but also ensure home delivery after sacrifice," Emran said.

"If we can sell 10 percent of the animals this year, we will consider it a success, as it is totally a new concept," he said.

Customers, however, will have to pay service charge for home deliveries, he added.

Director General of Department of Livestock Dr Abdul Zabbar Sikder said after inspecting cattle farms, their officials will provide health certificates.

Earlier, public health experts expressed alarm over traditional cattle markets, saying the country may face an acceleration of Covid-19 cases if the government fails to ensure health guidelines.

Sacrificing animals in open spaces may also increase the risk of infection, they said.