

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR

My First School

When I was in Class 2 my teacher handed me a folded letter for my parents. At home, before giving the letter to my parents, I took a quick look. I couldn't understand the message, but it was signed by "Hony. Secretary." This puzzled me. What was the connection between honey, secretary, and my school? Years later, I realized the sender was the Honorary Secretary of my school - Blue Bird School, Sylhet.

In the 1960s, Sylhet was a quaint town with bungalow-style homes and plenty of greenery and ponds. Our house was filled with trees, rose gardens, lemon bushes, as well as cows, chickens and ducks - enough nature to captivate the imagination of a curious child.

When I was five, my parents enrolled me in Blue Bird School. Until then, I had led a blissful life enjoying my home territory. When I was informed about my enrolment, I was too absorbed in my world to realize my carefree days were ending. Instead, I was delighted at my new school uniform: white short-sleeve shirt and blue shorts.

On that first day it was *Ammu* who took me to school. It was about three miles from our house - twenty minutes by rickshaw - on top of a hill across from *Manik Pirer Tilla*. The rickshaw dropped us at the bottom of the hill and we walked to the top where an L-shaped bungalow - the schoolhouse - stood alone.

Reaching there, I suddenly had the sinking feeling I was about to be left with strangers. Unnerved, I pleaded with *Ammu* to stay at the school the entire day. She did this the first day. From the next day a household staffer took me there. He too waited for me the whole day, every day, for several days. I often peeked outside class to ensure his presence.

Then one day he left after classes started.

When I peeked outside the classroom and noticed him missing, I started howling. The other children were amused. The teacher tried to calm me down. I cried for a good half hour before settling down.

At day's end, *Ammu* came to pick me up. She had brought treats - candies, books - to make up for my distress.



Off to School.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

But when I was left alone the next day I did not complain. Instead, I quickly made friends, playing with them outdoors during breaks.

My days at the hilltop ended soon. The school had outgrown the bungalow and needed larger space. It moved to a two-storied building in *Noya Sharak* where I spent Class 3. There was no outdoor space to play. But the indoor space was large, including an attractive new library. I spent long hours there poring over the pictures and photographs in large hardbound books.

The following year I was double-promoted from Class 3

to Class 5. The school moved to the next day I did not complain. Instead, I quickly made friends, playing with them outdoors during breaks.

Blue Bird School was a warm and nurturing place to spend my early school years. The teachers taught us without overload. Even though it was an English medium school, we could converse with them in *Bangla*. Just like the town, everyone knew everyone else at the school. Today, as Sylhet has graduated from small town to large city, so has Blue Bird become a much larger institution.

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Rangpur residents suffer as roads, homes get inundated after rain

KONGKON KARMAKAR, *Dinajpur*

Rangpur residents are suffering as rain-induced waterlogging has inundated many city streets and areas.

According to the Met office, 42mm rain was recorded in the city in the last four days; on July 19, the figure was 190mm. As a result, at least 17 neighbourhoods in 33 wards under Rangpur City Corporation have become inundated.

During a recent visit, this correspondent found *Mulatul*, *Kamarpara*, *Kamalkasa*, *Babu Khan*, *Shahipara*, *Habibnagar*, *City Bazar*, *Dhap*, *Hajipara*, *Amangsukulur*, *Munshipara*, *Barkatia Masjid*, *Gomastapara*, *Rangpur Central Bus Terminal*, in front of *Rangpur Kotwali Police Station*, *Tatipara*, *Rabartsonganj* and *Masupara* waterlogged. Many of the areas went under knee-deep water, and residents became marooned.

Slum dwellers were the worst sufferers as rainwater entered into their houses. Many were seen removing water from inside their houses.

Women were struggling to cook. *Jesmin Ara*, one of them from *Kamarpara*, said, "I set up my stove on a high place as the kitchen floor was submerged."

On the streets, sufferings got worse when rickshaw-pullers and battery-run three-wheelers refused to go through waterlogged areas. Many residents were wading through water to their destinations. "Water is so dirty and murky, it can cause skin diseases," said *Ashish*, a resident of *RJ road area*.

Many dwellers blamed the authorities concerned for the situation.

Mohamad Mamun from *Hajipara area* said no new drains were constructed since the inception of the city corporation eight years ago.

Talking to *The Daily Star*, *Prof Tuhin Wadud* of *Begum Rokeya University*, an urbanisation researcher, said poor drainage is behind the waterlogging.

The city should not be inundated as it is situated on high land and surrounded by six rivers, including the *Ghagat* and *Shyamasundari*, he said.

The water is not receding smoothly as the sewers cannot drain towards the rivers, he said. The number of drains in the city is not adequate, he added.

This correspondent found drains in many areas filled with polythene, waste and hyacinth.

Citizens said the mayor failed to keep his pledges to improve drainage system. In this regard, *Shafiqul Islam Mithu*, councillor of ward-14, said drains and canals have to be saved from encroachment.

According to city corporation sources, the city has 200km of drains.

Contacted, mayor *Mostafizur Rahman Mostafa* admitted the failure. He said they are renovating many drains and constructing new ones to resolve the waterlogging problem.

The works are expected to be completed within one year, he said.

Md Emdad Hossain, superintendent engineer of the city corporation, admitted that the narrowed down drains aggravated the suffering. "We will take steps to clear the sewers on a regular basis," he said.

Serve people with a smile

Foreign minister Momen tells Bangladesh missions in Europe

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has asked Bangladesh missions abroad to serve people with a smile.

He made the call during a videoconference with ambassadors based in Europe early this week, said a foreign ministry statement yesterday.

However, the context behind the minister's directive could not be known. It has been a common complaint from Bangladesh expatriates that they do not get good service at the missions, especially in countries with high concentration of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Following the arrest of Bangladesh MP *Shahid Islam Papul* in Kuwait on June 6 for human trafficking, money laundering and bribery, the foreign minister termed it "shameful for Bangladesh".

Momen instructed the ambassadors to make sure that service seekers are not mistreated in any way. The foreign ministry will take stern actions if it is found that any employee of the Bangladesh missions shows negligence in duty and in providing services and lack courtesy in serving people, the statement said.

'Finally a place to stay'

17 Bangladeshis, stranded in Vietnam, get accommodation until repatriation after passing four days near embassy

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

After passing four days under open sky near the Bangladesh embassy in Hanoi, 17 Bangladeshis, who were defrauded by Bangladeshi agents, brokers and a Vietnamese company, were provided accommodation on Thursday.

The company that hired them in Vung Tau finally took responsibility to provide hotel accommodation, Bangladesh Ambassador to Vietnam, *Samina Naz*, wrote in a Facebook post on Thursday night.

It was possible "after our intense negotiation with Vietnam Foreign Office, Vietnam Police & the Owner of the Company group of 17 people working with", she said.

The 17 Bangladeshis had traveled to Hanoi from Vung Tau, around 1,677 kilometres away from Hanoi, and had been demanding repatriation.

Their company, PHX, hired them for jobs early January but hardly could provide jobs, said *Faridul Islam*, one of the migrants. "As we asked, our madam (PHX owner) told us -- Atiq and Saiful (Bangladeshi brokers) brought you using my company. They could not give jobs, what can I do?".

Faridul said as they recently talked to the media, *Atiq* and *Saiful* threatened them of grave consequences and they traveled to Hanoi.

On July 3, the embassy repatriated 11 Bangladeshis. Since then, 45 more traveled to Hanoi, who and the embassy in cooperation with police accommodated. When the group of 17 traveled and took position at a roadside near the Bangladesh embassy, the embassy held meetings with Vietnam authorities, and finally the company owner took responsibility of accommodating the 17 Bangladeshis.

"We described the issues we faced in Vung Tau in front of Bangladesh embassy officials, police and the company owner. Our company's madam could not withstand it and finally agreed to provide us with accommodation until our repatriation," *Faridul* said.

RIDESHARING ON MOTORBIKES Is the ban proving counterproductive?

PRABIR DAS and SHOAIB AHMED SAYAM

Despite suspension of ridesharing services via motorcycles due to health safety concerns, bikers can still be seen with their vehicles parked at intersections in the capital, waving to potential passengers, and with some success too, as many commuters still choose the verbal-contract service despite the risks associated.

As of the end of 2019, over one lakh motorbikes were operating under 16 services, according to data provided by the services to the regulators.

Following suspension of all ridesharing services during the countrywide shutdown in March to contain the spread of Covid-19, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) allowed ride-sharing via cars a month ago, on condition that the vehicles be enlisted with the regulator. It continues to maintain a ban on ridesharing motorcycles due to the risk of spreading coronavirus.

But the clandestine operation of offline ridesharing is not just a concern about health safety.

Technology used in ride-sharing apps provides layers of security, like tracking routes and keeping records of riders and passengers. Bypassing the apps, bikers and passengers alike are at risk of incidents like mugging.

This newspaper spoke to dozens of riders and passengers in Dhaka who are providing and availing the service.

Most bikers expressed their anxiety over the safety issue, but said they cannot stop operations as they have no other way to earn a living.

Zakir Hossain was seen eagerly waiting for a passenger at the busy *Paltan* intersection. When this correspondent approached him, *Zakir* asked him whether he needed a ride.

"The ban is active, but I have no other way to earn money. Since we're not using the app, I always feel anxious, especially after evening. I fear a mugger posing as a passenger may snatch away my income, and maybe even hijack my bike," he said.

Abu Syed used to work at a private organisation but started providing rides full-time after losing his job during the pandemic.

He used to earn Tk 1,200-1,500 a day before the pandemic, when he occasionally provided rides. But now, he hardly earns Tk 500 daily, he told this newspaper while looking for a passenger at *Moghbar*.

"Before, we didn't have to sit at the



Commuters and bikers bargaining fare for a ride is now a common scene in the capital's major road intersections.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

intersection and ask people to get on, but the situation is different," he said.

Passengers, like the riders, have similar fears regarding security.

"If you want to save time, there's no alternative to motorbikes on busy Dhaka roads," said *Monir Hossain*, a construction materials supplier, who uses bike-sharing frequently to reach clients and construction sites in time.

"I try to be cautious in choosing my rider. I take services of those who seem trustworthy, as I always carry money with me," he said. "But until the authorities lift the ban, we must use the informal way."

Humayun Kabir, a freelancer, said he would roam around the city using ride-sharing apps, carrying his laptop, camera and other valuables, but never felt unsafe. However, due to no logs and tracking of rides, he hardly uses such modes of transport now.

Both riders and passengers said they hope the ban will be lifted soon.

Contacted, BRTA Director (Engineering) *Lokman Hossain Mollah* said, "Those doing this are risking their lives. On top of Covid-19, people can be victims of crime."

About the ban, he said they do not have a definite timeline to lift it, and have to follow the cabinet's decision.

As for the loss of livelihood, he said, "It is just an unfortunate situation; they are not the only ones suffering. Many in different sectors have become jobless. Besides, ridesharing should be part-time work, something to do to earn extra income."

"Regardless, putting one's health in danger to earn a living should not be encouraged," he added.

Pathao, a major ridesharing service

provider, views the whole situation differently.

"We do not think a continued suspension of ridesharing and punitive action against offline trips will be effective in curbing the spread of Covid-19," said *Sayeda Nabila Mahabub*, the company's marketing and public relations director.

Pathao is prepared to ensure health, safety and hygiene, if it is allowed to resume bike trips, she said.

While *Pathao* has complied with BRTA instructions, they are concerned to see ridesharing on two-wheelers continue informally, she added.

"This clearly demonstrates that the suspension has proven to be ineffective. We call upon BRTA to immediately allow full resumption of ridesharing services," she concluded.

Meanwhile, traffic police officials at different intersections of the capital opined that although carrying passengers on motorcycles commercially is currently not allowed, they do not harshly enforce it on humanitarian grounds.

Besides, when officers ask riders whether they are informally providing rides, they say the passenger is their relative or neighbour.

A traffic sergeant, seeking anonymity, said, "Covid-19 has made many jobless. If they can earn bread for their family this way, then why should we stop them? In the first few days, we would intervene. But later I realised that they all have a similar story. If they don't do this, their families would starve, so now we let them go."

[*Tuhin Shubhra Adhikary* contributed to this report.]

Don't go to village home unless you must

Says *Khalid Mahmud*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

State Minister for Shipping *Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury* yesterday urged Dhaka city dwellers not to go to village homes, unless there is an emergency, during Eid.

Addressing a programme at *Dhaka Reporters Unity*, he urged anyone requiring to travel urgently, to maintain health guidelines.

DRU organised the event to hand over financial assistance to four families members who died this year and two senior members for their treatment.

DRU president *Rafiqul Islam Azad* presided over the programme moderated by organising secretary *Habibur Rahman*.

Dig a hole and dump it!

Barishal Sher-E-Bangla hospital and city corporation's solution to medical waste management

SUSHANTA GHOSH, *Barishal*

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, *Barishal Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH)* authorities found itself in a waste disposal conundrum as the city corporation has stopped collecting waste from the hospital.

However instead of coming up with a proper solution to dispose of medical waste, the hospital is now dumping waste into holes near the hospital, which are dug up by the city corporation.

This so-called temporary solution is not only adding to the rising risk of polluting the environment around the hospital, but also increasing health risk of patients and commuters.

More alarmingly, these holes are also close to (around 80 feet) the hospital's emergency unit.

Dr Moniruzzaman, assistant director of SBMCH, said BCC has not collected waste from the



After BCC stopped collecting SBMCH's medical waste fearing Covid-19 infection, two authorities dug holes in the area to dump it, putting public health in danger.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

hospital for two months, citing coronavirus as the reason.

Asked, BCC conservancy officer *Dr Rabiul Islam* said, "We're not collecting waste (from the hospital) after several staffers, including our supervisor, were infected by Covid-19. We've dug a few holes with excavators in front of the hospital for disposing the waste. Our workers don't feel safe collecting waste -- what can we do?"

According to BCC, around

a tonne of medical waste is produced at the hospital every day.

With the sheer volume of waste, the hospital is running out of space at a fast pace. During a recent visit, it was seen that a third hole was being prepared after the first two have been filled up. However, various medical wastes were seen lying on the ground. *Dr Moniruzzaman* said the authorities are compelled to do this due to

a lack of inventory. Asked why did they dig the hole near the emergency, he said they had to do so due to space constraint.

He said BCC used to collect waste from the hospital, except the Covid-19 unit, whose waste was burnt behind the unit. The situation would have been different if the hospital had an incinerator, he added.

For the time being, experts recommended that the hospital authorities and the city corporation dispose of the medical waste not in the open or close to the hospital.

But most importantly, the hospital needs to purchase an incinerator immediately, they added.

This medical waste is usually dumped at a landfill in *Kawnia* area of the city. Meanwhile, BCC is considering another modern landfill at *Taltoi* area.

Lincon Bayen, co-ordinator of Bangladesh Environmental

Lawyers Association, said it's very dangerous to dump the waste this way. "We strongly ask the hospital authorities to come up with a safe dumping place."

According to experts, medical waste is not like other types of waste.

They should be dealt with caution as it can spread various diseases, including skin diseases, HIV, Hepatitis B and C, antibiotic resistant germs (superbugs) and other dangerous germs can spread from medical waste, said *Dr Mizanur Rahman*, a physician.

Another physician *Dr Bakir Hossain* said these are longstanding issues. The hospital, established in 1968, have not been able to solve these problems for a long time. Along with waste disposal issues, the hospital also suffers from human resource problems.

Despite repeated requests, the hospital authorities are yet to take care of these problems, he added.

Chief justice forms vacation benches for HC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Justice *Syed Mahmud Hossain* has constituted 12 single-judge High Court benches for hearing and disposing of cases during the court's annual vacation.

Appellate and High Court Divisions of the Supreme Court went on vacation from yesterday and will reopen on August 9.

The benches will virtually conduct judicial functions, said a notification by SC administration on Thursday.

The judges are: *Justices Tariq ul Hakim, Muhammad Abdul Hafiz, Syed Refaat Ahmed, Md Rais Uddin, AKM Abdul Hakim, FRM Nazmul Ahasan, Abu Zafar Siddique, Sheikh Hassan Arif, Md Ruhul Quddus, Farid Ahmed, Shahidul Karim* and *SM Kuddus Zaman*.