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Funeral fare for the final farewell

By Ekram Kabir

There are some unnoticed store-owners in town. They sell fragrances, scented-sticks, shroud and coffins for the dead.

Dying may not actually be the aim of the majority of the living, but for these store-keepers, it has two interpretations—"to eke out living" and "to serve a divine cause".

"We do not really receive death in our living consciousness, but our destiny is death and its aftermath. And this was the dominant thought when I got involved in this profession fifteen years ago at my Chankharpur residence," says Mohammad Amir Hossain, wearing a prudent smile.

This bearded middle-aged man may sound philosophically committed to what he is doing, but it's been seven years since Hossain shifted his outlet Chiro Bidaiy Store from Chankharpur to Katabon for better dividend.

"This area is habitat for more people than the old part of the city and have village-homes outside Dhaka; and thus they need to come and get funeral kits or coffins," says a comparatively well-off Hossain.

Why do people visit these stores?

"Well, it basically comes from a need: suppose your father or mother dies here in Dhaka city, and his/her last wish was to be buried at his/her village-home in Rangpur or Chittagong, then you become emotionally obliged to take the body of the deceased quite a long way. It may take—which usually is—a long time to reach there; and nobody wants the soul-less body to get putrefied

before burial; so for this purpose, you need a coffin," explains Mohammad Manik Munshi sitting in his Shesh Bidaiy Store, adjacent to Mirpur 10 graveyard.

For the too-pious Munshi, this way of making a living is slow-moving and unpredictable, but he doesn't have any dejection. "Because a human's death is Allah's wish," he says, adding: "I must not regret saying that I don't have many customers for funeral kits; on the other hand, I cannot pray to Allah to send customers here. That will be against the will of Allah making Him angry towards me...I cannot afford to commit such a sin."

Munshi sells four funeral kits per month which cost Taka 350 each and on average five coffins each at Taka 500. Also, there are times, commerce is zero for him. "So, to meet my day-to-day living, I keep other sellable items that are everyday requirement of the dwellers in this neighbourhood."

But on the contrary, a couple of kilometres away from Mirpur, in Katabon, a good number of 25 coffins on an average are sold out to both Muslims and Christians, their price ranging from Taka 350 to 400.

"If anybody wants a decent coffin, then the price goes up to at least 800 taka, but such buyer comes once in a blue moon," says Amir Hossain, adding with a sigh: "Nobody wants to spend much on a dead body, no matter how close the clan-members were to the expired one, you know; and to me, that's a sad part of my awareness."

Apart from this, Hossain is quite happy and doesn't need to do anything else other than



Merchants of doom: One of the funeral parlours in the city, specialising in merchandise that nobody wants to buy, but all have to use one day. Star Photo: Zahedul I Khan

this. But Mohammad Jasim and Abdul Karim at their Sheorapara Al-Bidaiy Store do. They cannot live only on selling coffins and other items for a decent living, they have a metals-fusing shop alongside their store.

Selling only four coffins in November, they also don't have any regrets. Because they think they are serving the humanity. "We take business as it comes," says Jasim, supplementing: "Actually, we don't hang on to this trade for living at all; to me, it's a satisfaction of my own soul. I am happy that I can help near ones of the departed one so that they don't have to go through any hassle in finding commodities that usually go with the dead."

Twenty per cent of Jasim's funeral kits get distributed free among those who cannot afford Taka 400 to 500.

None of these shop-keepers has the correct statistics as to how many of such stores are there in Dhaka, and it is apparent from their guess-computation that they don't have any correlation among them, for they differ on the numbers. According to Mohammad Amir Hossain in Katabon, there are about 50 shops, and on the other hand Manik Munshi in Mirpur says, it would be 15 to 20.

As far as these people's death-related philosophy and commerce are concerned, the living may be inclined to think about the Nature's great doctrine of immortality that seeks to teach that there's no radical difference between sleep and death, and that the latter endangers one's being as little as the former:

Twenty per cent of Jasim's funeral kits get distributed free among those who cannot afford Taka 400 to 500.

Health misses the boat

By Naimul Haq

taken during the same period due to lack of funds."

Reviewing the "Traditional Birth Attendant" (TBAs) sub-component of the mission said,

"There has been significant delay in carrying out the orientation programme of the community leaders, trained TBAs and family planning workers due to lengthy selection of NGOs."

Only 7.5 per cent births are being attended by TBAs despite providing training to 40,000 TBAs, one-month refresher training to about 3000 family planning workers."

About the "Ware house and

Distribution System for MCH

and FP Programme" sub-component, the report said, "The quarterly co-ordination meetings chaired by the director, logistics and supplies, have become irregular. The last meeting was held in April 1998 after six months. Monthly reports on stock positions at various levels, projected consumption, planned shipment for all major items under MCH/FP programmes are available. But the reports are hardly ever used for purpose e.g. timely initiation of procurement or placing of orders."

As regards the performance of "Family Planning Services Delivery" sub-component, the mission said, "Between 1992 and 1997 average monthly performance sterilisation declined from 20,000 to 3,500 and in IUD insertions from 30,000 to 15,000."

It also said, "Discontinua-

tion rates among the contraceptive users remain high with nearly half of them discontinuing in the first 12 months of use. Discontinuation rates for the pill, injectable, condom and IUD are 44 per cent, 51 per cent, 65 per cent and 41 per cent respectively."

On the "Population Cell in Bangladesh Television" sub-component, it said, "The potential of this cell as an important channel in the sector has not been fully exploited. The project has been a slow moving one, which is obvious from the slow disbursement rate. The original FPHP allocation had to be reduced. There seems to be a lack of full commitment on the part of ministry of information. Frequent change in project directors has also been hampering the implementation. There were provisions for procuring modern studio equipment since 1992 but due to non-utilisation, the fund was diverted."

Reviewing the "Establishment of HFWCs & Upgradation of RDs", the WB mission said, "The quality of construction, repair and maintenance has been less than satisfactory. This has been due to weak contract management and supervision by the consultants."

About the "Development of NIPSM and RUD" the report said, "The main objective of the project was to improve quality of teaching and research...To what extent that has been achieved is not yet clear."

Fresh vow to materialise spirit of Liberation War

15 drown in launch tragedy

From Ehsanul Haque

NARAYANGANJ, Dec 17: At least 15 people including two women drowned when a passenger launch partially sank in the Buriganga near Panchabati Gudaragh under Fatullah thana at around 8:45 am today.

Many others are feared trapped in the launch. The district administration, however, did not confirm it.

One of the survivors, Zakir Hossain, 26, said that his four-year-old daughter Chhanda was missing.

Local people, police and divers recovered the 15 dead bodies and handed over those to the victims' relatives without any autopsy, officials said.

Eleven of the victims were identified as Abdul Motaleb(35), Gopal Nath Banik(40), Abdurrahman Molla(65), Malek Molla(40), Narayan Rishi(45), Mariam(40), Mariam's husband Saidul Haq(48), Abdul Matin(50), Shahabuddin(40) and Babul(12) from Munshiganj and Ali Ashraf(35) from Fatullah.

Four others including a woman could not be identified till the filling of this report at around 10 pm.

The overloaded launch - Green Arrow - owned by a private company was on its way to Dhaka from Munshiganj. It was carrying around 200 passengers.

The launch sank as its roof collapsed when it hit a partly submerged pile of bricks near

the river bank.

All the victims were trapped under the collapsed roof and could not come out though the launch sank near the bank. The driver and other staff of the launch fled the scene.

A BIWTA official requesting anonymity said the roof of the launch collapsed as it was defective. "Most of the launches are given licence without examining fitness and these do not even have necessary support materials including life jackets and furniture. These vessels operate in the absence of checking as per rules."

Zakir Hossain told this correspondent that the passengers had earlier requested the launch staff not to take any

more passengers as it was already overloaded. "Without paying any heed to our request, they took at least 60 passengers from the nearby Baktabali Ghat. Many of the passengers specially women started crying and some prepared to jump out fearing danger," he said.

"When the launch was sinking, I tried to jump out taking my daughter but the roof collapsed separated me from my daughter," a tearful Zakir said.

Sujan(21) lost both his father and mother. He fainted repeatedly and later lay beside the bodies of his parents.

The DC and the SP of Narayanganj visited the spot and supervised rescue operation.

Who is correct?

By Nurul Kabir

Results of how many centres of the Ramma-Tejgaon parliamentary constituency (Dhaka-10) have been declared void?

Five-one, "some 40", 37 or 31?

On November 30, the local press reported that an election tribunal had declared results of 51 centres, out of a total 78, null and void.

Most of the newspapers quoted a statement issued by Abdul Mannan, the BNP candidate who lost to Dr. H B M Iqbal in the June 1996 vote.

The Election Commission has a different story to tell. EC secretary Abdurrahman Harun Pasha said yesterday that the number of polling centres was 31.

Results of 31 centres - not 51 - were cancelled by the tribunal. I have seen the verdict myself," the Secretary told The Daily Star.

The candidate who will suffer if the verdict eventually takes effect has his own numbers. "Well, actually the number is some 40," Dr. Iqbal told The Daily Star over telephone.

Explaining, the AL MP who has already challenged the verdict in the High Court and got a stay order on December 10 said: "There are cases where the tribunal has mentioned about male and female polling centres, but counted them as one centre. So there is scope to count them separately, and in that case the number could be raised to some 40 - not 51 as claimed by the BNP candidate."

Meanwhile, Iqbal's lawyer Barrister Shamshuddin Chowdhury found the number of the controversial polling centres to be 37. "The verdict, in this regard, is vague. It's true that the judge concerned has mentioned about 31 centres. But if you count the male and female centres separately, we have seen the results of 37 centres have been declared null and void."

At the same time, it urged Baghdad — its foe in an eight-year war that ended in 1988 — to cooperate with the world body to implement Security Council resolutions.

In the first official reaction by a Gulf Arab state, the Oman foreign ministry expressed the Sultanate's deep sorrow over the renewed confrontation with Iraq.

A foreign ministry spokesman quoted by the official news agency OANA urged Iraq to show more readiness to cooperate with the United Nations and called on the international community to exert immediate and comprehensive efforts to ensure a resumption of cooperation between Iraq and the United Nations.

In Saudi Arabia, a key ally, Al-Riyadh daily said the political aims of the big powers were not pure and did not adhere to human rights where their interests were concerned.

She said like many other developing countries, spread of education, access to healthcare or status of women are still at a relatively low level in Bangladesh.

Your research and its recognition once again reminds us of the importance of these in our development efforts. We wish to assure you that we'll take the human development agenda forward with a renewed zeal and commitment," she told the Noble laureate.

In this task, she said, "we look forward to your advice. Professor Amartya Sen, please accept our warm felicitations once again. We are indeed proud of the BASA officials."

Saudi newspapers voiced strong support for the suffering of the Iraqi people but blamed the strikes on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for dragging his country into another conflict.

Instead of the inspectors disarming Saddam, Saddam is disarming the inspectors," Clinton said.

The UN Security Council will not lift economic sanctions

Ahmed and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid homage to the Liberation War martyrs by laying wreaths at the National Mausoleum at Savar early in the morning.

On this day in 1971, Bangla

des came into being when

Pakistani occupation forces

surrendered to the Joint Com

mand of Forces of Bangladesh

and India after a nine-month

bloody war that cost 30 lakh

lives and chastity of two lakh

women.

Thousands of people

thronged the National Mausoleum offerings. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid tribute to the valiant sons of the soil who laid down their lives for country's independence.

President Shahabuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Oppo

sition Begum Khaleda Zia

issued separate messages on

the occasion urging the countrymen

to work together for national

development.

The day was a public holi

day. National flag was hoisted

at government offices, pri

ate buildings. The day was

heralded with a 31-gun salute.

The government as well as

different political parties,

socio-cultural organisations

and professional bodies chalked out elaborate programmes to cele

brate the day.

President Shahabuddin

Ahmed, Prime Minister Sheikh