

# City Centre as Seen by the Passing Bird

A photo feature by Zahedul I Khan



Sore thumb: The Jiban Bima Bhaban towers above the rest in the middle of the city, at Dilkusha. The architecture stands out as its innovative design contrasts sharply with the drab and dreary surroundings.

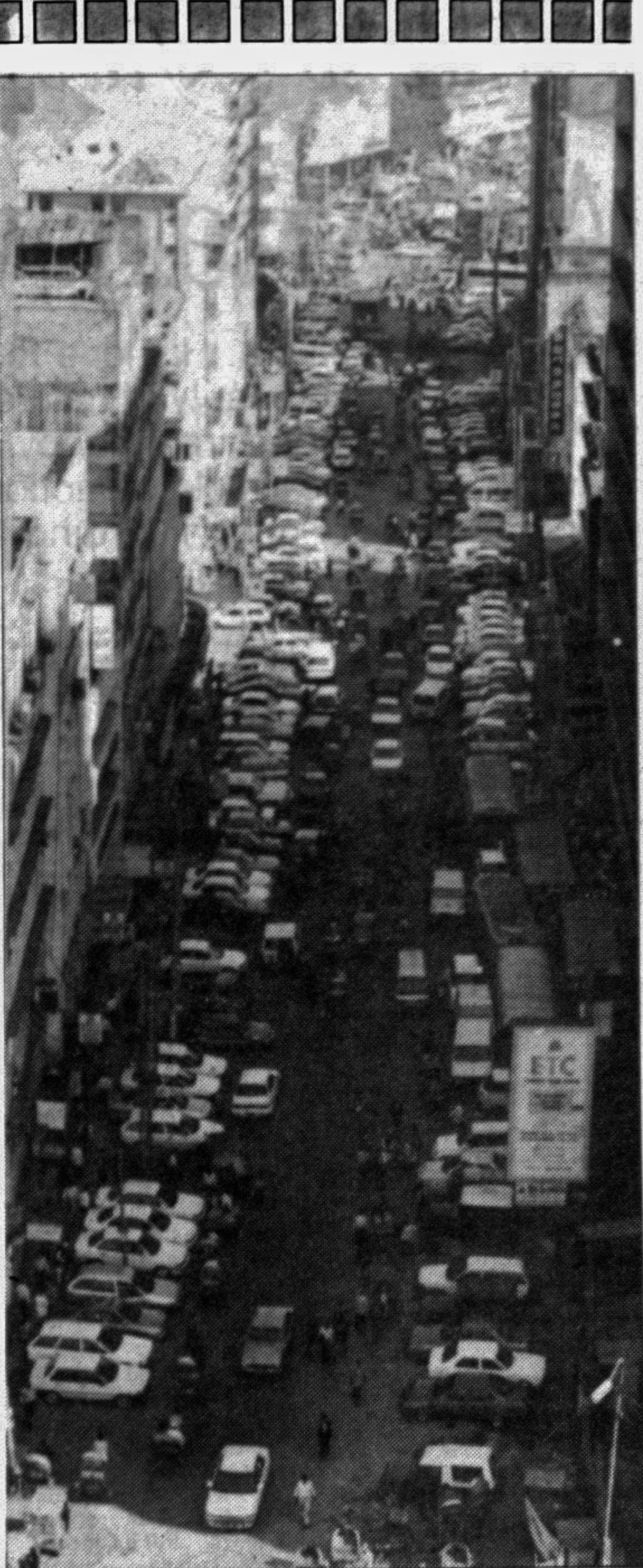


Elegance amid squalor: Bangabhaban, built in the '50s and now the home of the President of the Republic, nestling in a lush green space. The dome and arches of the palace, an example of Islamic architecture derived from Roman roots, stand in marked contrast to the squalid modernity around it.

The centre of Dhaka, as it may appear to a bird flying over Gulistan. The bird may not survive the journey from the cinema hall to Motijheel. There are no predators on roof tops, ready to take pot shots. But the dust and smoke rising from below may suffocate any bird (other than the sturdy crow or sparrow) flying overhead. Yet, amid the concrete jungle that is the centre of Dhaka, nestles the magnificent Bangabhaban, ensconced within a protective wall of trees and surrounded by lush green lawns. The bird may not see the green because of the haze created by the dust and smoke, but there it is.



Bowling and howling: The open space of the outer stadium, next to the Bangabandhu National Stadium and the Hockey Stadium has been restored as the Paltan Maidan and dedicated to the cause of democracy.



Dungeon under the open sky: Man and machine jostle for breathing space as Dhaka's planners left little room for vehicles in the streets. This Motijheel street looks ready to stop functioning altogether.

## Silent Tears of a Freedom Fighter

From Ranesh Maitra

PABNA: Heroics of the country's female freedom fighters — especially those who live in the rural areas and come of poor families — remain largely unsung. Nobody seems to care whether they exist or not. Some of them have silently passed away. There has been no reward, no reception or no panegyric for them.

Bhanu Nessa's valiant role in the War of Liberation would have gone unsung, too, had Habibur Rahman Swapan, an energetic young journalist from Santhia, not traced her out two years back, on the Silver Jubilee of our independence. Thanks to Swapan, people of Pabna, especially of Santhia, got the opportunity to express their gratitude to the valiant freedom-fighter. There was a public reception at the Santhia Press Club in Nessa's honour as part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations. A public reception in Pabna followed. Unfortunately, the matter ended right there. Once the formalities were over, people who matter simply forgot Bhanu Nessa and little did they care how she would get on with her life in the days to come.

The great freedom fighter of Teulia, a small village under the Santhia thana, now sells *panju* (a kind of pakawra) to earn her living. Whether it is the month of Ramadan or not, she prepares and sells *panju* which is a popular iftar menu.

"This is my profession, I do it everyday and this earns my livelihood," said the 63-year-old Nessa, tears rolling down her cheeks.

She has two sons and a daughter. They are all married. Abdul Pramanik, her husband, was a farm-labourer. When he died several years back, she was compelled to take up the same job but could not continue for

long; her age and frail health got in the way. So, she started cooking *panju* and selling them.

"On average, I earn ten to fifteen taka a day," she said. "I can hardly make both ends meet with that money."

Life is now an endless struggle for survival for Nessa, who, 27 years back, took part in the War of Liberation to rid the

country of Pakistani occupation forces.

"On December 7, 1971, Santhia was liberated following a number of battles at different places on different dates. Many Pakistanis were killed and we lost many freedom fighters, too. On December 7, the Pak army fled away to Pabna and their camp in Santhia was taken over by the freedom fighters."



Bhanu Nessa: A glorious past but a bleak future

"But the next day, the Pak army tried to win back Santhia. They marched from Pabna towards Santhia with a truck and jeep loaded with heavy arms and ammunition. There was a direct fight between the Pak forces and hundreds of our heroic freedom fighters. It continued for hours. Finally, the Pak army was defeated and they fled off leaving behind their truck and jeep."

"Apprehending that the army could attack again the next day, the freedom fighters of Santhia overnight damaged the Gorgachha Bridge over Pabna-Santhia Road and thus created a barricade against the movement of the Pak army."

The army came as expected. Fight continued for hours and the freedom fighters ran out of ammunition. Nobody agreed to go to Santhia to bring ammunition from there covering a distance of about three miles. On request by the freedom fighters, Bhanu Nessa ran all the way to Santhia, took a sack loaded with ammunition and braving all the sufferings, came back to the place of battle, distributed ammunitions among the men in trenches and thereafter, they fought again inflicted the final defeat on the Pak army in Santhia thana."

Thus Bhanu Nessa saved the lives of not only the freedom fighters but also the residents of Santhia. Nessa was honoured by Shiksha-O-Sanskriti Kendra during Bangali Sangskriti Utsav held two years back.

But neither the government nor the political parties have so far made any move to help the landless and hapless old woman out of her misery, to stand by the brave lady, who stood by the freedom fighters and extended them the helping hand they had desperately needed.

## Acid Burnt Family Cries for Help

From Our Correspondent

MYMENSINGH: Ambia Khatun, 30, and her two minor sons who suffered severe acid burn injuries a month earlier, are crying for help. Their treatment at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital (MMCH) is being hampered due to scarcity of required medicines.

Ambia Khatun and her two sons Shaheen, 12, and Masud, 9, sustained acid burn injuries when some miscreants allegedly led by one Hasim Uddin threw acid on them at village Vehottori in Iswarganj thana on November 13 night.

According to police and the victims' family sources, Ambia, a mother of four children was staying at her father's house in Vehottori as her husband deserted her two years earlier. Hasim Uddin of the same village was allegedly pressuring Ambia for sometime past to marry him. But following Ambia's refusal, Hasim became furious.

Ambia alleged that miscreants led by Hasim Uddin entered her house at the dead of night when she and her sons were sleeping. "I woke up when the miscreants flashed a hand torch on me. But they did not give me any opportunity to get up from the bed and poured acid on my face while holding my hands and legs. The miscreants also sprinkled acid on my two minor sons using injection syringes," said a helpless Ambia lying on her bed at MMCH.

"The miscreants went away safely after the heinous act," said Phulbanu, 70, the mother of Ambia who woke up hearing the screams of the victims.

Phulbanu also alleged that the next morning when the victims were being brought to Atharbari Railway Station by a rickshaw in critical conditions, Hasim Uddin followed them up to the railway station. "At that time Hasim Uddin was saying in full-throated voice 'Ambia suffered acid burn injuries by herself,' Phulbanu said.

Ambia, lying on her bed at Ward No 11 also alleged that Hasim violated her on July 13 night when she went out in response to call of nature. Following the incident Ambia filed a case against Hasim, who then began pressuring her family to withdraw the case. But when Hasim failed to convince Ambia, he committed such heinous act with the help of his associates, alleged Ambia.

It is also alleged that Hasim and his men are now threatening the victims' family to withdraw the case or face dire consequences.

The government, the non-government organizations and affluent persons of the society have been urged to come forward to provide proper and timely treatment of a helpless mother and her two sons.

## Battered by the Weather for Hundreds of Years

From Aroop Talukder

FOR hundreds of years, cyclones, hurricanes and tidal surges have regularly battered people of the southern region of Bangladesh including vast coastal areas. Nearly five crore people in the southern belt are now vulnerable to such natural calamities which have become more frequent in recent years. Probably for this reason, Bangladesh is known to the rest of the world as the land of cyclones and tidal bores.

Tidal surges, cyclonic storms, tornadoes and hurricanes in different times have claimed lives of millions leaving a trail of devastation throughout the southern region, particularly the coast-line along the Bay of Bengal. According to different sources, a cyclonic storm accompanied by tidal surges battered the coastal belt in 1584, claiming the lives of 70 per cent of the population of the area. More than two lakh people were killed that year. Similar disasters struck the region in 1737 and 1762. Tremors followed in the wake of the tidal surges, leaving the entire coastline a lifeless barren land.

Next cyclonic storms and tornadoes hit the south in 1769, 1770, 1784 and 1787. However, available records suggest that these cyclonic hawks and tornadoes were less disastrous than the others were.

A cyclone along with tidal bore hit the coast on 6th June, 1822 which lasted for a week. More than one lakh people were killed and property including crops worth 15 lakh taka were destroyed in that incident.

Next incidences of tornado and cyclone were recorded in 1825, 1831, 1855 and 1864. The tidal surge of 1869 punched huge cracks into the embankment of the Kirtankhola river along the Barisal town. The tidal surge and cyclone of 31st October, 1876 inflicted heavy damage on the southern region, including the port city of Chittagong. The havoc happened in full moon with high tide, as a result casualty and damage naturally increased. Several thousand people, livestock, cattlehead were swept away with the 12 to 15 feet high tide.

In 1897 a cyclone hit Chittagong region killing 14,000, while another 18,000 died in an epidemic.

After this, no records are available about some 50 cyclones that lashed these areas till 1940 which left an estimated 50,000 people dead.

In 1941, a tornado lashed Bhola, the biggest delta island of the country, which killed nearly one hundred people. Another cyclonic storm in the Barisal region in 1954 killed

more than 200 people, caused material damages worth nearly ten lakh taka and made nearly 1,000 families homeless.

Two other tornadoes also swept over the greater Barisal region in 1957 and 1958, but damages were less than in the previous ones.

In 1960, a 22-hour-long cyclonic storm and tidal bore hit Barisal, Bhola and the vast coastal belt of Barguna, claiming lives of at least 5,000 people. The Sundarban mangrove forest was also battered heavily.

Nearly 9,000 people were killed in the tornado and tidal surge of 9th May 1961 which twisted along the coastline of Bhola and Chittagong.

In May, 1963 a devastating cyclone hit Noakhali and Chittagong and the offshore islands which left at least 15,000 people dead as well as many poultry birds and cattlehead which were swept out to sea by the 10 to 15 ft high tidal bore.

On May 11 and 12, 1965 a cyclonic storm with a wind speed of more than 100 miles per hour (MPH) hit the offshore islands of Bhola and Patuakhali where more than 10,000 people were killed. Tidal surges reaching 15 to 20 ft in height washed away the coastal areas on 1st November of 1966.

On April 4, 1969 a tornado with maximum wind speed of nearly 400 kilometres per hour hit Demra of Dhaka, killing 1,000.

One of most devastating cyclones, accompanied by 33 ft tidal waves hit the southern coast on Nov 12, 1970. Official records show that more than 500,000 people were killed, but unofficial counts put the figure at closer to 10 lakh. Wealth of several crores of taka were destroyed, while countless number of poultry birds and cattlehead were also lost.

Due to this natural calamity, general elections had to be postponed.

A tornado struck Uritchar on May 25 and 26 of 1985, which left 10,000 people, dead and rendered several thousand families homeless. Nearly a thousand square miles area of six districts were battered severely during that tornado.

Nearly a hundred people were killed on 9th November, 1986 in a cyclonic storm that lashed over Patharghata under Barguna district.

On 28th April, 1989 more than 600 people were killed in Manikganj in a cyclonic storm.

During the cyclone of April 29, 1991, which swept over the south-eastern coast in the Chittagong region, some 139,000

people were killed. This was one of the most powerful hurricanes on record, with windspeed reaching 235 kilometres per hour (KPH). Tidal surges whipped up by the storm were 20ft high. Ten lakh tonnes of crops on 3,000 square miles of agricultural land were reportedly damaged.

Smaller cyclones hit the coast in the following years, with 133 people being killed in Cox's Bazar in 1992, and nearly 200 killed in the cyclone of May 19 last year.

Since 1991 frequency of cyclones has increased, but the death toll has significantly decreased. Low tide during the some cyclones prevented tidal surges, while precautionary measures taken in time by the government, Red Crescent and other non-government organisations helped to prevent a heavy toll on human lives. Weather experts say shortages of cyclone shelters had contributed to the high death tolls in earlier cyclones.

Since the Uritchar disaster, 1,500 cyclone shelters have been constructed, but this is not enough to tackle a cyclone emergency, and the problems of the common people living in the vast coastal areas, sources said. But even after efforts by the government as well as different non-government organisation, how many cyclone shelters have been constructed? Are they sufficient to protect the lives of crores of people living in the southern region including the vast coastal belt along the Bay of Bengal? This question arose particularly after the natural havoc of September 27 last year when many of the deaths were recorded as 'due to absence of nearby cyclone shelters'.

The cyclonic storm of September 26, 1997 also left a trail of heavy devastation particularly in seven thana areas of the country's biggest delta district Bhola including Laxmipur, Hatia, Noakhali, Patuakhali and some nearby districts.

This time, according to experts, prolonged cyclonic weather over the coastal districts caused heavy damage to crops and other devastation including damage to embankments along the riverside.

The cyclonic storm of November 22 this year also left a trail of devastation particularly on the several thousands acres of standing croplands that damaged aman and rabi crops and winter vegetables in the southern coastal districts under Barisal division.

## Cottage Town Where Cattle go to Graze

From Our Correspondent

SATKHIRA: The Taka two-crore Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) industrial town in Binerpota village on the Satkhira-Khulna highway, set up back in 1986 to attract entrepreneurs, has ended up attracting cattle.

The town on 20.75 acres of land has virtually seen no growth of industrial units in the last 12 years and has become a grazing field instead.

Lack of interest from the entrepreneurs, complication in obtaining bank loan, unplanned development work, lack of raw materials, absence of adequate power and drainage system have been identified as the major causes behind the failure of the project.

In 1986, 20.75 acres of land were acquired for the industrial town and the BSCIC spent a to-

tal of 1.58 crore taka for development works.

The town has 96 plots divided into A, B and special categories. The number of plots planned for allotment to different industrial units are 20 for food and allied items, 15 for engineering industries, eight for jute and five for bamboo-based items, 10 for shrimp hatchery and allied items, seven for textile and allied, three for tannery and allied, and the remaining 28 for chemical and allied items.

A senior officer at the BSCIC in Satkhira told The Daily Star that out of 96 plots only 22 plots have been allotted so far. Among those, four are now operating. The other projects failed to take off due to financial constraints. Although there were more applications for allotment, entrepreneurs are, however, not that keen

anymore, he added.

Out of 22 plots allotted, only four entrepreneurs, have actually set up their units. The units are for fish meal, tyre retreading, shrimp hatchery and chemical manufacturing. On experimental basis a shrimp hatchery and a plastic pipe factory have also started.

Bright prospect for growth of cold storage, jute, textile, food processing, fish meal and bamboo-based cottage was predicted when the project was launched.

Indiscriminate growth of industrial units at different places inside the Satkhira town has posed a threat to public health. These units should be shifted to the BSCIC industrial town for public interest.

Bank loan for easy term would expedite shifting of these units inside the industrial town of the BSCIC.

When contacted, an exten-

sion officer informed The Daily Star that they have recently gave connection of electric supply in each plot. Many of the entrepreneurs would come forward to setting up industrial units in the BSCIC town if easy term bank loans are available, it was gathered.

At least 2500 job opportunities would be created if industrial units are set up in a planned manner.

Meanwhile, the BSCIC authorities have prepared a list of 10 items which can be produced by women labourers. The BSCIC will supply raw materials and market facilities for these items. The items included food items, jute-based handicrafts, timber products, sweet from honey, bamboo baskets, toys, crockery and others.

Bangladesh Krishi Bank and other Commercial Banks will provide loans.