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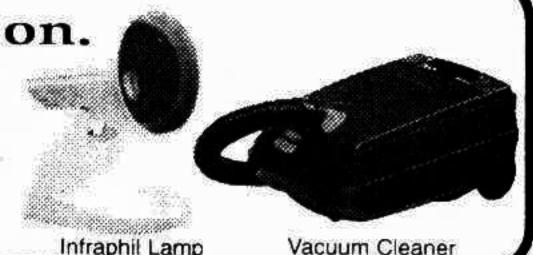
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Festival on the altar of sacrifice | Protests but no pranks

By Mir A Zaman

The little boy, hardly seven years old, tried to push his way through the crowd to have a glimpse of what was going on. Some were sympathetic while others were annoyed, but nevertheless they made way for him. After a few minutes of pushingimploring-and-pushing again, the boy finally found himself in the front row. Just a few paces away, there they were. On the brightly-lit alter of the Shaheed Minar, under an open sky, it was a world within a world, a world so close to real yet so far.

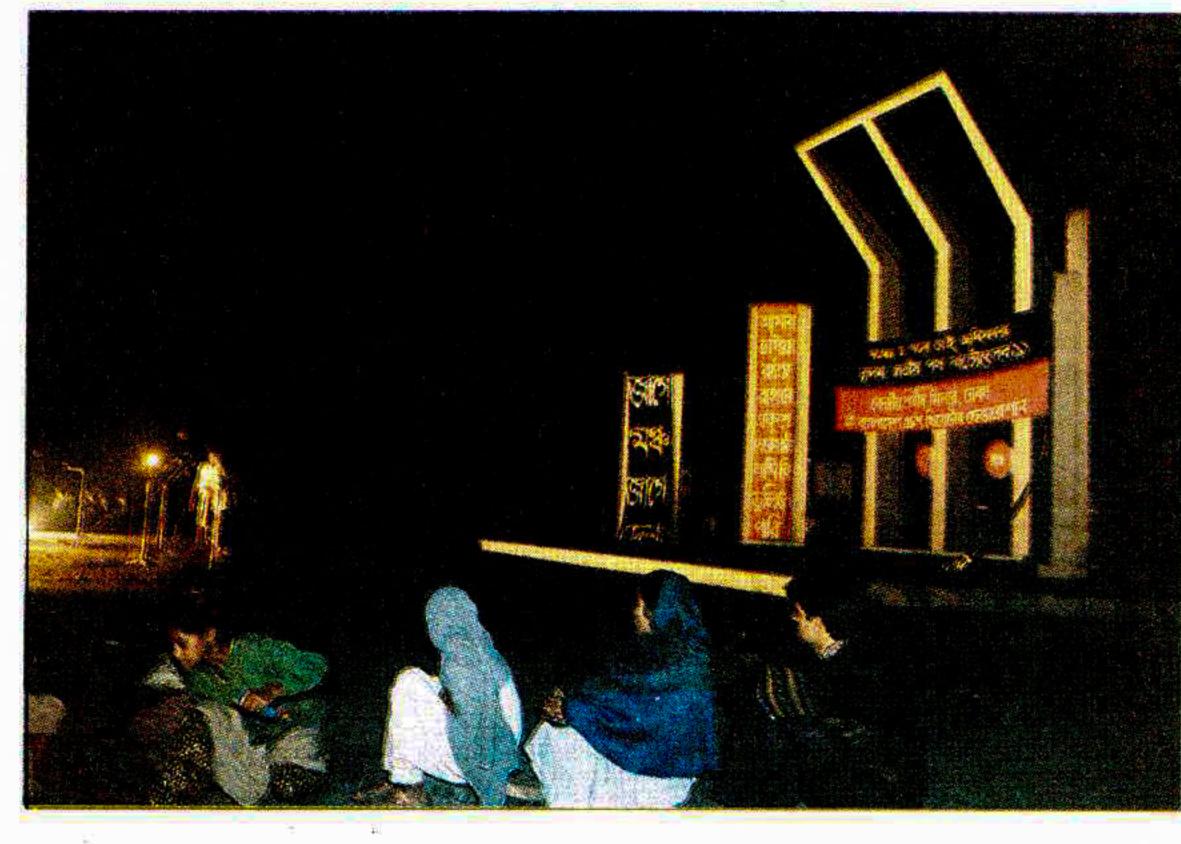
"I come here everyday," said the boy, excitement apparent in his voice and amazement written all over his face. "I watch the show from the beginning till the end. I was a little late to-"day. Did I miss a lot?"

The third day of the twelfth Patha Natya Utsav came to an end just a while ago. It's time for the little boy to trudge back to reality. He lives in a nearby slum. His father does little bit of this and little bit of that. while his mother works as a domestic hand.

Patha Natya Utsav, since its inception in the late eighties. has become a regular feature in the country's cultural arena. Designed to commemorate the sacrifice of martyrs in the language movement, the drama festival became a strong voice against the autocratic regime of General HM Ershad in those tumultuous days.

In those days, the plays, mostly satirical, lashed out at the follies of the ruler and his sycophants. Every move the actors made, every word they uttered contained the popular urge for freedom from the vice grips of the military junta in

the guise of democracy. After the fall of Ershad, the



Light on life

The Shaheed Minar comes alive on festival night.

country's political scenario has changed. The fight is now against the enemies of democracy, the ultra-religious activists. Twenty-two groups have joined hands this year and their cultural endeavours will be guided by one aim, for people's rights on the stage and on the streets.

However, for many in the audience, the underlying tone matters little. They throng at the Shaheed Minar for fun. And fun they have. It is a fair out there. Some find the festivity a complete misfit.

Would anyone believe that this programme is meant to commemorate the ultimate sacrifice people like Salam, Barkat, Rafique made for the language," complained one, in his late fifties. "They are desecrating the Shaheed Minar."

cially the young generation. "Paying tribute to the martyrs of the language movement has got nothing to do with

Many do not agree, espe-

—Star photo Zahedul I Khan

feigning an air of sadness," said one, a university student. "We are exercising our freedom to speak, speak against the flaws in the system, speak against the enemies of democracy. The festivity is a strong warning for the enemies that we are alive." Some of the elderly people share similar sentiments.

"Ekushey February is not to mourn deaths, it is to respect what those deaths have presented us with - our freedom to use our mother-tongue," were

the words of the middle-aged school teacher. "It is a matter of great pride for us that we have fought and won that right. The drama festival is certainly a

tribute to the martyrs." The vendors, selling tea, futchka, chatpati, jhalmuri, nut, popcorns, toys and bal-loons, do not even drag them-selves into such debates. They are happy with the brisk business they are having. It's one time in the year when the whole area comes alive with activities. The more these programmes take place, the merrier their business becomes. The equation is simple. Yet they also feel the presence of an inexplicable emotion swelling at the bottom of their hearts.

"I don't know what these people (he meant the performers) mean by patriotism. democracy, fundamentalists etc.," said one vendor, preparing chatpati. "You may say that we only care about business. You know something whenever I come here to sell chatpati, I feel something happening deep inside me. Sometimes, it takes me close to tears. It happens every year.'

The drama on the street is a new phenomenon in the country, but it has already won its place in the cultural psyche of the people. The festival at the Shaheed Minar heralds the month of February and reminds us of the ultimate price the martyrs of the Language Movement paid.

The little boy who eagerly waits for the plays to begin, the chatpatiwala who tries to fathom the inexplicable feelings deep inside, the conscious youth who traces meaning of freedom, it is their assemblage at the Shaheed Minar that makes the festival meaningful, a tribute to the martyrs.

48-hour hartal

pointed out that there is noth-

ing in the four points about res-

ignation of the government or

government officers and em-

ployees are being used as

"activists of the Awami League"

and those who have refused to

carry out "illegal orders of the

ruling party are being harassed"

officials to maintain neutrality

and carry out their duties as

employees of the Republic with-

out any fear and favour. She

promised to reward those who

are victimised by the present

that officials and employees

who are victimised or harassed

by the government would be

treated properly after the fall of

on poet Shamsur Rahman.

Khafeda said her party con-

demns the attack and demands

exemplary punishment to the

real culprits. But she warned

that people would not tolerate it

if any innocent person were vic-

ment is arranging some "stage-

managed dramas" to stop reli-

gious education in the country.

She called on the government to

put a halt to what she called

said the prices of all petroleum

products in the international

market are now very low but

prices in Bangladesh remain

the highest. She demanded im-

mediate reduction of gasoline

The former prime minister

"playing of evil games".

She alleged that the govern-

this government," she said.

"I am giving my assurance

Referring to the recent attack

She urged the government

Khaleda Zia alleged that

From page 1

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in digital book fair

Please visit Transcom Pavilion No.1 at DITF

By DU Correspondent

The month-long Ekushey Book Fair begins at the Bangla Academy premises today with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attending the inaugural cere-mony as chief guest.

The theme of this year's fair is, "Book Fair for Creating People".

Eminent educationists and litterateurs of the country, including National Professor Kabir Chowdhury and Poet Shamsur Rahman, will attend the inaugural ceremony which begins at 10:30 am, followed by a cultural programme. Organised by Bangla

Academy in association with Bangladesh Book Publishers' and Distributors' Association, the fair will continue till February 28.

This year, a total of 203 publishers of the country are taking part in the fair. Bangla Academy will launch, for the first time, a web site putting details about the fair on the In-

ternet. A huge digital screen has been set up in front of the Information Centre to keep visitors informed of the events.

The Academy authorities have taken necessary measures to maintain sanctity and discipline of the fair. Security outside the Academy premises will be enhanced, as the student wing of the opposition BNP plans to protest the Prime Minister's arrival on the campus.

Leaders of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal said in a press conference yesterday that they would bring out a procession on the campus with their faces covered by black cloths.

The JCD leaders claimed that Sheikh Hasina has lost her credibility with the students due to her government's "repression" on opposition leaders and workers.

The rent for single unit stall is Tk 3,500, double unit Tk 6.000 and triple unit Tk 10,000. The budget for this year's fair is Tk 12.69 lakh.

The fair will remain open from 3 pm to 9 pm every day while on holidays the timing will be from 11 am to 9 pm with a two-hour interval from 12 only on Friday. It will remain open from 8 in the morning on February 21.

Discussion on different topics will be held on the Academy premises every evening as part of the Ekushey programme.

Nazrul Institute and Bangla Academy will jointly set up a pavilion at Amtala to celebrate the birth centenary of National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam from February 24 to 28. The five-day long programme will include discussions on the life of national poet, seminar and cultural functions.

Birth centenaries of Jibanananda Das, Kazi Motahar Hossain. Abul Mansur Ahmed and Mohammed Barkatullah will also be celebrated at the book fair.

Road to free trade defined

SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) has called for opening road links among land-linked South Asian countries to ease transportation of goods and flourish intra-regional trade and investment, reports UNB.

"We must have a motor vehicle agreement among at least five countries connected by land so that transportation of goods can take place without transhipment," SCCI president Kantikumar Podar told newsmen yesterday at the end of the Third SAARC Economic Cooperation Conference.

This alone will, SCCI felt. multiply intra-SAARC trade manifold. Also, bilateral and regional conventions should be signed to improve communication through railways, shipping and airways.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wednesday inaugurated the two-day conference, which coincided with the Third SAARC Commerce Ministers'

As one step ahead towards a common currency, being discussed in various forums, the SCCI president mooted the idea of introducing easily cashable "coupons" among SAARC member countries as alternative to credit cards.

meeting.

SAARC Chamber secretary general Rahmatullah Javed. Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBBCI) president Abdul Awal Mintoo and his predecessor Yussuf Abdullah Harun also addressed the press briefing at the FBCCI conference room.

The third conference, attended by business leaders of seven South Asian countries. identified six vital areas of regional cooperation - trade, investment, energy, infrastructure, tourism and telecommunication. Their specific suggestions

will be forwarded to respective governments through SAARC Secretariat for immediate ac-

The SCCI forum reiterated the tremendous potential of joint ventures and technology tie-ups and stressed the need for regional agreement on investment promotion.

The SCCI president said the Chamber has already commissioned a study by TATA Economic Consultancy to identify 50 joint venture projects in the SAARC.

The study reports from all the member countries will come in hand by March this year, Podar hoped. He said the outcome will be

discussed in the SAARC investment forum scheduled in Bombay in April and to be opened by SAARC chairman and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The SCCI president stressed the need for further simplifica-

tion of visa procedures of business people, especially between India and Pakistan. Emphasising a quick en-

trance into the SAFTA regime, he said intra SAARC trade is the only need of the hour. Justilying the need for land

routes among SAARC countries, Podar said Bangladesh could cater to the needs of northeastern states of India in a much cheaper way. Imported tyres from Colombo will be much cheaper in Madras thana that from Bombay, he said.

On the other hand, he said, shipping facilities in Colombo are better than in Bombay.

The SAARC Chamber unanimously advocated market access to all items and commodities originating from within the SAARC by the SAARC member states.

"This implies the complete elimination of all import restrictions such as licensing, quantitative restrictions, quotas, other non-tariff barriers and granting MFN status to each other." one resolution

It, however, suggested exception be made in case of "sensitive" items and safeguard be provided under SAPTA agreement.

It said the non-LDCs in the SAARC should establish zero tariffs on imports of all primary products and unprocessed minerals. Major players of the region should also establish zero tariff on imports of intermediate and finished products within the next four and five years respectively from 2000.

The SAARC chamber leaders also called LDCs for gradually reducing tariffs on intermediate and finished goods to make it zero within six to eight years from 2000.

FBCCI president Abdul Awal Mintoo said intra-SAARC trade, which accounts only 3 per cent of the total regional trade, is deplorably low and needs to be invigorated through market access, reduction of tar-

iffs and diversification of mar-

The Agartala-Comilla trade link was diverted to Agartala Calcutta after partition of India and Pakistan, while Delhi-Lahore trade diverted to Karachi-Lahore, he mentioned. Former FBCCI president

Yussuf Abdullah Harun said globalisation should be looked with its real perspective, rising above all narrow political and conceptual mindsets, for the very survival of the post-2005 regime.

"We've to base on our comparative advantages to keep with the global changes." Harun

No more industry in public sector: Kibria

RAJSHAHI, Feb 4: Finance Minister Shah A M S Kibria has said the government will not set up any more industry in the public sector, reports APB. The state-owned industrial

units, he said, are being disinvested as these are incurring huge loss. He also acknowledged that

the government was giving subsidy amounting to Tk 2500 crore every year to the nationalised industrial sector. Kibria said this while ex-

changing views with the business leaders of northern districts at a meeting on development of the region at Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI) here Wednesday evening.

RCCI president Mohammad Ali Sarker presided over the meeting.

The Finance Minister said the government would extend all out cooperation to educated, experienced and skilled entrepreneurs of the country who should come forward to set up industry at their own initiative.

He urged the businessmen to come forward to set up agrobased industries in the country utilising local resources and manpower.

Lalkhan Madrassah and its maulanas



Students of Lalkhan Madrassah in the backdrop of their new building.

From page 1

"We have no secrets. Had we been doing anything otherwise, the people would have seen it. Even police would not have spared us," the maulana said.

We talked at length on various other issues, including the botched attempt to assassinate poet Shamsur Rahman. Do you think that Shamsur Rahman is a 'murtad' (infidel)? Said the maulana: "Why should we call him an infidel. He is a poet. I have read some of his pieces. We definitely condemn any attempt to kill him."

On Taslima Nasreen, he also said he would protest if any one misinterprets or abuses the holy Quran. But I have no right to take her life, he said adding that one has the right to have his or her faith in religion as dictated by the Quran. As we discussed Taslima Nasreen, the maulana surprised us by singing a popular tune composed by her first husband, late Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah.

Bhalo aachhi, bhalo theko" the moulana sang in perfect

He gave a resume of the madrassah's activities and background. He claimed that father-in-law of a Chittagong University teacher donated the hill and its surrounding 20 acres to the madrassah, set up in 1981.

"A mosque, the first floor of which was just being finished, had received some Tk 13 lakh from wealthy Saudi and Kuwaiti Sheikhs," he said.

"Regularly, our principal Maulana Ejaharul Islam visits Saudi Arabia and other rich Gulf states to collect zakat and fitra from Bangaldeshis working there to run the madrassah. There are visitors from the Gulf

states at our madrassah and they also leave donations."

Hossain denied there is anything shadowy about the madrassah. "It is open to scrutiny, even police came last week to investigate. They searched everything looking for clues but found nothing."

The students

Zafar Imam, 8, is aiming to become a Maulana, preparing himself at the Lalkhan Bazar Madrassah of Chittagong. which is now under investigation for its alleged links with

'Harkatul Jihad'. A typical day for Zafar begins with the crack of dawn at the madrassah located on a shaven hilltop, with a mosque, an open bath, an unfinished two-storey building and a tinroof barrack type house on the slope, where students squat

with teachers. After offering Fazr prayer he sets out for the day's ritual which includes classes from 8 a.m. till 11 a.m., learning Koran, Bangla, English and Mathematics. After lunch, a quiet time is spent in leisure and games. He pays Tk 300 for boarding, instead of Tk 500 because his father cannot bear to

Like Zafar, a number of students receive subsidy. The madrassah management also pays for some 100 orphans, a teacher said. The classes were nearly empty when this correspondent

visited the place. The madras-

sah students were yet to return

pay more, he said.

after their Ramzan and Eid vacation. Only a few like Zafar, the only son of Shahab Mia, a farmer from Feni, has returned. Even the teachers are yet to re-

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turn at the 500-strong madras-

The students are encouraged to participate in physical activities like playing games and join physical exercise, Hossain said answering a question.

The Neighbours

Below the hill a local grocery owner, Sheikh Ahmed, said he had been there for a decade but seen nothing unusual except trouble with some residents of the bustee.

Mohsin, an electrician said he had not seen any arms training . He had heard that members of 'Mujahid Party' come at night. But he had not seen anyone using guns, only the students practices 'lathi kasrat', which takes place during Ramzan after sehri, he added. He also heard that they also go abroad for jobs. The electrician said he has free access to the madrassah. However, "lathi kasrat"(exercise) after sehri,

seemed like an odd practice. Syed Obaidur Rob, president of lajaradar Malik Samabaya Samity, whose signboard clain a that the organisation is the owner of the slum that occupies most of the land down hill and some other parts, said they have a dispute over the ownership of the neighbouring lands. There had been clashes and the slum was once set on

Freedom Fighter-turned auto-rickshaw driver Abdus Samad said he knows about guerrilla training. Such things are not possible here at the madrassah. He had not seen anything like that. Babul, who declined to pro-

vide his full name, claimed that about six months ago he saw some bearded and long haired 'hujurs' practising with tree branches. He has heard that they re going to stage a rally with thousands of people. Why did you not report this? In response, he said the madrassah authority had implicated us in many cases. So we remain quiet. But he admitted that there is no physical evidence of arms training.

Mohinddin, a student of Islamia Degree College, said that the madrassah people had always criticised every government that came to power. They also prevent use of microphone during cultural functions in the

area, Mohiuddin added. We spoke at length with the local police. Police sources said that they have found nothing so far inside the madrassah that could be linked with arms training and subversive activi-

They said the place had already been under surveillance for a year. The watch is still continuing. Even their source of income is being investigated, the police said.

Police first began investigating the activities of this madrassah following raising of slogans by some youngsters during a demonstration about two years ago in the city. They raised the slogan. 'Amra Sobai Hobo Taleban. Bangla Hobe Afghanistan', (We all will become Taleban and Bangla will Afghanistan) become "Although the slogan was not repeated anymore but we mounted vigilance around some madrassahs as most of the demonstrators were from the madrassah," the police sources

The police believe that the institution had served as a centre for indoctrination. The Barrack-type classrooms below the hill where there are no tables or benches raised questions in our mind. But this is typical of madrassah in which students and teachers alike squat on the

floor, the sources said. But suspicion remained why the students, the senior ones whose age group is 18-20, practised with lathis during Sehri as some locals said.

This correspondent found nothing to corroborate press stories about this madrassah at Lakhan Bazar being the venue of arms training of any extremist group. Question arises as to why did this particular madrassah was identified to be the centre of arms training.

