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The old high court with renaissance architecture came up around the beginning of the 20th century. Designed for the residence of governor of East Bengal and Assam, the advisor architect of the Indian government said it was not suitable as the governor's residence. The High Court was set up here after partition in 1947. It is presently used as the office of Defence Ministry.

e-mail: starcity@thedailystar.net

MADRASAS FOR FEMALES

Where life is under lock and key...

MORSHED ALI KHAN and SULTANA RAHMAN

It is a privately-owned residential madrasa along with an orphanage for 306 girls aged between three and fifteen. It is a single-room bamboo-made house, where all the students are herded together to sleep, eat, play and study.

In the centre of the crowded neighbourhood of Chantek in Demra, the madrasa is kept under lock and key round the clock. Inside, helpless children cram the handful of windows to wave to passers-by.

Most children show visible signs of malnourishment and anxiety. Their only ambition is to learn how to read the Quran and become religion instructors.

"We will do what Allah wishes," Sajeda, a 12-year-old

girl said when she was asked about her plans on completion of her studies in the madrasa established in 1988.

The Jamia Islamia Ashraf-ul-Ulam Mahila Madrasa teaches only Arabic. Students receive no education in Bengali, English, Science or Mathematics, which is contradictory to the national education policy.

Other female Qawmi madrasas in Dhaka also offer similar 'education', not officially recognised.

The head of the madrasa, Mohammad Abdur Rahman, explained the principle behind this kind of education and said it is based on gaining 'access to paradise' after death and not aimed at gaining anything earthly.

"We teach children how to lead a religious life and gather maximum spiritual wealth for

eternal life," the principal said. He, however, did not explain his failure to address the problems that include unhygienic conditions in the madrasa.

Of the 25 teachers of the madrasa, most are males. The principal stressed that he maintained strict segregation between the male teachers and the students by installing a curtain between them during class.

In March 2002, seven students were burnt alive and a hundred others injured inside this madrasa as it was under lock and key when the fire occurred.

The thatched house was burnt to ashes. Most of the students could not come out during the fire as the principal kept the key.

"The bodies were so severely burnt that they could not be identified," said a student who was injured in the fire. "I am an

orphan, where will I go? The madrasa at least offers me shelter," the girl said.

The situation in Rashidia Ibrahimia Mahila Madrasa at Shanir Akhra about 500 metres away from this madrasa is more or less the same.

With 210 students crammed inside two floors of a six-storey building, the children are confined to rooms under lock and key.

On July 13, when the Star City correspondent visited the Rashidia Ibrahimia Mahila Madrasa established four years ago, the third floor was found to be opened, while the fourth floor was locked. Around 50 juveniles on the third floor surrounded the correspondent to meet her.

"We rarely meet new people. The entrance and exit to this place are restricted," said eight-year-old Tania. "I was admitted

here one and a half years ago and never had the opportunity to see outsiders."

As Tania talked to the correspondent, a boy around 13 screamed seeing a female visitor inside the madrasa. He rebuked the correspondent and also the students for entertaining an 'outsider'.

"You will be punished later," the boy threatened, locking the door.

"We do not allow outsiders on our premises," said Abdullah, principal of the madrasa. He was talking from other side of the wall. "We keep the girls confined so that their mind cannot divert from the life described in the Holy Quran," the principal said.

According to Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasa Education Board, a non-government institution which registers the Qawmi madrasas, there are more than a

100 female madrasas in the Dhaka metropolis, 26 of them have been registered with the board.

Most of the registered female madrasas have been set up in rented houses, said Abul Kashem, assistant administrative officer of the board.

The board officials said they are planning to add Bengali, English and Science to the curriculum so that the same treatment under the national education policy will be given and students will be able to apply for government jobs.

Board officials and leaders of Qawmi madrasas met Prime Minister Khaleda Zia earlier this month where they demanded madrasas to be brought under National Madrasa Education Board.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.



"It was the CCTV that helped the British authorities to identify the people who are believed to have carried out the bomb attacks in London. Since we can not brush aside the possibility of similar incidents here too, we have decided to set up CCTV in Bangladesh"

-- Lutfuzzaman Babar
State Minister for Home Affairs

Told reporters after a meeting of the home ministry in the wake of the steep slide in law and order in the country, on July 21.
Source: The Daily Star

"Only a phone call from Mannan Bhuiyan (BNP Secretary General) to Abdul Jalil (Awami League General Secretary) or any of the 11-Party leaders will suffice to kick off the discussion"

-- Dr Kamal Hossain
President, Gono Forum

Told a press conference on their stand regarding the caretaker government reform proposals, at Jatiya Press Club on July 19.
Source: The Daily Star

"If you agree I would like to increase the price of octane by another ten taka"

-- Mahmudur Rahman
Advisor to the energy division of Minister of energy and mineral resources

Told a meeting of businesspeople in the city, on July 20. Source: Prothom Alo

"Nobody has raised questions on the transparency of ballot boxes ever"

-- Justice MA Aziz
Chief Election Commissioner

Told journalists reacting to the proposal from European Union diplomats who wanted to offer transparent ballot boxes to the Election Commission to ensure free, fair and transparent elections, on July 17.
Source: Prothom Alo

"The chief election commissioner has to first stand firm and determined"

-- Hasanul Haq Inu
President, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD)

Told journalists on the proposal from the chief election commissioner to talk with 96 political parties, on July 22.
Source: Bhorer Kagoj

Dhaka-Narayanganj trains run at risk of accident

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

The Dhaka-Narayanganj passenger trains are running at risk of accident as the tracks have become vulnerable due to lack of maintenance.

The trains run at the maximum speed of 15 kilometres per hour on the run-down tracks that have not been renovated for years.

The rail lines go under water after every spell of heavy rain. After last month's downpour, the tracks went under water, forcing the authorities to limit the service up to Chashara station, three km off Narayanganj.

The railway authorities earlier this month declared the line from Chashara to Narayanganj unfit for train movement.

"It is possible to reopen the line within a week. But without renovation, there is no hope of making the lines permanently usable," said Anhar Mahmud, divisional manager, Bangladesh Railway.

The only 16-kilometre journey takes at least 70 minutes as the trains run unusually slow.

"The line was laid with a capacity of 50 kilometres per hour. Even a few years back the capacity was about 40 kilometres, but we had to bring it down to 15 kilometres for the bad condition of the rail track," said Mahmud.

The passengers are unhappy with the situation as they are

Floodwaters inundated a part of the Dhaka-Narayanganj railway line and these passengers cannot reach their destination.



deprived of the direct rail link between Dhaka and its nearest district town.

"We have to get down at Chashara and take another transport to go to Narayanganj which is hazardous and not cost effective," said Kiran Devnath, a

regular passenger. Bangladesh Railway runs nine trains everyday on this route and all of them are maintained by private operators. The passengers are unhappy with the service and condition of the trains.

"The compartments are worn

out and dirty," said Enamul, a passenger who works in Dhaka and lives in Narayanganj.

The officials of the private operator Panna Traders admitted that they are now losing passengers. "They are reluctant to travel by train due to wastage of time

and risk of accidents," said an official of Panna Traders.

Bangladesh Railway officials said they had submitted a project to the ministry more than two years back for renovating the Dhaka-Narayanganj rail tracks but the project has not seen the

daylight. He said renovation of the line is badly needed, otherwise the service would be shut down any time.

Pirated books galore on city streets, Harry Potter the latest



A little girl sells the latest Harry Potter (pirated copy) series to a passenger at the Sonargaon intersection.

FAIZUL KHAN TANIM

Just a week after the international launch, with Dhaka being part of the sixth of the Harry Potter series Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, pirated copies of the book have flooded the local market including the streets.

The major intersections of Panthapath, Gulshan 1 and 2, Satrastra and Tejgaon are filled with hawkers selling copies of these books between Tk. 150 to Tk. 300. Keeping the dimensions in fact, the colours matching, the book has been reproduced within a matter of days.

At a glance one cannot differentiate the original from the pirated copy, but a closer look will show the number of spelling and grammatical mistakes on the

front and back cover pages. Such mistakes can easily mislead the little knowledge of English children already know.

The inside pages are reproduced on newsprint found locally or coming from either India, said a bookseller.

Abdus Salam, a bookseller from Nilkhet described the reproduction procedure: once an original book is released, a single title is bought, binding carefully removed and pages taken out one by one and scanned or photocopied. Some books are however available to the reproducers before the official release as business houses that carry the original books for distribution ensure a copy is leaked out before the release.

This single copy is sold at five

or six times the original price to their Nilkhet clients who then pirate the book.

The scanned parts of the book are given to printing houses and more than a thousand copies of the book are brought out in one go. The chapters are sorted; cover which had already been scanned attached and finally bound. The software used for this process is Adobe Photoshop. The books are freely available in the market the very next day.

The price of books that are reprinted after scanning is slightly higher than those photocopied. The photocopies are sold as low as Tk. 100.

Booksellers are very happy. They buy the books for Tk. 150 to Tk. 180 from suppliers who do not have proper outlets and sell them

to kids and even adults in vehicles at traffic intersections.

Monu Miah, one such hawker in Gulshan 1 said: "I sell 10 to 15 books a day. This is now the hottest book in town and it is fetching more money than begging. We have at least Tk. 30 to 50 profit on each Harry Potter book, depending on the place and time".

With Harry Potter the latest conquest, John Grisham's The Broker, Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code, Angels and Demons, Monica Ali's Brick Lane and many more are in the hands of the hawkers. Prices range from Tk. 150 to Tk. 250 but in case of a popular title, the hawkers hike the price a little above normal.

Taslim Ahmed from Gulshan 1, an ardent reader himself said:

"I know that these are pirated books and such sales should not be encouraged, but not all can afford Tk. 1,475."

"If the consumers are getting it cheap on the street and if the law allows it, what harm?" he asked.

"Pirating of books should be stopped to save the industry. If one looks with a microscopic eye at the back page of the Potter book, there are four to five spelling mistakes," said Neil F Antunis, executive director of Words'n Pages.

Neil also added that, the main reason for the original books to be pricey is because Bangladesh happens to be one of the two countries in the world where duty is imposed on books, the other being Sri Lanka. Nowhere else does this system prevail and that is why books are so cheap in

India and everyone can afford them.

Directors of major bookshops in Dhaka said that they are talking to international publishers around the world to sell copyrights to Bangladesh so that the book could be published locally.

Operations manager of Etcetra Bangladesh Pvt Ltd, Ismail Chowdhury said: "We are very upset about the whole situation. We reduced the price by Tk. 325 and selling it at Tk 1,150 plus VAT just to encourage original sales but the books on the streets costing Tk. 200 are destroying sales. We are losing lots of customers and the authorities should look into this matter."