

Elderly beggars increase in Ramadan in the city

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The old man was looking for shelter from the drizzle. Caused by the low pressure in the bay, the drizzle cost him the coin he has been trying to earn since 10am in the morning. Drenched all over, he stood in front of the variety store at the Dhan-mondi road no 27 crossing. Several other young men and women continued knocking at car windows during the traffic signal asking for money. But he, being a man of about 80 years, could barely walk anymore. He usually starts at 8am but the rain and his stoma-chache delayed him today.

Hailing from Bamna of Barguna district, Abdul Khalek Majhi arrived in Dhaka a few days before Ramadan. "Ramadan always brings a little extra cash," he says. This is his usual yearly trip. He has been coming to Dhaka every Ramadan for about five years. "People become compassionate to beggars during the month of Ramadan. It is a blessing for helpless people like us," Khalek adds.

There are hundreds of others like Khalek in Dhaka. It is a common phenomenon during Ramadan that destitute people from all around Bangladesh come to the capital city with high hopes.

This year, however, Dhaka city is experiencing more of this migration than usual. The increase reveals a troubling and growing phenomenon: without proper social welfare services or government run old homes, the ranks of senior citizens beggars is swelling.

Khalek's story is typical of elderly beggars. He lives in an Agargaon slum. Every morning he walks either to the



Beggars at Farmgate and other parts of the city have increased during the period of Ramadan.

Bijoy Shawroni signal or around Dhanmondi 27 to Manik Miah Avenue, where, along with several other beggars, he continues till 3pm.

"I had everything when I was healthy. I lost it all because of this disease I have," he continues. "I am now weighed down with loans that I took out to pay the doctors' fees - loans that eventually failed to improve my condition. This time I may have to spend the rest of the year in Dhaka

begging so I can pay out the debt," he explains.

Flash floods this year have pushed hundreds of people, including untold numbers of the elderly, from the northern districts of Naogaon, Joypurhat, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Nilphamari, Dinajpur, and Badarganj. Most have taken refuge in the capital, many of them begging from commuters during traffic signals.

This is also the regular season of

Monga in the northern region. Every year during the Bengali month of Ashwin and Kartik, most of the agrolabourers in the region become unemployed because no extra hands are needed in the field at this time. Hired labourers usually have no reserve money to survive this period, so Monga forces another spell of unemployed people to the city.

"I used to live with my son. He does not have any land of his own and works

as a hired farmer. He is now unemployed as all the work in the field is done. He can barely provide for his 5-member family. So here I am begging," describes Mohammad Jainal of Bogra.

Najamuddin from Bakshanagar, Jamalpur is also among the growing ranks of elderly beggars. "My elder son, the only person who tries to provide for me, is always ill. I am just trying to survive by begging," he says. Every Ramadan for the last two years Najamuddin and his wife come to the city and beg for money.

Other senior citizens echo their hardship. "When my husband remarried at the age of 65 and asked me to leave, I had nowhere else to go. My two sons did not provide for me and I could not live with my widowed daughter," says Kohinoor Bhanu, who also came to Dhaka from Pirojpur thinking Ramadan will bring her peace for at least a few months. "I tried to work for a few years but now I cannot compete with the young women in my village anymore so I had to turn to begging." She plans to stay till Eid-ul-Azha.

Some even feel it is too late for them to benefit from old age homes. "Old homes are of no use for me now. I lived my life to the end," says Khalek Majhi, adding, "What will I do with an old home at this age."

"If I die in Dhaka there is no one to take my body home. Maybe the Anjumane Mafidul will bury me at the Azimpur graveyard in one of the temporary graves. I heard they demolish these graves a few months later. My memory will perish along with my grave," he says.

Free talk-time: blessing or nuisance?

SHARMIN MEHRIBAN

Free talk time at night is the latest rage in the ever expanding roster of mobile phone promotional deals, with a number of telecom players offering cost free chatting between 10pm 6am or 11pm - 7am.

"Djuice and CityCell are offering the charge-free talktime during the off-peak hours. Banglalink only offers reduced rates at such hours," explains Shahiduzzaman Akash, proprietor of McCoy Int.

The airwaves are now ablaze with chatter nearly 24 hours a day, as customers flock to the new services. But as the trend catches on, with phones ringing late into the night, some are finding the services useless, others down right annoying.

Shahjahan, a sales executive, says free talk time at night is not of much use for him, since all official work is done during the daytime. In fact, he finds the nightly free talk time to be something of a nuisance. "People disturb me at night by making all the necessary calls during the free talktime timing," he added.

Others, including the studios, the diligent and the early sleepers, expressed similar disappointment with the service. "I like talking on a mobile as it I can use it anytime anywhere, but the thing is, my friends tend to disturb me with late night calls and this is very annoying before my exams," says Jewel, a student.

Parents seem especially put off by the new privileges, saying children abuse the privacy of mobile phones and waste their time chatting at night. "If my daughter speaks on the regular telephone, I might pick up the phone and know the identity of the caller and my daughter can't speak for longer periods at odd times," said Rabeya, a housewife. "But with a mobile, she spends the whole night talking and this hampers her sleep and academic concentration."

Md. Salauddin, another sales executive, echoed this view, saying the new free privileges encourage young people to call each other at odd times to the utter dislike of their parents.

"Perhaps lovebirds would benefit most," says Akash. Others agree that the young are probably best benefited by free talk time. But they also pointed out the adverse effects for students of late-night talking. "In such situations, they think of bunking classes," says Munna, a student and a sales executive at his brother's shop, Labiba Telecom.

Even those working in telecom question the use of free talk time, saying it has limited appeal. Mohammad Mohiuddin, proprietor of Seven Star Telecom, admitted that the free talk time is of no use for businessmen. "Apart from the young generation, it would also be beneficial to the black marketers," he said.

10x3

10x2

10x3