

People sitting there tried to imagine the beauty of *Senakunjo*. While talking, a good part of the cigarette turned to ashes in his fingers.

During the wedding ceremonies of the major-general's daughter, Sharfuddin had been assigned minor responsibilities with regard to looking after the cooking, keeping guard over the food, etc., tasks that over the last few days he had performed with great enthusiasm.

On the occasion of the marriage ceremony Sharfuddin had to buy new clothes for his wife and children. *Bajigori katan* saris had come to the market. Madhuri supposedly had worn one in a movie and soon afterwards it had hit Dhaka markets. It was now a 'hot cake' in Dhaka bazaars. Sharfuddin had taken out a loan from House Building Finance to construct a second storey on his house, but now a major part of it had been spent shopping for his wife and children.

Despite the fact that at the wedding his major-general cousin and his wife were too busy to even spare them a moment, Sharfuddin's wife worried that in the piles of gifts theirs might go unnoticed, did not leave it at the gift-counter. She sought out the major-general's wife from among the crowd and pressed into her hands the small, red-coloured box wherein nestled the gold ring. The wife gave her a thin smile before instantly busying herself with other guests. Still, Sharfuddin, his wife and children were charmed with everything they saw. There were a lot of ministers. A special table had been laid out for them. The major-general, his wife, the bridegroom, everybody was busy attending to them. The happier that lot was, the better the chances of the general's service extension. Sharfuddin himself sidled up to a state minister's table, who had been elected from his constituency. Dismissing the waiter Sharfuddin himself tore off the plastic wrap of the water bottle and poured water into the glass of the state minister, then said, "Sir, I am a staff of PDB. I am a huge supporter of your party. I myself, all the members of my family, even my fifteen-years-old daughter whom I showed as an eighteen-year-old, cast our votes for you."

The honourable state minister looked at Sharfuddin and smiled. It was as if the door of Paradise had opened wide before Sharfuddin.

On the way back home he said to his wife, "People like us can't even dream of going to such an event."

Next morning on the way to the bazaar he ran into some neighbourhood acquaintances. Without any preamble he straightaway launched into his tale, "Last night we went to our niece's marriage. You know, don't you, that a major-general is my cousin brother? It was his daughter's farewell reception. The whole program was held in the *Senakunjo*. What a hi-fi place is *Senakunjo*, you would know if you once go there to attend a party. Nearly all the cabinet ministers came. As the uncle of the bride almost everybody shook my hand. Somebody went ahead and asked the energy minister, 'Sir, are you really going to sell gas?' The honourable minister told us clearly, 'We are not giving away our gas.' You know, no matter what kind of pressure America brings on us, everybody has some love for his own country." Et cetera. One or two people listened to him attentively, the rest were irritated and slowly slid away. "The LGRD secretary is my brother's friend from their college days. He treats me like his own younger brother."

Sharfuddin's wife Lina Begum went to bring his daughter from school, where she had become friendly with some of the mothers who waited for their children, sitting and chatting on old newspapers on the pavement in front of the school. For

long she had been hearing others tell different stories and had felt herself to be inferior. Sometimes she had thought, 'Oh if only I could travel abroad like the others, or go to Hotel Sonargaon to attend a marriage ceremony or a party.' Today, after a long time, she had a story to tell. Turning to someone she said, "Sister, yesterday we went to attend one of my niece's farewell reception. Almost all the movie stars came. Bipasha and Toukir's weddings were held there. Ministers, secretaries, they all came to my brother's-in-law's daughter's wedding, Mou, Zahid, Shakila Zafar, Ishita all of them were there. You know, face to face, Mou is quite dark-skinned. Ishita sat down to eat with us at the same table. You can't even imagine how much gold jewellery was presented at my niece's wedding. Even in Hindi films the heroes and heroines don't get so much gold at their weddings. Ornaments, saris, the whole shopping for the wedding was done in India. Even the saris for the bride's mother and the bridegroom's mother came from India." Two or three ladies turned away and became immersed in their own talk.

After saying Asar prayers a few men sat outside the shop at the end of the lane to chat. From among them Mr. Zahir said, "Can't we get our road made into a pucca one by getting Sharfuddin to request his cousin? His cousin's friends are secretaries and ministers. The LGRD secretary is his college friend." Mr. Kalam said, "Let's try talking to Sharfuddin and see how far he can go." Mr. Kafiluddin, however, did not like the proposal, "Go ahead, and you'll find out that major-general cousin brother of his doesn't give a fuck about him. But that silly bastard Sharfuddin keeps yapping about him day and night." Even then, some of the neighbourhood men went to Sharfuddin with the proposal, and he assured them that he would talk to his cousin and get something done.

While surfing the channels on the television Polly Akhter, Sharfuddin's daughter, suddenly came upon an interview of her major-general uncle. She called out to her parents, and her father sent her to the neighboring houses to tell them to watch that channel on TV. On that same day after Asar prayers, people started treating him in a special way.

After buying the house, Sharfuddin had planted a jackfruit sapling in a corner of the yard. This was the first time that jackfruits grew on the tree. They had eaten one or two of them. One day, while Sharfuddin was putting the biggest jackfruit from the tree in a sack after coming back from the office, his wife had wanted to know who was it for.

"I am going to give it to my major-general brother. I'm going to tell him to make our lane a pucca one," Sharfuddin said.

"Can't they buy jackfruit from the market? I wanted to take the biggest jackfruit of our tree and show it to my father," Sharfuddin's wife said.

"You can still do it -- you can show him two if you want," Sharfuddin replied.

After much effort, having to negotiate past the guards at the gate, when he managed to reach the ground floor of the major-general's house, the orderly stopped him. The orderly took him to his room and seated him there. Sharfuddin said, "I have come here with a jackfruit from my own tree."

"Okay, sit down. Let me talk to upstairs first."

Under the staircase, in a small room with only a single bed, there Sharfuddin sat waiting. The orderly came back after talking over intercom. "Sir and Madam both are having rest. You have been told to leave the jackfruit here."

Sharfuddin was hurt. Because the whole way here he had rehearsed how he would tell his brother and sister-in-law that this was the first year jackfruits had

grown on his tree and that he had brought for them the biggest one of all. But above all, his plan was to take this opportunity on a holiday to request his brother to arrange for a pucca road for his locality. His status would rise in the neighbourhood.

So another day, long before his office shut its doors for the day, he went to the major general's house. When the door opened to reveal his sister-in-law, he fell to the ground and touched her feet in a special *salaam*. Embarrassed, his sister-in-law moved her feet away. "Oh Bhabi, after a long time I've met you, so I felt like honouring you by touching your feet," he said.

After the formalities of enquiring after her health and health of her children, he came to the point. "Bhabi, if you could just tell my brother. For him it's nothing at all. One phone call and it's done. Please, Bhabi. Everybody in our neighbourhood says the same thing: While our son is such a big officer, such a big gift, an even bigger gift is our goddess-like daughter-in-law."

Afterwards, for some days with Sharfuddin himself running back and forth to the ministry, sometimes letting drop the fact that the major-general was his brother, sometimes bribing the clerk, he managed to get the fund allocated for a pucca road. Whereupon Sharfuddin soon became a neighbourhood leader.

While the mother of his major-general brother was still alive, Sharfuddin had managed to get a photograph of his brother in his uniform from her. He had hung an enlarged copy of it on the wall of his drawing room. There was another photo of Sharfuddin with his brother, both very young, which was also hung in the drawing room. Though he suffered from minor humiliations at his brother's home, nonetheless in his neighbourhood he was respected as a cousin of a big military official. And lately, his work in the matter of the pucca road had increased his status even more.

Compared to the other girls of their locality Sharfuddin's daughter Polly Akhter was quite pretty, as well as being good in her studies. After adding in his extra income, Sharfuddin's overall earning was sizeable, and he dreamed of marrying his daughter to a doctor or an engineer. These days all the good, prospective bridegrooms enquired about their future father-in-law's bank balances. In the meantime a matchmaker had been pursuing them for some time. The groom-to-be had a BA. He had a government job. At first they hadn't liked the proposal, had straightaway said 'no' to the matchmaker. But the matchmaker had been persistent. Like a jackal he was always behind them, trying to endlessly persuade them.

Then Sharfuddin's wife began to soften a little. It was because her husband, despite being a clerk, had become the owner of considerable bits of property in Dhaka city. Her daughter at least would not have to live poorly. After a long period of doubts and hesitation she implored her husband, "Come on, why don't we go and talk to brother general, he might give us some good advice."

On that day the major-general brother was at home, and perhaps was in a good mood. He was relatively courteous with Sharfuddin and his wife. He listened about the marriage proposal of their daughter with interest. At first he said, "You are going to marry off such a young girl?" Then after thinking about it a while he said, "It's such a great stress marrying off a daughter, why, take Allah's name and go forward with it." At one point he added, "I will attend your daughter's marriage ceremony."

Preparations for the marriage ceremony then