



PRIDE OF BRAHMANBARIA

Unlike in any other place in the country, Sarail, a small town 80 kilometers north-east of the capital, reserves some mind-boggling surprises. For centuries two distinct species -- Sarail hound and Aslee Morog (fighting fowls) -- have survived in Sarail. It remains a mystery till date as to how these two unique animals landed in Sarail more than 200 years ago. Morshed Ali Khan, Porimol Palma and Sheikh Md Shahidul Islam tell us the tale of these two pride of Brahmanbaria.

With its unmistakably lanky shape and predatory instinct, the Sarail hound can leap several feet into the air and hunt down a bird in flight. Any furry animal, be it a cat or a rat, venturing into Sarail territory, stands little chance of escaping. Among its handful number of connoisseurs in the country, the Sarail is still there, but its existence is at the verge of extinction.

Nobody seems to know for sure how this unusual canine landed in Sarail over 200 years ago when communications in this part of the hemisphere were extremely perilous. Legend goes that Zamindar Dewan of Sarail one day set out for Calcutta (now Kolkata) on his convoy of elephants. At one point during the painstaking journey he met an Englishman with an unusual dog. Fascinated by the canine's looks and agility, Dewan convinced the Englishman to give up his dog in exchange for an elephant.

Later on a hunting trip the dog was lost in the forest. But weeks later the dog wandered back to Dewan's palace. To the surprise of the caretakers, the dog was pregnant. Eventually, it gave birth to several puppies. Some say the puppies were the results of the dog's mating with wolf or jackal.

Kaiser Tamiz Amin, a Sarail enthusiast, having four Sarail pets at his residence in Gulshan, has a different story. Amin says traders from the Arab Peninsula, Central Asia and Western India often travelled to this part of Bengal on horseback. For their own secu-

arity they brought with them the Central Asian Hounds, famous for their attacking instinct.

The British brought with them the European Grey Hounds, known for their hunting instinct. "To me, both versions seem correct. At one point, both the breeds might have crossbred, which is Sarail," Kaiser Amin says. Interestingly, the European Grey Hounds also originated from the Arab Hounds.

Shihab Ally of Royal Bengal Kennels, a platform of dog lovers, suggests that the breed is from the family of Sight Hounds, an ancient variety of dogs brought to the sub-continent by Middle Eastern traders. Descendants of the breeds like Salukis, Azawakhs, Tazis and Afghan Hounds crossed with the Grey Hounds of the British rulers in India, creating a new set of hounds. The landlord of Sarail might have brought these hounds and crossed them with wild dogs from the jungles of Tipperah district (Tripura of India), creating what is known as Sarail today.

Loss of Purity

In course of time the breed is losing its purity. Tapan Lal Rabi Das of Chouragoda village at Noagaon Union of Sarail is one of the few individuals trying to rear the Sarail. Das, who now owns a dozen Sarail breeds, claims that Zamindar Dewan Monwar Ali presented two hounds to his great grandfather Kali Charan Rabi Das over a hundred years back. Since

then, they have been rearing and breeding the dogs for commercial purpose. He has 12 of them. A six-month old pure Sarail puppy could change hands for as much as Tk 50,000 or more.

Some people are crossing the local dog varieties with the partial Sarail Hounds just for commercial gains.

Revival of Sarail Hounds

Dr Shahjahan Thakur, another Sarail enthusiast, set up a breeding project in Brahmanbaria in 2001, but failed to flourish due to fund shortage. A dog-lover, Faisal Mahmud Faizee of Dhaka formed The National Society for the Sarail Hound in 2006 with young Sarail Hound enthusiasts, who owned, trained and bred pure Sarail Hounds.

"In some cases our members succeeded, but many failed," Faizee told The Daily Star.

Sarail's MP advocate Ziaul Haque Mridha sent a letter to the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries in 2009, and even raised the issue in parliament to preserve Sarail Hounds. In response to the letter, Sarail Upazila Livestock Department sent a report on Sarail Hound to the ministry. No further development is known.

Major Mod Abdullah Al Mamun, former director of Rapid Action Battalion Bhairab Camp-9, collected four Sarail Hounds for the Rab headquarters to train them for anti-crime techniques. Its progress is not known.

Kaiser Amin says Sarail Hounds have a problem for use in anti-crime activities.

FEATURES OF SARAIL HOUNDS

The Sarail has a built of compact and fine boned structure with tall legs and paws. They have long head and ears with a wide chest. The tail is abnormally thin and long. Sarail has a white mark running down from the forehead, a white tail-tip, and white paws. They are very devoted to their masters, but don't like to hug or lick. Sarail has very sharp eyesight.

Character:	Intelligent, steadfast and aloof, prey instinct very high
Height:	Male (25-28 inch), Female (23-26 inch)
Weight:	Male (23-33 kg), Female (18-28 kg)
Speed:	55 km/hr
Lifespan:	8-14 years
Temperament:	Alert, bold & at times ferocious
Coat:	Short thin coat
Colour:	Mostly bi-colour; brown & white, brindle, black & white

SOURCE: ROYAL BENGAL KENNELS

"Once these hounds set a target, they go after it without listening to any commands."

Special memories

"A few years ago I got seriously sick, and I was on bed rest for two weeks. I found my dogs lying beside my bed eating almost nothing

for the whole period," Kaiser Amin says.

In 2011 when his mother died, the dogs refused to eat and cried the whole day and night. "Humans have so many demands, but the dogs don't. And they are so devoted to their masters."

The legend goes on

SHARIER KHAN

"Have you ever wondered why the region stretching from Brahmanbaria to Habiganj is marked red in the police record since British period?" asks Zulfikar Chowdhury, a former tea garden manager who is now working with US oil company Chevron.

We were a bit perplexed. Four of us were talking about the great Sarail dog and Chowdhury took the floor by asking us the question. Smiling at our ignorance, he said, "Well, to look for the answer, you have to travel across the region from village to village. And there are certain features in these villages which explain why the villagers tend to be very violent and where did the Sarail dog come from."

Now he got our attention. Our argument that the British brought the hounds here was trashed.

"Firstly in each of these villages, you will find some people who are oddly tall and well-built.

These people control the villages. These are the people who brought the Sarail dog. I got this story from some very old staffs of a tea garden where I worked in the early nineties."

Zulfikar continues: Probably back in the 16th century, when the Mughals spread out across India, this region (Habiganj to Brahmanbaria) was ruled by the Monipuri kings. The Monipuri kings swore their allegiance to the Mughal king whenever he sent troops. But when the troops would head back to Delhi, which was basically a five-year journey, the Monipuri kings would declare independence.

The Mughal king would learn about this rebellion a few years later and by the time the troops return to the area, many years would have passed by.

Fed up with such tricks of Monipuri kings, some Mughal rulers sent a large contingent of troops headed by General Kalapahar. His mandate: slaughter them all and leave the soldiers there to stop any kind of rebellion.

The troops brought greyhounds as their watchdogs and a breed of fighting roosters to keep the soldiers entertained during recess. Greyhounds were part of all Mughal warring troops.

Once the mission was accomplished, the commander thought it wise not to take back such an army. Instead he stationed the soldiers in groups in different camps from Sarail to Bahubal of Moulvibazar. The tall and aggressive soldiers from Afghanistan and western India were asked to make their own living in a community dominated by low caste poor Hindus.

Over the time, these soldiers melted into the society and became Bangalees. "These are the people who brought violence in the area. They kill one another over a missing chicken," Zulfikar said.

The greyhounds, which needed special care and handling, remained based in Sarail where they were bred and traded as good watchdogs. And at some point in time they may have cross-bred with wild dogs and thus their colour and looks evolved.

During the British regime, the Sarail dogs received special attention of a zamindar. The authenticity of Zulfikar's tale is debatable yet thought-provoking.

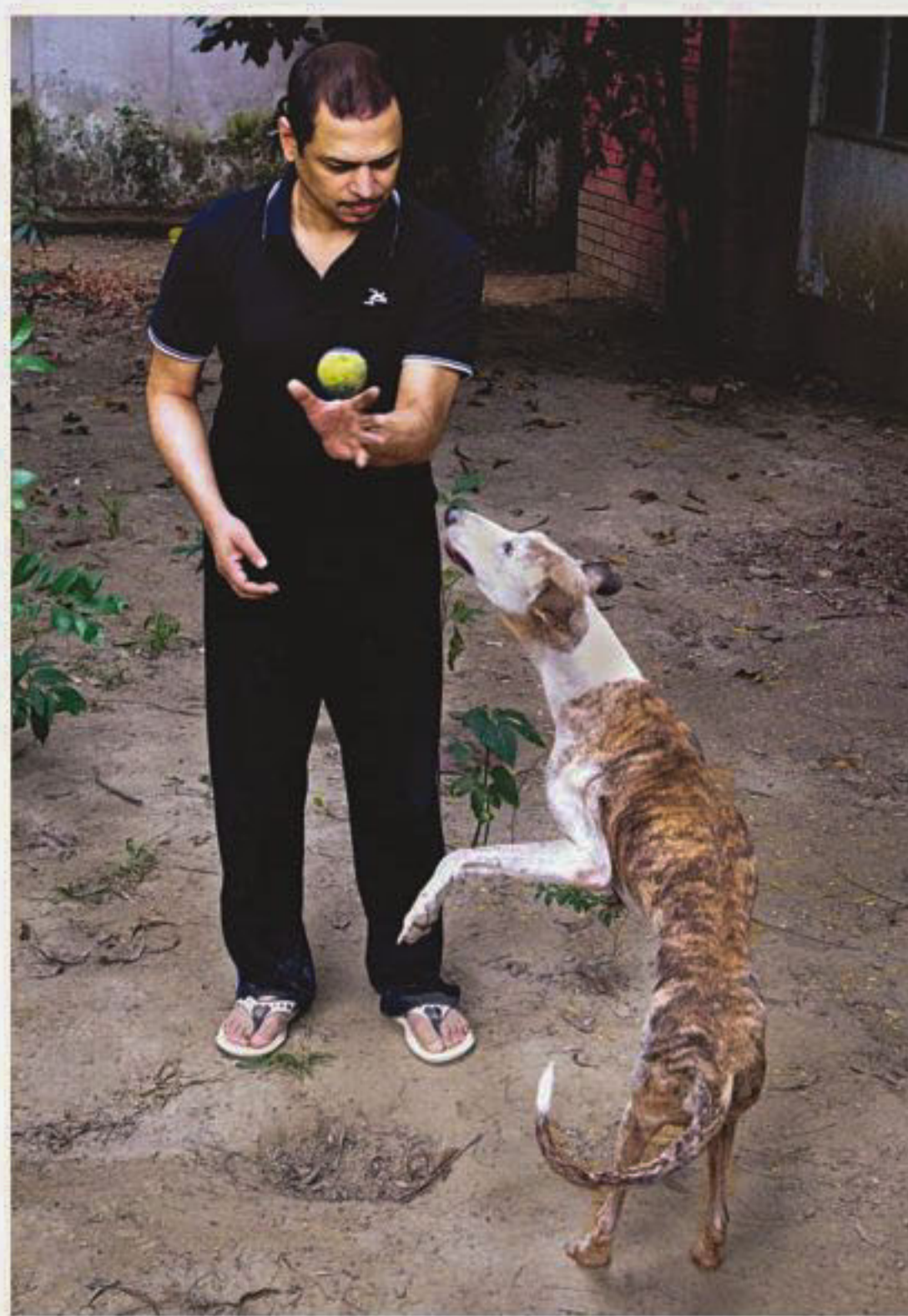


PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Aslee Morog, born to fight

Cockfight is said to be one of the oldest sports of the world whose origin goes back to 6,000 years in Persia. But how Aslee Morog, a unique variety of fighting fowl, became a regular feature of Sarail remains a mystery.

Those involved in rearing Aslee Morog and their fighting these days say Zamindar Dewans of Sarail brought the rare variety from Iran 400 years back. Some say the belligerent fowl and the hen were imported from Ray Bareilly of India during Mughal era.

Whatever its origin may be, the fowls and their fights have made a name in Brahmanbaria and in other places in the country. Many of the households in Sarail upazila town, Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet now breed and rear Aslee Morog, and arrange their sport for pastime.

The grown-up fowls are of long legs, neck and physique and can grow up to 3 feet high and weigh five to six kilograms. They have fewer fluffs, but strong and sharp nails, and are very strong fighters. Even the one-day old chicks have been noted to fight each other and chicks of other breeds.

How is the cockfight?

Cockfights can be arranged at individual or group levels, says Gazi Mohammad Ashraf, owner of fighting cocks at Sarail Town.

"Say, one group from Dhaka declared that they have eight fowls and wants to fight against Brahmanbaria, we too form a group and collect eight cocks," he said.

The fight occurs between two fowls of two groups. The standard time for a fight is two hours and 20 minutes. If one cannot defeat the other either by killing or injuring during the specified timeframe, the game comes to a draw. Thus, eight cocks of one group will fight the eight cocks of the other group in eight times. Those who win more than four times will win the whole tournament.

More the cocks are made to exercise, more they are able to fight, Ashraf said, adding that some cocks get tired in 30 minutes, while some continue the fight for hours. If the weather is sunny and hot, the fighting period endures for short periods, but if it is cold, it takes longer time.

"Therefore, cockfights are arranged mostly during the winter," said

Shafiqul Islam, a breeder of Aslee Morog, at Noagaon village of Sarail upazila sadar.

Exercise, discipline:

Ashraf said he chases his cocks every morning for over an hour, heats up cock's body by hot clothes and puts for practice fights every 15 days for 30 to 60 minutes.

One needs to spend quite a lot to fulfill the hobby. Each cock has to be kept at separate cage, as one cannot tolerate the other if kept together. Their regular feed in the morning includes wheat, rice and bread. Grass (Durba ghas) and hyacinth soaked with dews are their favourite food items. As lunch, they are provided with rice or wheat and pure water. Their evening food includes banana and boiled rice with water. They need a quiet environment for sound sleep and regular exercise for good health, said Shafiqul Islam.

Gazi Ashraf, 32, whose ancestors have traditionally nurtured the Aslee Morog, said he serves even better food for his cocks. These include local chicken, eggs and milk.

He spends so much for the Aslee cocks not for profits, but for

hobby and maintaining tradition. However, he also has some gains out of breeding the cocks.

A grown-up and trained cock can be sold at Tk 25,000-30,000, said Ashraf, a farmer by profession.

"We also build friendship and fraternity through the sport. A lot of people come to Brahmanbaria, and we also go to Dhaka to contest the cockfight," he said.

Cockfight is a tradition in many parts across the world -- in Asia, Europe, America. There are many legends surrounding the cockfight, which is even featured in literature and religions.

In many places, cockfights are outlawed often based on opposition to gambling or animal cruelty. In the United States cockfighting is banned. In many countries cockfighting is a popular sport, but betting is illegal.

"No, we don't conduct cockfights for money. It is our hobby. But, owners sometimes do betting, say, television or other items for prizes," Ashraf said.

Let us hope that the cockfighting remains a sport, not a commercial venture or an act of cruelty against animals, to entertain people.



PHOTO: SHEKH MD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

