



A worker repairing a part of a truck differential that has a broken pinion.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## DHOLAI KHAL 'ENGINEERS'

ROBIN GAZI

There has never been a foundation stone. Neither are there any markets with marble floors or glitzy neon signs. Dholai Khal grew within a limited space, based on the need and the skills of the traders and workers there.

Senior spare-parts traders talked about a market on English Road, to the west of Dholai Khal, catering for a small number of vehicles that plied the city streets after the British era.

But, right after the Liberation War of Bangladesh around 200 large shops, garages and lathe workshops mushroomed in Dholai Khal, as the need for services outgrew the capacity of the small market on English Road.

Soon with the increasing number motor vehicles on the roads the number of traders spiralled up. Some say around six lakh people in one form or another are now involved in businesses at Dholai Khal.

People with no training and in cases

no education began working in Dholai Khal with skills learnt from their fathers or just by watching other workers doing it. The snowball started rolling down the hill.

When a worker was asked why he does what he does, he simply threw back a question, "I was born here, what else I am supposed to do?"

In most countries across the world, the work people at Dholai Khal do would require a minimum diploma certificate. But here, some workers cannot even read but recognise the numbers written on a slide calliper or a screw gauge. They know how things work, a craftsmanship handed down from seniors.

The workers and traders here are in the spare parts business with little to no help from the government. There is no planned education to get these workers employed in something of a larger scale where their craftsmanship can be nurtured and at the same time an industry flourished.

The so-called engineering workers do make some products that end up getting exported earning the government precious foreign exchange. But the government does not seem to be eager to tap into this wealth of human resource. The private sector too has not made any significant investment for a large scale industry there.

Dejected with the small amount of money they work for and the condition they work in, some workers "manage" a certificate, gather some cash and head for the Middle East or South East Asia to do the same job they do here.

But one cannot help wonder had these workers been born in Italy or in the UK, some of them would have undoubtedly been hired and trained by the likes of Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati or Rolls Royce to hand-build engines, do the stitching on the seats, hand finish the paint, or brush the all-aluminium panels.



Drive terrain and steering column parts being recycled.



A warehouse full of imported scrapped engines.

### Making a big difference

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Selim Parvez was sitting across the table to the owner of the shop although it could barely be called a table as it was less than two feet wide.

The shop? Well, it is a 144 square-foot of space stuffed with three lathe machines making auxiliary parts for sophisticated machinery.

Optimistically named Rafi Engineering, the shop is in Dholai Khal, deep inside a market tucked away within a cobweb of alleys.

To get to the tiny shop, one has to carefully negotiate and tread over heavy machinery, electric motors, cogs and gears, and welders working with firework in blinding darkness.

Selim, the entrepreneur who makes electric security gates, was in a pickle. The rise in violence in the garment sector and across the country over the last one year or so has increased the demand for electric security gates. Owners of garment and other factories now want those installed so that in the event of an attack they could just close the gates to their factories by remote switching, keeping the workers and the equipment safe. And in the event of a fire, the gates would open automatically to help the workers escape the flames.

Selim is the go-to guy for the gates. He imports all the electronics from Europe but he needs to build the gates here in Bangladesh. Any shop could make a gate for him but he needs precise engineering for the cogs and wheels.

Armed with just slide callipers and screw gauges, the skilled workers of the shop went about making the parts for Selim. Within a short time the cogs, gears and wheels of the gate were placed on the small table. The job was taken care of well.

Bulbul Ahmad, who runs the shop, talked about his business for a while. He said much of his business comes from large heavy industries.

He said without them making parts in their small shops many industries would grind to halt since importing spares takes time and costs a lot of money and in business, time is money.

An industrialist cannot afford to keep his or her factory closed even for a day in this age of competition just because a cog has worn out or a gear broke a pinion.

He said all that his and a few thousand other shops do is get a lump of metal and make an exact copy of the sample provided to them. And, these tiny little bits keep our factories running.



### Keeping Bangladesh moving

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dholai Khal has been instrumental in keeping the vehicles -- cars, buses, trucks, motorbikes -- of Bangladesh running smoothly at a cheaper expense with a trickle down effect on the economy.

In a country where one has to pay almost equal the price in fees, taxes and freight charges when buying a car, it is not unusual that people there would use vehicles even after the road can be seen through the floor.

In other words, if there is a used car for sale in Japan for, let's say Tk 10 lakh, you may end up paying over Tk 20 lakh to get it on the road here. And keeping it on the road is expensive as well, in cases a lot more than what you would pay in some countries in the west.

Most people here cannot dream of getting a car let alone afford one. Yet, some do buy cars, largely out of necessity rather than luxury, thanks to appalling condition of buses on city streets and the absence of metro rail service or any form of mass transit.

Carmakers do not usually design

or build vehicles to last more than 10 years. It is bad business. They have to make the components tougher and more importantly future proof which jacks up prices. And there is no point in doing that since most car users would get rid of their vehicles way before they age 10 years anyway.

Here in Bangladesh, however, you'd be lucky to spot a car that has rolled off the assembly line in the current year. We consider a five-year-old car almost new since most cars on the streets are around 10 years old. Some are over 20 years and still running.

So, how are they running when the company did not build them that way? It's all because of a place called Dholai Khal in the old part of the capital. It has kept vehicles on the road even when the government has made it very difficult for us to buy and keep a car.

Your shock absorbers shot? No problem. The guys at Dholai Khal can get you new or refurbished ones, or drill a hole in your current ones, fill them with oil and make them as good as new.

The engine is dead? Don't worry. Get it overhauled or even better get a new one or even an upgrade from Dholai Khal.

You drove into something and damaged the car? Get the damaged body panel fixed or have it replaced here.

Overloaded your truck and broke the differential? Get the old one fixed by a lathe machine or buy a used or new one.

The Dholai Khal craftsmen even refurbish old tyres.

They have everything a motorist needs and all of it cost so little.

Nothing you throw away is wasted in this giant scrap yard of the country. Even discarded metal, plastic, and rubber are recycled if the parts are too damaged to be refurbished. Melted to a lump, they are made into parts for factories and cars.

And all this so that people who are not very rich or particularly well off could go about their business in a car.

Israfil, the owner of a tiny shop that imports scrapped engines from Dubai, Malaysia, Singapore and Japan, told The Daily Star, "We keep the country moving."



A worker making a gear on a lathe machine.



Workers having lunch in a cramped lathe workshop.