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**B**angladeshis have been amply acknowledged for their superhuman resilience, flexibility and adaptability, which basically mean the same thing. They have also been described as fiercely nationalistic, highly emotional, phenomenally hardworking and remarkably hospitable. While all these are deserved accolades there are some other qualities that make Bangladeshis stand out. And we're not talking about physical features or strange habits, we are talking about the Bangladeshi psyche – the way we look at things which, in turn, determine our behaviour. These are of course subjective assessments and not to be taken too seriously. In fact what may seem as endearing and admirable to some may be completely obnoxious and crass to others. Here are a few of our traits that make us the quirky, adorable people that we are.

## DISCLAIMER

If for any reason these stories evoke outrage or humiliation please do note that all we are doing is poking fun at some of our eccentricities, not to offend anyone in particular or demean our identity as Bangladeshis. If for some reason you do not possess a sense of humour, it is advisable to skip these pages and go on to other sections.

## Why Take the Long Path when there's a short cut around the corner?

A M AMIN

**B**angladeshi drivers are ingenious about discovering a short cut in some forgotten alleyway that will take you to your destination in less than half an hour and bypass a two-hour gridlock on the main roads. This ingenuity has extended to many other important things that we do. This is where the expression 'ektu manage kore den' originated from meaning – please just somehow manage to get it done. Which is why drivers who have never driven can get a 'legitimate, digital driver's license' without going through a single driving test – because someone in the BRTA has 'managed' it. If you haven't had time to pursue a college education – not to worry. Someone will 'manage' certificates for your instant Bachelors in Zoology and Masters in Bio chemistry. Your good for nothing, failing son can also get full marks in all his board exams as someone has managed to take pictures of the question paper and leaked it through whatsapp. All that is required is a little cash – it could range from the fifty bucks to the doctor's attendant to help you jump to serial number 1, to fifty thousand for that coveted question paper. Every kind of official document can be procured through a short cut – machine readable passports, an online visa date that is impossible to get online, a birth certificate, land deed, permission to build a shopping complex in a children's park, an unofficial gas line and so on.

Often the derogatory word 'bribery' is used but actually it is now a part of the system, a mandatory unofficial tax to get things going. Take the hawkers on the pavement – if they didn't pay 'rent' to the law enforcers where would they sell their ware, if bus drivers didn't pay the 'toll' to stop in the middle of the road to onload and offload passengers, how would they get their buses full? If muggers and robbers didn't share their loot with local patrols how would they ever get any work done? If beggars didn't



CARTOON: SHARIER

**A** newcomer in the city is sometimes a little overwhelmed by the chaotic pace of Dhaka and its inhabitants – so many of them in every little square inch. Along with that are buildings of all shapes and sizes proudly claiming a grandeur that seems to be not quite visible to the naked eye. Asgar Palace, Serendipity Mansion, Gulshan Arcade, Gulistan Emporium and Blue International University – these definitely indicate a kind of bigness in structure. But then you may find out that the 'palace' is a dark, dusty sliver of a building and the 'university' consists of only three rooms in the same dark, dusty, sliver of a building.

This is indicative of our sense of imagination and creativity. There is nothing wrong with stretching the truth a little for effect. Hyperbole, exaggeration and understatement are therefore crucial elements in Bangladeshi conversation. When we like someone they are so good that they could be eligible for canonisation. In contrast if we do not like them they are nothing less than the Satan's spawn. When someone proudly announces that his son has obtained 'first division marks' he is talking about his six-year-old in KG1. When the matchmaker says the groom is 'slightly older' than the prospective 26-year-old bride, it means the fellow is already pondering on a second set of false teeth. When a parent claims that their daughter is a child prodigy and sings like Lata do not fall into

pay the local mastaans how would they get their special spots to get the guilt money out of the rich?

This is one of the Bangladeshi compulsions to make people happy. Customs officials and their buddies make sure that they feel happy about letting all those taxable goodies with their hard earned money. Yes they may be remittance earners and a big part of our 6 percent economic growth but they too must contribute to charity. For many politicians and public officials the incentive to become inordinately wealthy through the unofficial taxing system is far more motivational than the dull idea of helping to 'build the country'. It's what makes them happy.

Thus the regular 'beautification' projects that denude the greenery to make tiled walkways for morning walks, the obsessive 'development' by clearing out the waterbodies and trimming down the rivers for money-making concrete. Sometimes even a charitable donation from a foreign country to say, build new schools in remote areas, will require giving a happy tax to a few officials. Nothing is for free, even if it is free.

that trap. You may be coerced into listening to a recital of the young talent screeching one raunchy Bollywood number after the other until you are left utterly disoriented and a little nauseous.

We also have our own sense of time and distance. An invitation for 7pm usually means no one except the fool who goes by GMT, will turn up before 9pm. It's because we are two hours behind any real time so 7pm means 9 pm and 10 pm means 12pm. This is why when the friend who is picking you up for dinner says he is only ten minutes away, it actually means at least 30

to 45 minutes and he has just put on his shoes. Also when someone says it's a five minute walk you should immediately know you have to multiply that with five to get the actual time.

Speaking of passersby, it may come as a surprise to many visitors to Bangladesh that we really go out of our way to be helpful. In fact we never say 'No I don't know' or 'No I can't do it'. No matter what it is we are the most agreeable nation in the world. This is true when asking for directions – just ask any random person on the street where a road or house is – they will go out of their way to give complicated directions – 'go straight till you find a mango tree next to a coaching centre then turn left then right then left again'. Of course nine times out of ten they have absolutely no clue where the place is but it would seem uncaring if they just admitted that.

— A M A

## Stretching it – just a little