

STORIES FROM THE STREET

2 5-year-old Rafiqul Islam has come to Dhaka for the first time to visit his friends at Mohammadpur. After spending a week's holiday in Dhaka, he decided to go back to his village Dattapara, Shibchar upazila of Madaripur district. But his friend requested him to stay back for few more days, as they had a plan to go to the village together after Victory Day — i.e December 16.

Rafiqul on the other hand wanted to leave as soon as possible as he was running out of money. "When I shared my crisis with my friends, they came up with this lucrative way of earning money— selling flags!" exclaims Rafiqul Islam, the seasonal flag seller at Zia Uddyan area. "At first I could not understand what to do as I am new in the city and am not familiar with the roads and lanes properly," he states.

However, Rafiqul's friends took him to Chawkbazaar and bought him some flags within 1000 taka. They reached the Zia Uddyan area and started out slow. "It was very interesting! says Rafiqul. "So many people bought the flags. All I had to do was stand there with the flags and did not move an inch!"

Currently, Rafiqul has a varied collection of flags—stickers, head bands, flags hooked to sticks, and large flags. Apart from this, he has a very interesting sketch book for the children, having inspiring features related to our

FLAGS FOR SALE!

NILIMA JAHAN
PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

liberation war. Depending on the sizes, Rafiqul sells flags starting from 10 taka to 500 taka, and the book at 50 taka.

Like Rafiqul, there are a large number of seasonal flag sellers in our city, who sell flags to the people in the month of December, in most cases, from the first day of December till the 16th December. However, it is a temporary form of business, since flags are not bought as much in the other months, as they are in December or few national holidays.

"I love these flag sellers, even today, who are upholding our victory knowingly or unknowingly to people of all social classes," says 65-year-old Ajit Ranjan Acharya, a freedom fighter. "I feel very proud when I see parents buying flags for their children," he adds. "I feel nostalgic; it is the flag that we fought for bravely; it symbolises our freedom. Not only does the flag symbolise pride but also our identity—representing our very own Bangladesh."



STRIKING A CHORD

When we talk of *Hijras* or transgenders, we usually visualise men dressed up as women singing, clapping and dancing for money; or by the red lights on the streets using unique begging or mugging techniques to make money from passers-by. However, when the government recognised *hijras* as the third gender in late 2013, many of us failed to realise that it was going to take much more than this recognition for the *hijra* community to be accepted by us, the society.

For starters, not many of us actually understand the dynamics of a transgender. It's more internal, than it is physical. Many of us in society tend to harbour a belief that only if individuals have both the male and female body parts, they are to be identified as *hijras*. It will probably take eons for the society to realise, that the third gender is so much more intense than just being physical, to the extent that more academic readings and understandings are required.

"It will take many more years for us to be accepted here in society," says Munia, a *hijra* (transwoman) who now works for a private medical and research centre in Dhaka. She speaks of the frustrations of the *hijra* community who want to lead a respectable life, but fail to do so because of the taboo that exists within the social surroundings. "We were definitely thankful to the government when the authorities recognised the third sex and made an effort to include us in the work force," she says. "But what happened back then humiliated many of us even more!"

Munia remembers when she and a group of other *hijras* were asked to get medical tests done at designated government hospitals. "We were told that this was a normal government procedure—getting medical examinations done before applying for a government job. We were fine with it at first. Why shy away from the norm?" However, they were not ready for what was to come.

They were made to undress and were examined inch by inch, in front of a room full of people. "These people were not meant to be there," says Munia. "They were not doctors or nurses or anybody from the medical teams. In fact, they were other patients waiting for their turn to meet the doctor. Why were we made to take off our clothes in front of them?" This was a question that Munia and the others ask even today.

This was done, according to Munia, because it seems that the authorities wanted to determine if the *hijras* were indeed who they claimed to be, and not charlatans faking their gender to obtain

"Not once, but we were made to visit different hospitals at least on three occasions where we were made to undress under similar circumstances," says Munia. "In fact the worst part was how our privates were being scrutinised and examined. We were stripped off of our dignity!"

Many say that the social surroundings are changing and very soon the third gender will surely be included and accepted. Unfortunately, the changes are not happening as fast as one would require it to be. The change needs to happen now, if we want to identify as a progressive nation, open to ideas, welcoming and including those who are different.

the government jobs. "At the end of all the humiliating episodes, the doctors finally declared us to be fake, simply because of our male privates!"

If the medical tests are indeed integral to qualify for government jobs, the medical team should have included practitioners from psychology and behavioural science departments as well, thinks Munia.

How difficult is it for the professionals, the authorities, the governments, the medical teams and society at large to

INCLUDING THE DIFFERENT, DEFINING THE OTHER

ELITA KARIM

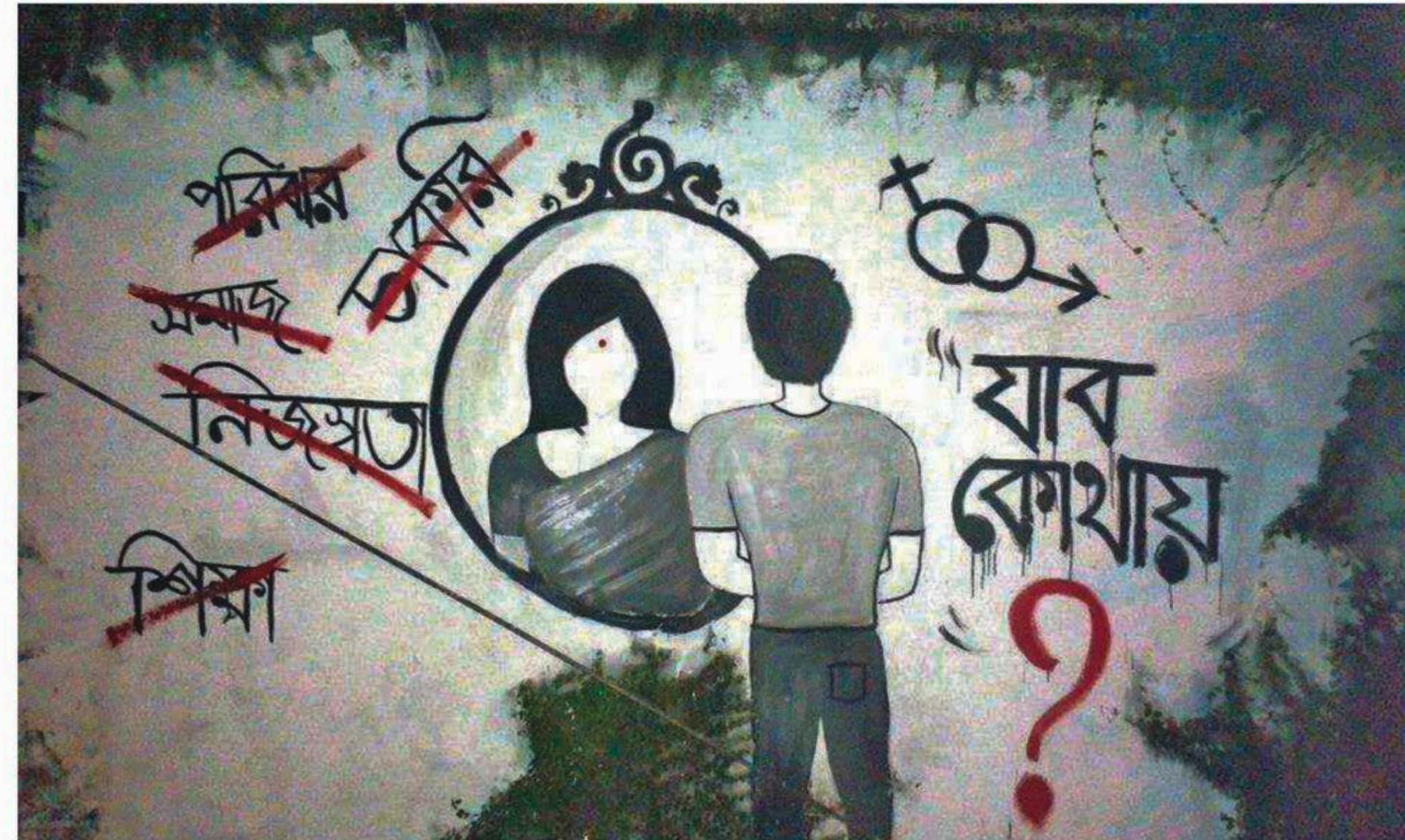


PHOTO COURTESY: VOICELESS BANGLADESHI

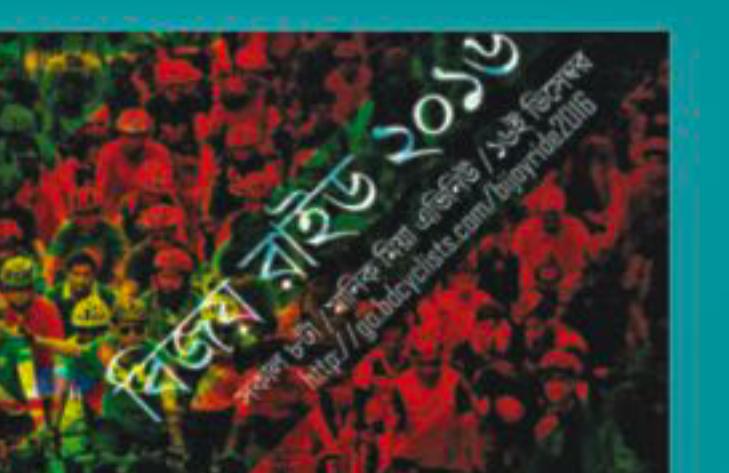
comprehend the basic nature of a *hijra* or a transgender, trying to survive within the set social surroundings?

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ABOUT TOWN



BIJOY RIDE 2016
December 16, 8 - 11 am
Manik Mia Avenue
Hosted by: BD Cyclists
For query, visit:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/749302955208065/>



WINTER FIESTA '16
December 22-24, 10 am - 8 pm
Unimart, Gulshan 2, Dhaka
Hosted By: Hatch
For queries, visit:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/116369052038807/>



PROJECT KOMBOL
REMOTE AREA KOMBOL DRIVE: 2016-17
December 16-29, from 7 am - 11:30 pm
House 74, Road 7/A, Dhanmondi
Hosted by: Project Kombol
For more information, visit:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/1196337337121628/>