

| HUMAN RIGHTS |

In this city of 14.5 million people, at least 9.07 percent of its inhabitants have some form of physical disability, according to Household Income Expenditure Survey 2011 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This means that around 1.4 million citizens of Dhaka are physically challenged. However, when we see an amputated man struggling to cross a busy street after having failed to climb the towering footbridge, it becomes apparent that the city offers little to these citizens with special needs.

is forced to use the street no matter how risky it is. Even if they use the footpaths, these people, especially the visually impaired, are at a high risk of fatal accidents as they get no indication of where the footpath starts and where it ends. "Also the authorities installed pillars on the footpaths to prevent motorbikes from riding on it. Nobody thought that these pillars are also obstacles for a physically challenged person," says Shahin Alam, a wheelchair user who works for an NGO.

all people and state funds can also be saved," says Maruf Hossain, programme manager of Work for a Better Bangladesh Trust, an organisation which has been focusing on disability rights under the programme 'Ensure Our Rights'. However, the city corporations claim that they have already taken steps to ensure accessibility of people with disabilities. "We are planning to install footbridges with escalators so that these can be climbed easily. We are regularly colouring the zebra



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# IS THIS OUR CITY?

Unfriendly infrastructures make Dhaka one of the most inaccessible cities for persons with disabilities.

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

"Our sufferings start right from the moment we step out from home. We can't walk freely; most of the times we have to depend on others for crossing a road or for boarding a public transport. Sometimes we don't get any help and we get harassed by the miscreants. We are also extremely vulnerable to road accidents and hijacking," says Mahub Alam, a visually-impaired student of Dhaka University.

According to Accident Monitoring Cell of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and Dhaka Metropolitan Police, pedestrians are the most vulnerable commuters of Dhaka city. Imagine, then, the plight of the physically handicapped pedestrian! For them, using a footpath is nightmare. Most of the footpaths are so high and in such derelict condition that a wheelchair user or a visually impaired person

Their vulnerability becomes extreme when they have to cross the busy streets of Dhaka. The city mostly depends on footbridges and under-passes to connect both sides of the streets for pedestrians. However, almost all the footbridges of Dhaka city have steep stairs which are absolutely inaccessible to persons with disabilities.

Meanwhile, zebra crossings, which experts cite as an effective and easy means of street crossing for the disabled, ailing and elderly people, are hardly maintained in Dhaka. "Very few intersections of the city streets have zebra crossings. We found that most of the existing zebra crossings have become unusable as their white markings have faded. The city corporations have been investing on building more footbridges—prioritising vehicle movement over pedestrian's accessibility. But if signal posts can be installed in every zebra crossing and traffic law can be enforced properly, street crossing becomes easier for

crossings but due to lack of knowledge about traffic rules it will take time to make zebra crossings function properly," says Farazi Shahabuddin Ahmed, chief engineer of Dhaka South City Corporation.

Md Sharif Uddin, superintendent engineer of Dhaka North City Corporation, also reiterates such promises and says that they have taken steps to install blind strips (tactile dotted tiles which can be discerned with white sticks) on the footpaths and have already installed those in Gulshan avenue and Kamal Ataturk avenue.

There are positive initiatives but due to lack of sustainable planning and knowledge about disability, many of these initiatives fall short of ensuring an accessible city for a large segment of the population.

For example, the first footbridge in the city with an escalator still remains unusable by people with disabilities as they would have to climb two layers of staircases to reach the escalator. In this regard, organisations working for disability rights should come forward to make government officials and the general public aware of the challenges and rights of the people with disabilities so that they consider these human rights issues before designing and implementing any development project. ■

| MUSINGS |

It begins with a listless thought, brushed aside. What does a heartbeat sound like, you wonder. Brush, aside.

You ride the creaky elevator down to the parking lot. When it rains, it pours. It plants fat, wet kisses against the steel bars of the entrance gate, dull silver now on places where the paint has worn out. If you stand very close, and if you are lucky, then you will feel a faint spray of second-hand rain bouncing off the metal to your forehead, soaking the penciled-in arch of your brow.

You lasso the end of your *orna* like a slim, red bangle around your left wrist and wait, only as patiently as impatience can allow, for the driver to return from his excursion to the tea stall across the road. It has never occurred to you to drink tea priced *char taka* from the mouth of a cup kissed by many but you will forgive him when he arrives later than the five minutes he promised and again when he smother his wetness against the car seat, only because the rain can smell oh so *divine*. (And, perhaps, also a little because you are not your father, not yet.)

But he returns, eventually, and you watch the neighbourhood buildings with their multicoloured *gamcha* hanging from makeshift clotheslines and wooden *dolna* swinging precariously blur into a reel of shifting images as the car pulls out.



PHOTOS: PAHN CHAKMA

# THERE WILL COME SOFT RAINS

NUZHAT BISWAS

At first, the sky is petulant, pelting rain droplets hard against your car window but it soon loses interest, slowing to a gentle drizzle like a water tap left on by accident. Drip, drip, drip.

You watch the mud squelching under rickshaw tires and think again that listless thought. What does a heartbeat sound like?

You hear the driver curse a mouthful when oncoming traffic is swept into a stuffy embrace. It loves you often, like this, this city. Some days, you don't know why you even complain.

Your neighbour is a double-decker bus dressed in the austere colours of your nation. It is beautiful, you think, even with its green-painted metal dimples in places where an unruly car may have bumped into. It wears the strip of red like a band-aid, you decide after some contemplation. It's not bad, really, as metaphors go.

A boy who resembles more man with his laugh lines and finger-picked hair stares from the upper window. You could be offended but you decide not to be. His gaze is curious, a little weary. Later, much later, it will occur to you that he was not staring at you at all but the sweeping, silver catenary of your car roof. Must've been all that shine.

A child navigates through the intricate labyrinth of vehicles to arrive at your

window, his plaintive voice knocking against the glass half-heartedly. He wipes your window, offers to do some more for pacha ta – but you have already turned away, ducking your head like someone caught listening into a conversation they had no business listening into, no business being a part of. You do not resurface until the scampering of little feet signal the child's departure, until an old blind man too has passed by in futility.

It is almost sunny when the car releases a long-held breath and starts anew. You roll down the window, ushering in the smell of wet earth like a favourite *khala*, breathing in deeply with it the undertones of exhaust fumes and human perspiration.

You count verandas, struck by the simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity of the scores of wayside homes. You read aloud quietly the names of Dr. So-and-So, Son of Barrister So-and-So and Wife (who, incidentally, shares your *dadi's* maiden name), written in lettering that may or may not be bold (because in Bangla, it all reads the same) on name plates peeking out under the dome of rosette kiss-me-at-the-gates.



At the next red light (that your car zooms past), you watch a flat-chested *hijra* swirling an *orna*, red as yours, sashay away, pausing periodically to flash a betel-leaf-stained tangerine smile at the owners of small, roadside hash houses. You wonder if anyone's ever told them they're beautiful.

You roll the window up hastily as a garbage van cycles by too close to comfort, holding your breath until it is lost in the mass of metal bodies. You watch it go, go, go. The boy couldn't have been a year younger.

The car squeezes into an alleyway, replacing shopping malls and eateries with walls worn with age, wearing a dirty handprint here and there and black-and-white advertisements on their otherwise bare bodies. A woman passes by, her *orna* tucked primly behind her ears, her fingers bony and bare except for a gaudy gold ring. She peers inside, no pretense of being surreptitious and seemingly satisfied

with evidence of life, goes her merry way.

The car dozes against an old mosque with a minaret cracked almost halfway like a peanut shell to reveal the *muaddhin's* podium. The driver, you know, has already gone in search of a nearby tea stall.

You climb the winding stairs to your friend's home on the sixth floor (as the elevator is out of use), pausing to catch your breath now and then, hearing a bird or a car horn or a mother's shrill voice. You have just reached the landing on the fifth floor when it dawns on you.

You place a palm, moist and soft with sweat, in a searching, sentimental gesture against your chest. A little left, a little more. Yes, just right.

You ask yourself, 'What does a heartbeat sound like?' And your heart, curled under your palm answers with a steady *dhak-dhak-dhaka*.

Nuzhat Biswas is the oft-curious *hyphen betwixt an incurable humanist*.