

### MUSINGS

# With Sukhu Mia across Bangladesh

M SHAKHAOWAT HOSSAIN

Dogs usually live for some ten to thirteen years. Small sized breeds may live a little longer, but the bigger the size, the smaller their lifespan. So I decided that within the lifetime of my pet dog Sukhu Mia I would like to go with him beyond the confines of Dhaka and travel all over Bangladesh; our motto would be to see and relish the sights and sounds of our country.

However, traveling with a dog in Bangladesh can't be stress-free. Journeying with a canine companion can, indeed, be immensely challenging. And this is what I found as I took Sukhu Mia to distant places. The first phase that was to take us

Sukhu Mia was only one year and a month old when we went from Dhaka to Sreemangal to see the land synonymous with tea. We could only travel by public transportation vehicles, but this turned out to be quite troublesome and, well, challenging a way. The first problem we faced, in fact, was when a CNG taxi driver flatly refused to take us in. Sukhu Mia was a dog; why would he want to go to Kamalapur Rail Station in the first case and why should the driver take him there?

Sukhu Mia, however, is always eager to get inside vehicles when close to them. When I was talking to the CNG taxi driver about going to the rail station, his front legs were already on its door. He was dying to get inside and took in the exchange between the driver and me eagerly. But the man said: "I'll not take the dog inside my taxi; that will be blasphemy." I wished then that Sukhu Mia would not be able to follow our exhortations. I remained calm and quiet though for my dog always has a calming effect on me.

After talking to the drivers of a few more CNG vehicles, (with some I couldn't agree because they wanted so much more than the actual fare) we eventually found one who was ready to take us in at a reasonable bargain. The rest only asked exorbitant fares because of the dog. I wondered then: did Sukhu Mia feel guilty about causing me such stress?

Our journey was going to be in several phases. But the first phase that was to take us to the station already set the mood for the rest of the journey; we would be aggravated elsewhere too!

Nevertheless, we finally reached Kamalapur Rail Station so that we could take the morning train to Sreemangal. Our tickets were already booked, but, inexperienced as I was in such situations, I realized my blunder at this point. I had booked tickets for a regular compartment – where to hold the dog in my lap – where many other passengers would be

sharing it with me. I had held him in my lap on similar occasions before when we had gone to all sorts of places with Sukhu Mia by public transportation. But he was a puppy then and had now become a big dog; holding him in my lap throughout a long journey was clearly being too ambitious. Also, no dog can sit in any one place without moving sooner or later, and this is the case even if he is on one's lap.

However, it wasn't Sukhu Mia's size that caused us trouble when we got into the compartment. The problem on this occasion arose because two men objected to the presence of a dog in the compartment. They kept on objecting loudly, saying that they had children with whom they were afraid of the dog. They asked us rudely to get down from the train.

Contrary to these men's claim though, it was clear to me that most of the children in the compartment were not afraid of Sukhu. Their demeanor said it

some extra money to the guards for their cabin.

On our way back to Dhaka, I didn't blunder again. This time I booked a big regular cabin for the two of us. Although the traveling ticket examiner (TTE) said first that dogs should be sent to dog boxes, he didn't make fuss at the presence of the dog in the cabin. If you may ask me, certainly, I don't ever want to send him to a dog box and travel without him. Sukhu Mia's place is with me—when I travel and wherever I want to go!

But let me return to our trip to Sreemangal. Sukhu Mia's eyes told me there that he had fallen in love with it. And during the journey and back he seemed to have found great comfort in the endless lush fields and plants of the land, all rejuvenated by the recent rains. Sukhu Mia seemed to have gained a new life because of his pastoral experiences, which were very different from the city ones!

On another journey, Sukhu saw the banks of the Megha. That was a journey

that the boatmen simply loved Sukhu Mia. On the banks, many stray people and children came to pat him. My faith in humanity was somewhat restored by their gestures. All of them acted like his relatives. One of the aged men even said, "Dogs are better!" Before I could ask the wise man "better than whom or what?" he just vanished into the dusty street.

From Brahmanbaria we came back to Dhaka by bus, but once again it proved quite hard to board one. In fact, the ticket man of one bus denied us entry only because one of us was a dog. However, we got another one after waiting for a while. I had to take one extra seat for him even though Sukhu Mia was so little then that he didn't need it. We had taken three seats at the back of the bus: two for humans and one for a dog!

I realized soon that public transports would always be a difficult option for me if I chose to travel with Sukhu Mia throughout Bangladesh. In this connection, I would like to share our experiences of going to Chandpur and also Jahangirnagar University by private cars. On these occasions we faced no trouble at all in the streets!

I wish pet dogs along with their owners could travel across the country would be able to move freely and comfortably with the help of public transportation. As we build gigantic highways and improve our transport systems for the coming decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I hope our planners will make pets part of their plans. Surely a change in attitude is called for now; humans and dogs need to cement their relationships even more for we have been coming closer and closer over time.

True, some people despise dogs when they travel with their owners on public transportation, but some love them too and would not object to them. Homeless people always welcome dogs heartily. Some of them are even willing to feed them. The middle class and upper class are divided into two opposing schools here: the majority can't appreciate dogs but a few do love them.

The fact though is that dogs have an extraordinary central nervous system that enables them to come close to us humans. They love us selflessly and without any intention of betrayal. I hope therefore that the majority in this case will soon be become a minority. One day, I hope, we will all learn to appreciate dogs and welcome them in our travels across Bangladesh.

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all. They clearly liked him; a few even approached him with a smile and tried to pat him. Children often can be quite caring and down to earth too. Moreover, the ones in the compartment seemed to have taken to Sukhu Mia in a short time. Sukhu, let me point out now, is a Golden Retriever, a breed ranked very highly by dog experts for its friendliness with humans, especially young ones. No doubt a few can be quite fearsome, but there was no such creature in the compartment. Meanwhile, the train guards came and joined the loud voiced gentlemen. After some discussion, the guards, however, asked me to go with them to discuss the situation. They took us to a small cabin at the end of the train. This was for the train staff and had two seats and a little space in the front; one could even stretch out and move in it. There was a fan as well. For us I think it was cozy in the sense that we could take refuge here. And I realized there and then, we could do so if we gave

by train too. He was very young then—only four months old—and I had to hold him in my lap almost all the time. While traveling to Bhoirach of Kishoreganj on this occasion, I saw a lady and two gentlemen in the train looking disapprovingly at us. One of the men even told me that Sukhu Mia was going to pollute the compartment by just being there; many of the onlookers nodded in agreement at this solemn pronouncement. These people kept scaring us with their slighting remarks as the train moved on. Both my companion and I pretended as if we had not heard a word. After leaving Bhoirach Station, we walked to the riverbank through roads that were less traveled by. There we met people from the lowest strata of the society, mostly in rags. Strangely enough, these people were quite kind and sympathetic to us. As we moved on, crossing the Megha River next from Brahmanbaria to Ashuganj, and then to Brahmanbaria by an engine boat, we

# Dhaka on a sad day

Tired desk with wooden chair  
No circulation to the air  
Creepers climb, decay's despair  
Beyond the window pane  
Empty cup and blackened pot  
Brickwork stained and left to rot  
In the land the world forgot  
Beyond the window pane

With a jolt the fan is cut  
Shadows triumph, light is shut  
A canyon street become a rut  
Beyond the window pane  
Hours fade as thoughts possess  
Sully sweet a home address  
Wires crossed in tangled mess  
Beyond the window pane

No way forward, no return  
Subtropical malaise to learn  
Gone are days to seek and yearn  
From artery and vein



# Dhaka on a happy day

With pedal click the rickshaw's here  
Driver withered, fuelled by cheer  
Buoying bazaar life is near  
'Elixir of the street

Neighbors wave, an old man's grin  
The cricket ball is bowled to spin  
Teashop friends are adding  
People that we meet

Howl of dog and hawk's call  
Bristleous vibrance for all  
Haggling at any stall  
A spicy welcome treat

Breeze divine, imbibe the ride  
Tension can no longer hide  
Joy of life can't be denied  
The lore of rickshaw feet

Wheels are turning, going fast  
If only such a ride could last  
The future bodes as does the past  
When stopped to find our feet

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# CATMOON

FAYEZA HASANAT

Cats are to be hated. And their whining, which some might lovingly define as meowing, is nothing but tiresome whimpering. At least that was what my mother said she—not my mother—my cat—said.

"Why did you bring this nagging thing inside the house? Why don't you get rid of her?" Mother constantly did her own thing and kicked me out for failing to do her bidding. I throw her away? She was MY cat. I found her by the road that I always took to go to Hakim Bhai's *Khelaghar* by Bashabo bridge, where boys of my age played football. Because I was not a boy, it took me a lot of nagging to convince them that I had two feet that looked exactly like theirs—and could kick as hard. Sometimes they would let me play, but then they would throw me out the moment I missed a goal, or failed to defend the non-existent goalposts. It was on one of those days, when, after the boys kicked me out for failing to do their Daniel Passarella—even though in comparison I was half in size, dwarfed in age, and dissimilar in gender—asking me to join a sewing class, I found the tiny kitten, shivering and in need of me. I picked her up and headed home, telling the boys kicked me out for failing to do their football. The fluff had no big ears to hear me with, but it listened.

Within a few months, it grew into a white bundle with a tail that wagged and a tongue that poked out and paws that scratched. It was then I realized my fluff was asking for a name of its own. So I named her Biral.

Biral was no prophet, but she understood a thing or two about the tongue of a seven-grader. She knew how important her words were, chirps, chatters, hisses, purrs, and growls were to the girl whose world either constantly fell apart suggestion, and because I trusted her judgment, I stayed—grounded!

or simultaneously vanished. The fall was usually caused by an angry mother, and the vanishing came as its aftermath, to place the outside world away from the girl's reach.

"I'm grounded for a week, Biral. Should I run away, like Bappi, Kajol, Kaka's son?" Because Bappi knew how to fail every math test, he learnt how to flee. But Biral always growled at the



Then Biral ran away. I spent days, hoping to find her by the front door, or under my bed, or anywhere around the house. If a door squeaked or a window scratched, I expected to hear a meow followed by a wagging tail. Biral was eventually found sitting in a box of old clothes. She was gone all day, but came back with five shadows, some of which were grey, and some, polka dotted.

"Biral, you're back!" I screamed with joy.

"What on earth are we going to do with so many of them!" Mother screamed loudly.

"I want to keep them all. I'll name them...*choto, chotto, chot-to, chott-ou and cho-tu-tou-ou biral!*"

"Goodness! Can you believe what she's saying? She already smells like a cat herself! Look at her face and her arms! Full of scratch-marks! Who's gonna marry such an untidy girl!"

The listener on this occasion was one of her nephews, our permanent houseguest. Back in those days, one's childhood was usually disrupted by some cousin or a distant relative whose life's goal was to make one's existence miserable by simply turning himself into your own mother's pet.

"Auntie, don't worry. I'll take care of them." My cousin—my mother's pet promised.

Next day Biral and her five shadows were gone. My days went blank, the house went dander-free, the cousin looked saintly, and my mother became Cinderella's fairy godmother. She spent her time washing my unruly hair, smudging my smooth-cut-scratched skin with soothing lotion, dipping my nails and toes, as if in her pair of glass slippers waiting for me—somewhere in a distant future—and I might miss my chance if she didn't carve civility onto me.

One day, while my fairy godmother-mother was braiding my hair, I heard a melodious mew.

"Biral's back!" I snatched my hair free from the hands of Rapunzel's witch-mother and ran outside, sans-slippers.

Biral came back to make the house a happy home.

voice. "I don't know. I left them by a dumpster near Kamalapur." Said her pet huntsman.

The day we moved out of that house, when all our belongings were packed, and when we were about to hop into the car, I could not find Biral.

"Baba, can we wait a little longer?" I pleaded. "Maybe she's gone to say goodbye to all her stray cat-friends."

"We'll come back for her tomorrow. I'm sure she'll be done saying goodbyes by then." Father said.

Back in those days, "the next day" usually came a week or a month later—especially in the world of grown-ups. My father followed the grown-up schedule and took me back the next day.

I found Biral sitting on the veranda, licking her paws.

"Biral, I'm back! Did you miss me? Let's go home!" I stroked her neck and tickled her ears. She lingered around me for a while, and then muzzled away inside the house where I no longer lived.

"Come back, Biral, come back!" I cried.

"Let's go, sweetheart. Cats are place-bores. This is her home." Father tried to explain.

But who can reason with a little girl's love? I kept screaming to the top of my voice!

"Come back, BIRAAAAA! I hate you!" Biral vanished, leaving her meows hanging within the shadows of my memory, like the faceless grin of Alice's Cheshire cat, as if to always taunt me with the truth she tried to teach me that day: everything that we love, or the thing that we call love—is just a haunting!

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# Port of Tranquility

ARYAN SHAFAT

On a sun baked plateau, infused with the hue of stained blood and brown bread, caressed by the waves of the immortal spirit, which walizes with seaweeds.

Dilapidated shells form murals on the universe. Under a congregation of wild, grey, smog-like wisps, the soul of the sea ascends, from the depths; pupils dilated.

The seagull's glide haunts in mid-air, as the salt freezes to stone droplets, floating in the air.

The spirit oblitates the translucent cloak of reality, violent booms and turbulent surges drown the shrieks from above.

They abrade and tear the coarse fabric of the sand. An infinite pool of molten rage along with gusts of insanity.

The sea's soul: unshackled from time and its celestial limbs.

A candle, its wick, drenched in the eternal ocean of serenity, glows with fervor.

Amidst the fire-play between the dull, threadlike masses, infested with fissures, who conjure light from below; tiny ants, scurry to depart for the other side on dinghies, the mast and hull reek of futility.

A melting candle, its wick, drenched in the eternal ocean of serenity, glows with fervor.

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