

How much would you pay for a pigeon? Let's rephrase that question. Would you pay to buy a pigeon at all in the first place? After all, there's plenty of hard work involved in breeding them. From providing them with filtered water and a variety of grains to hosting them in a huge space on your terrace, it's not easy.

But believe it or not, there are associations in Bangladesh involved in pigeon racing, which spend money to the tunes of lakhs behind a single bird.

The Cavendish, a Belgian pigeon, was bought for BDT 410,000 from an auction a couple of years ago, and according to the Bangladesh Racing Pigeon Owner's Association (BRPOA), it is the highest amount any one has spent on a pigeon in the country.

Don't look surprised. It's not uncommon for fanciers—people who breed pigeons—to spend such an amount on these racing birds. In 2013, a Belgian pigeon called Usain Bolt was sold to a Chinese businessman for an astounding GBP 400,000, or around BDT 30,000,000.

“There are many factors behind the price of a pigeon,” explains Md Amdad Hossain Bhuiyan, General Secretary of the BRPOA. “You look at the number of races its mother has won and you also look at its races. When you find that its relatives have won a number of national races, the price automatically gets higher,” he adds. The Cavendish's mother had won 11 national races in Belgium and that's the reason why its price went up to BDT 400,000 during the auctions.

“Unless something very tragic takes place, you are bound to get a good return,” says Amdad. “Aside from winning races in Bangladesh, fanciers often sell the children of these high-priced birds at an even higher cost to other fanciers,” he says.

The one aspect that the purchase of The Cavendish definitely highlights is the growing interest in pigeon racing in Bangladesh. What began as a mere pastime in 2004 has grown into three big clubs. Aside from the BRPOA, there is also the Bangladesh Racing Pigeon Fanciers Club (BRPFC) and the Bangladesh Racing Pigeon Entrepreneur Ltd.

Members of these clubs take part in 10 races every year, from November to March, which is considered to be the ideal time for the pigeons to compete. “In Europe, the races take place in the summer because the region is nearly frozen over in winter. For us though, it's the opposite. During summer, in the heat and amidst the rains, pigeons are likely to face more dangers,” explains Jahid Ullah, Treasurer of BRPFC.

So how do the races take place? Each participant is required to pay a fee of BDT 100 to their respective clubs for each pigeon, after which the pigeons are carried on trucks to the race venue. The gates of the cages that the pigeons are kept in are electronically controlled so that when the buzzer is pressed, all the cages open at once, allowing a fair start.

The objective of the pigeons is to return to their respective homes or lofts as quickly as possible. Once the pigeon

arrives, the timing is recorded on a digital clock. The distance from each of the lofts to the starting point is pre-measured using Google Maps and is then divided by the amount of time that the pigeon takes to cover the distance. Eventually, the pigeon with the highest velocity is deemed the winner.

“It's a well-known fact that pigeons have the ability to locate their lofts despite being thousands of kilometres

And then there's the luck factor. There are times when a pigeon, despite coming close to its residence, circles around the rooftop before landing on the sensor board, which records its landing time. That way, the pigeon loses crucial seconds.

While these birds are born with a strong sense of direction, that ability needs to be honed from a young age in order for them to take part in races. It

Members of the racing clubs in Bangladesh claim that they aren't into pigeon racing just for the money. After all, it's not as though there's a lot of money in the sport in the first place. They also claim that there's no underground betting scene in this sector.

For most of them, it's a hobby. The majority of the members have been taking care of pigeons since they were in

# WHEN PIGEONS TAKE THE CENTRE STAGE

NAIMUL KARIM



away from it. Research shows that they use the earth's magnetic field, the sun and their noses to find their home,” says Jahid.

Some of the starting points include Teknaf, Chittagong, Saint Martin's Island, Chowmuhani and Mirsarai. These birds, on an average, have the ability to travel at 80 km/hr. So, if a race begins from St Martin's Island, a number of them come back to their respective homes in Dhaka within five to six hours. Their location and timing is measured with the help of a device with a chip that is fitted onto the bird's left leg.

“You feel really proud when you see your pigeon crossing seas and rivers in just a matter of hours and coming home. You know that you have trained it well,” says Jahid.

But it's not as though the same pigeon always ends up winning. There are a number of factors involved here as well. For instance, the pigeon that won last time may not necessarily be feeling well in the next race. Fanciers analyse this phenomenon by observing if there's any change in the pigeon's eating or flying habits.

takes around five to six weeks, at least, to train a pigeon.

“After the pigeons are old enough, I send them to a place that's around 10 km away from my house. On the first day, they will take some time to find the top of my house. You will see them circling above for four to five minutes before landing,” says Jahid, while explaining the training mechanism.

“In the third week, they are taken 30 km away and by then, they know the way around quite well. After six weeks, they are generally capable of taking part in a race where they will need to cover 100 km, and as time progresses, they further expand their radius,” he adds.

The pigeons used for racing are a special kind and their origins are generally from Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. Every year, fanciers from these countries come to Bangladesh and sell their pigeons via auction. Local auctions among the clubs also take place after each race.

“If your pigeon wins the race, you will be given BDT 20,000. During the auctions, the price for the winning bird goes up to BDT 100,000,” says Jahid.

school. The clubs are places where they can go and have a good *adda*. They believe that pigeon rearing is an activity that the youngsters of today need to get involved in.

“There are so many teenagers doing drugs these days. They don't have a place to go for entertainment. It's a horrible cycle. Pigeon rearing helps you learn a lot of things. Firstly, it keeps you occupied. You learn discipline and how to be responsible and then, you also grow a fondness for the birds, as though they are your own children,” explains Zahed Khan, a fancier from Mohammadpur.

Mohammad Amdad Hossian Bhuiyan from the BRPOA wants to take pigeon racing to another level. He wants the government to form a pigeon racing federation just like the other sports federations of the country and ensure that Bangladesh participates in pigeon races abroad.

Only time can tell whether pigeon racing will be considered as an official sport in the country, but there's no doubt that it's an activity that is gaining popularity. ■

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We all start playing as children. Whether we know what we are doing or creating, it fascinated us. Little did I know that sometime in the future, what everyone knows as “vocal percussions” in general, would lead me to my passion known as “beatboxing”.

While growing up in the Middle East, I was surrounded by music thanks to my parents being open-minded and creative themselves. At a young age, I started trying to learn singing, playing the harmonium and tabla. So playing around with different sounds using my mouth was just normal and listening to Bobby McFerrin's “Don't Worry Be Happy” intrigued me more though it was more to do with vocals/acappella. Watching Michael Winslow on the Police Academy was another experience itself. But I discovered more about vocal percussions through one of my biggest idols—Michael Jackson.

I always felt that there was something more human to his music besides all the production we used to listen to, and later I found that that was exactly what it was. Michael Jackson used to use “beatboxing” to compose his tracks and even include them in hits like, “Beat it”, “Who Is It?”, “Strange in Moscow” and many more. I

# FOR THE LOVE OF BEATBOXING

MOKTADIR DEWAN SHANTO

used to sing his songs to myself and try playing with the tape-recorder to chop bits of his songs to know more.

We didn't really have access to the internet back then. This fascination was around 1996/97. Besides listening to Metallica, Nirvana, Pearl Jam and many other bands around the 90s and of music from the 80s, old school beats from the likes of 2pac, Nate Dogg and many others started bringing me more towards the hip-hop sound.

But little did I know beatboxing was a huge part of hip-hop, because there was no source from where I could find it. I heard samples of beatboxing through N'Sync's Justin Timberlake, and found that they had a lot of that in their songs. In one of their live concert CDs that I found one day, JT says “prepare yourself for the human beatbox...” and it hits me. THIS IS WHAT I WAS DOING! THIS IS BEATBOXING! EXPLORE EXPLORE EXPLORE!

I started to find out more and try different sounds. But back then, beatboxing was mostly old school beats. After 2000, the world beatboxing scene changed and went Steller. But I had no idea about it sadly, especially because I never came across anyone interested in this “strange” thing I used to do. Didn't meet anyone who knew what it was.

After moving to Bangladesh, my beatboxing was dormant until a few musician friends heard it and suggested that I try to implement it with rock and maybe fusion. That's when I started getting back to beatboxing to explore more. And with the release of *Kata Taarer Bera*, the first official hip-hop mixed album, in 2008, a proper recording of beatboxing was released to the masses. It was something that I recorded around 2006 for the album.



PHOTO: COURTESY

song changes into a blues/funk/sexy groove with beatboxing.

I gradually started to meet young beatboxers, who faced the same thing I did back in my early days—they didn't know if there were other people into this crazy thing. But that's when I started to see a spark of interest. Meanwhile I started working on my own project called Beatbaksho and started using beatboxing as my primary identity. I was being called “BeatBaksho”, a name I made using the idea of the very thing I love doing—beatboxing.

I had a short stint touring several cities and venues, as Beat-Baksho, with the band AvoidRafa. There were shows where the whole setup was just me on beatboxing, Rafa on vocals and guitars and Pavel on Bass. With a set-list which lasted to atleast 2-3 hours. Through the tours, I was able to meet more people interested in beatboxing and also go to new locations and even talk about it.

Things started to take a different turn, positively after a show called “Next Level” around the end of 2014, where I got to see beatboxing being a huge part of the local hip-hop scene. This is where I met Ronesh Biswas a.k.a Han-X my brother, partner and co-founder of our community called “Beatbox Bangladesh.”

Beatbox Bangladesh took off and established itself as the face and official community of beatboxers in Bangladesh. Since its inception, we have organised several beatbox workshops and meets in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Through the show we found a few dozen beatboxers and chose 16 from them to be a part of the first Beatbox battle (competition) in Bangladesh called “Battlebox BD 2017.”

This event was supported by several pro-beatboxers and beatboxing communities from the USA, Japan, Netherlands, Jordan, Australia, France and also by the humanbeatbox.com. But most of all, the newfound love and interest for beatboxing. It was a small step, but the first of its kind. With the amount of interest that I have seen among the youngsters, I am sure beatboxing can grow a lot more in the coming days.

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