

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Regent Street, London.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

London Memories

I had just turned sixteen when I went to London to pursue my A levels. I spent two years there living away from home. This comprised my first taste of independent living.

Of course I missed my family – achingly so – but with support from my affectionate London-based Chachu and Chachi, I was able to complete my studies.

During a visit to London this week, memories of those two years came rushing back. The city has changed and reinvented itself since its pre-Thatcher days, but the street names, the red double decker busses and the impeccable manners of its population remain.

Standing tall in my memory are my teachers at Waltham Forest College which I attended. All three were superb and I quickly established a bond with them at the outset. Through the next two years they remained a source of challenge and inspiration. Mr. Jones, who taught us Advanced Mathematics, was like a character out of P.G. Wodehouse, replete with witty comments (“Ladies and Gentlemen and Others, can you solve this one?”) and incredibly difficult pulley problems. The Physics teacher, Mr. Lyons, was the classic absent-minded professor: late to class, and often looking lost (“Oh no! Where did I put my glasses?”), but making up with his enthusiasm. Mr. Neal, the Pure Mathematics teacher, was a younger fellow who was visibly in love with Ms. Windsor, the teacher next door, but that did not detract him from instilling good vector calculus into our heads.

Outside school, though, London in those days had palpable desperation in the air. Unemployment was high and the economy miserable. Incipient racism, encouraged by the likes of Enoch Powell, was raising its ugly head. While I managed to avoid encounters with roving bands of skinheads engaged in “Paki-bashing,” some of my fellow students were less

fortunate. I loved the music of the times and took heart that many rock stars took a stand against racism. Unfortunately the popular guitarist Eric Clapton made irresponsibly racist statements in public that exacerbated the situation.

Tickets for the subway were expensive for a student, but London’s Red Bus Pass, which cost ten pounds per month and allowed unlimited bus travel, was a bargain. Armed with it, I explored the sprawling metropolis. Soon I got a part-time job at an off-license selling alcohol to East Londoners, though legally I was too young to drink!

Since family communication was by letter, I looked out for the postman. Overseas phone calls were exorbitant, though local calls at 2p from the red phone booths were a bargain.

Looking back, I realize I learned much of my adult habits here. These included crucial life skills such as managing finances, but also table manners, including the correct way of wielding knife and fork and donning a jacket, holding open the door for women (and standing up when one joins the table); civic sense, such as queuing and minding the trash; and a healthy respect for tolerance, pragmatism and fairness. But I also learned about the class system entrenched in British society, and how one’s accent and address instantly determine one’s place in the class hierarchy.

After A levels, my London days drew to a close. I could not afford tuition at British universities and had applied for undergraduate scholarships in the United States. One of these came through and I said goodbye to London. I was delighted to be going to America (who would not at seventeen?) but I felt a pang of sadness at leaving this magnificent city. Nowadays, visiting London is always exhilarating.

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Dream of a home deferred for 900 families

NHA almost doubles the price of flats allotted in 2010

HELEMUL ALAM

Like most people living in Dhaka, Maududa Yesmin had a dream -- a dream of owning a home for her family. Determined, she and her husband, who worked at a private organisation, toiled hard to achieve that goal.

The housewife not only saved money from her husband’s meagre salary, but also tutored students in between her daily chores. It took the couple nearly two decades, and fortune finally seemed to have smiled upon them.

In 2010, Maududa won a lottery of the National Housing Authority (NHA) -- a 1,000 square feet flat at a building in Mohammadpur area.

NHA took up the project in 1997. The initial plan was to provide lower and middle class people with plots at a lower rate (per katha plot at Tk 1 lakh or Tk 1.5 lakh) to solve their housing crisis, according to NHA officials.

Twenty years went by but they could not carry out the plan due to the change of governments, among other reasons, they added.

In 2010, NHA decided to allot flats to 900 families through lottery in Mohammadpur Block F. As part of their plan, NHA would construct 15 buildings consisting 900 flats.

For a prospective owner like Maududa, the arrangement was straightforward. She had to pay Tk 35 lakh for the 1,000 square feet flat under the housing scheme.

The payment plan was divided into two parts. First, she had to pay Tk 18 lakh in four instalments and then she had to finish the rest of the payment on a monthly basis.

In order to pay Tk 18 lakh, the couple withdrew their fixed deposit, took a loan from a relative and finally completed paying the final instalment in November last year.

She said as per the agreement, NHA was supposed to hand over the flat after they had finished paying Tk 18 lakh.

That, however, did not happen. Instead, NHA decided to increase the price of the flat recently, almost double the previous amount Maududa was supposed to pay.

According to NHA, they have increased the price as per the government’s new rate for the flats.

“We are still struggling to come up with the additional money,” a frustrated Maududa told this correspondent. “We’re still living in a sublet room of a small house.”

Not just Maududa, almost all families who were allotted the flats (mostly lower middle class), are in a precarious situation due to the sudden increase in the pricing. Many of them had to either borrow money or sell land in village to pay the previous amount.

FAMILIES PROTEST PRICE HIKE

Protesting the authorities’ move, most of the people who were given allotments of the flats organised a press conference in the capital recently. They said they also sent a letter to the Prime Minister’s Office, seeking the premier’s intervention.

Convener of Mohammadpur Block F Flat Owners’ Samity, Siddiqur Rahman Selim, said, “It has been seven years, but the authorities are yet to hand over the flats. Rather, they are now charging Tk 59 lakh for the same 1,000 square feet flat, which was Tk 35 lakh initially.”

He said the housing authorities were sup-

posed to hand over the flats by 2014 or 2015. The price of an 800 square feet flat was Tk 30 lakh and of a 1,000 square feet flat was Tk 35 lakh, he said.

The amount was fixed at Tk 3,500 per square feet. But NHA in a recent move increased the price to Tk 4,400 per square feet. They said the price was increased due to an additional construction cost such as staircases, lifts and lobbies.

The convener also claimed that these “hidden cost” was not mentioned in the prospectus.

“NHA asked us to submit the fourth instalment by November last year. They said construction works for five buildings out of 15 were going to be finished shortly. We deposited the money as per their demand,” he said.

He claimed that the authorities said they would

construction works could not complete it due to a piling-related problem. A legal battle was going on between the contractors and NHA for a long time regarding the issue, which delayed the project, he added.

As they (NHA) had to change the design, hire a new contractor as well as due to the delay in implementation, their cost also went up, he said. Meanwhile, they had to change the price of the flats as per the new government rate, he added.

Kabir said they also formed a committee in this regard and the committee reduced around Tk 200 and fixed the rate at Tk 4,400 per square feet for a flat. It was also approved by the NHA board.

When asked about people’s concern that they were being charged extra in the name of con-



The buildings under construction. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: STAR

hand over the flats by December 30 last year.

“Instead of doing that, NHA hiked up the rate,” he added.

WHAT NHA SAYS

Contacted, SAM Fazlul Kabir, member (engineer and coordinator) of NHA, said they have increased the price as per the government’s new rate for the flats.

He said the contractors who were assigned the

structing lifts, lobbies and staircases, he said, “We’re not charging anything out of the blue, those were initially in the plan.”

He said it was a “mistake” that they did not mention those in the prospectus.

“Five of the buildings would be completed by June this year while the rest by June 2019,” he added.

He also added that they would soon send a proposal to the housing and public works ministry for reducing the price of the flats.

Allocate budget for disabled under each ministry

Speakers urge govt at consultation programme
DU CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a programme yesterday urged the government to increase budgetary allocation for people with disabilities.

And for better results, the budget for the disabled should be allocated under every ministry of the government, they also said.

The recommendations were made at a consultation on “a national budget inclusive of people with disabilities” at the Institute of Education and Research of Dhaka University.

Centre on Budget and Policy of Dhaka University, Democratic Budget Movement and Access Bangladesh Foundation organised the pre-budget citizen’s meeting in collaboration with parliamentary caucus on national budget and planning.

General Secretary of Democratic Budget Movement Amanur Rahman presided over the session.

In his keynote paper, Litan Baruri demonstrated that the development activities for the disabled were limited to providing social security benefits under welfare budget, without considering their human rights aspect.

“Although the budget has increased in some sectors compared to the previous years, it is still inadequate. And the budget was not proposed considering the

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National unity must for fair election: Dr Kamal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain yesterday called for forging national unity to force the government to hold a fair and inclusive general election, slated for later this year.

“Let us be united irrespective of political affiliation and ideology in order to ensure a fair election. The role of observer that we [senior politicians] have been playing on behalf of common people will be contin-



ued,” he said.

The Gono Forum president made the remarks yesterday at a meeting titled “Rule of Law and Democracy”, organised by Bangladesh Supreme Court Bar Association at its office in the capital.

Speaking as the chief discussant, Dr Hossain said the government is still in power after the controversial 10th parliamentary election on January 5, 2014.

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A battery-operated rickshaw, which is banned on the streets of Dhaka city, maneuvers dangerously through three buses amid heavy rain on Topkhana Road. These rickshaws are vulnerable to electrocution in the rain and susceptible to brake failure particularly on wet, slippery roads, putting the driver and passengers both at serious risk in such conditions.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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