

The Birds of Heaven

Fifty thousand people travel every winter to Hokkaido, the northernmost Japanese island. Landing in the small airport at Kushiro, they head to the north eastern part of the island and brave subzero temperatures and lashing cold winds – all to see a bird. But it is not just any bird. The Red-crowned Crane, white and black with a red spot on its head, is exquisitely beautiful, and its gracious movements on the snow capture our imagination.

Cranes are large birds with long legs and necks. Due to their size, grace and primeval appeal, they have a special place in many cultures. There are fifteen species of cranes in the world, living on all continents except South America and Antarctica. In Bangladesh we have the Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) as late as my childhood, but it has been extirpated.

Due to excessive hunting, Red-crowned Cranes were thought to have vanished from Japan. But in 1924 a small flock was discovered in a wetland in Hokkaido. To save it from extinction, the bird was declared a national monument by the Ministry of Culture. Since then, Hokkaido's farmers have fed and nurtured them, and today their population in Japan is around 2000. (Red-crowned Cranes are also found in other parts of Asia.)

Each crane has its own territory among the rivers and lakes of Hokkaido, but in winter, when the waters freeze, they move around looking for food. Farmers in the island feed them at several sanctuaries created for them to help them through the winter. The cranes congregate at these spots to the delight of birders and bird photographers.

Pairs of Red-crowned Cranes mate for life and females lay two eggs every year. For one month, males incubate the eggs during the day and females do so at night. Young cranes – their iconic red crown after one year and reach adulthood when four or five. They live an average of 25 years.

As I watch a large group of cranes on a flat field at the Tancho Crane Sanctuary, ordinary



Red-crowned Crane Couple, Hokkaido.

PHOTO BY: IHTISHAM KABIR

avian movements such as preening are punctuated by flashes of exhilarating beauty and bursts of excitement. The beautiful moments arise from two events. The first is when the birds land, braking at the last minute by spreading their wings, arching them back after landing like a dancer. The second beautiful sequence occurs when a couple performs its courtship dance. They point their long beaks towards the heavens in unison, going around each other, the male strutting and flicking its wing feathers. Excitement comes when they jostle and fight, elders sometimes chasing brown-necked

juveniles. Between these moments of beauty and excitement – landing, dancing and fighting last a second or two – they stand around, preen their feathers, or stab into the snow with their pale green beaks searching for food.

With the snow in the wetlands and rivers of Hokkaido melting in spring, the cranes return to their homes near the water to build nests. And the enthusiasts who came to witness their special moments go home with their hearts filled with splendid joy.

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'South Asian govts have failed to ensure rights of minorities'

Prof Muchkund Dubey says at Jagannath University conference

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Governments in South Asian countries have failed to ensure the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, said Prof Muchkund Dubey, former foreign secretary of India yesterday.

"The governments in power have failed to recognise the rights [of religious and ethnic minorities], and take measures to redress their rights," he said, referring to Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh among other South Asian countries.

Dubey was speaking at the inaugural session of the two-day long international conference titled "State and Society in South Asia: A Historical Perspective," organised at Jagannath University.

Jagannath University (JnU) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies jointly organised the conference.

In his keynote speech, Dubey observed many governments of South Asian countries made delayed response to issues of religious and ethnic minorities.

"In many cases it was too late to even be able to deal with the problem," he added.

During the conference, Prof. S. Choudhury, Social Development in New Delhi, said that freedom of expression, right to dissent, non-suppression of diversities, upholding human dignity, ensuring human rights and special care to the rights of minorities are the essence of democracy.

"But South Asian countries have significantly deviated from that essence of democracy," he said.

Regarding establishing secularism, Dubey said, "Most of the South Asian countries subscribe to secularism in their constitution. But partial factors were introduced during the course

of implementation as in the case of Bangladesh, which has once again reverted back to secularism in a very steady fashion."

Soon after the Liberation War, Dubey – as an UN employee – came to Bangladesh to prepare a report on the requirement of technical cooperation for rehabilitation and development.

"In the report I quoted Bangladesh, among all South Asian countries, having the best chance of progress in development," he said.

One reason was cultural and linguistic homogeneity which none of the other countries [in the region] have. Secondly, sacrifice makes people proud and motivates them to move ahead.

"Today, Bangladesh is ahead of most of the countries in South Asia, including India, on many indices of social development like gender parity, maternal mortality rate etc.," he added.

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The 14th instalment of the Dhaka Motor Show kicked off yesterday at the International Convention City Bashundhara. The three-day event, organised by CEMS Global, focuses on the local automotive industry, segmented into three parts: automotive, commercial and motorbikes, and features some of the biggest names in the sector.

PHOTO: FARHAN AHMED/SHIFTF

Family support is paramount

High-achieving women share experience

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

They all achieved leading positions in different sectors – from business to journalism – through dedication, grit and creativity, which was not easy for them as women in a mostly male-dominated society. But one common condition made it possible for all of them: support from their families.

A number of high-achieving women started their journey to success yesterday, at a discussion titled "Encouraging and Influencing Minds to Dream" held at the CA Bhavan in the capital.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) organised the event marking International Women's Day (March 8).

Working in a male-dominated sector – transport – was not easy for Malika Malik Quadir, managing director of Shohorban.com, a major player in digitising the transportation industry in Bangladesh.

Hard work and dedication are important to achieve trust in business, while family environment is more important for continuation, said the Harvard graduate.

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Jatka Protection Week begins today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

This year's Jatka Protection Week, a ban on fishing young hilsa that are smaller than 10 inches in length, begins today with an aim to boost production of the national fish.

To observe the week, the Department of Fisheries will organise various programmes including workshops and discussions till March 22 in order to raise awareness among people, especially fishermen and traders.

State Minister for Fisheries and Livestock Ashraf Ali Khan Khasru came up with the announcements at a press briefing held at Matsya Bhawan in Dhaka yesterday.

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Weather may remain mainly dry with temporary partly cloudy sky over the country having chance of rain or thunderstorms at one or two places over Khulna and Rajshahi divisions till 6pm today, reports UNB quoting Met office. The sun sets in the capital today at 6:09pm and rises tomorrow at 6:07am.

SHYAMOLI SLUM

Eviction drive leaves dwellers under open sky

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

This land has been allotted to copyright division of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs a few years ago, he added.

Although the magistrate claimed that the slum dwellers were given repeated notices in the last few years, the slum dwellers said they did not value their valuable, assuming that the eviction would not take place due to the stay order of HC.

Many slum dwellers, who failed to find shelter due to the sudden eviction, are staying at a nearby area.

"We tried all things but did not find any place to go, even after frantic efforts," said Mohammad Israfil, 45, who used to run a roadside tea stall in Shyamoli.

He said they do not have any home at their village, nor any relative to live with, for which he along with his wife and two children are staying here.

However, many others who could manage a shelter at their relatives' village have left the place after the eviction, selling possessions which they could recover from the rubble.

The 1.25-acre land of Shyamoli No. 2 slum, which had been occupied illegally since 1962, had been cleared on Thursday in the drive, said Imran Hassan, an executive magistrate of Dhaka District who led the eviction drive.



Residents of the Shyamoli slum stand amid the rubble yesterday, the morning after the eviction ended. Some of them were seen trying to retrieve their valuables from the debris.

PHOTO: SHAHEEN MOLLAH

MOSQUITO ERADICATION

Mayor Atiqul pledges 'crash programmes'

BSS, Dhaka

Mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) Atiqul Islam yesterday said "crash programmes" will be conducted for mosquito eradication and cleanliness in the city.

"We will launch crash programmes for mosquito eradication from the city, and clean up the drainage system ahead of the monsoon season," he said.

He said the programme will be conducted along with councillors will try their best in combating the mosquito menace," he said while speaking at a discussion on "Mosquito Eradication and Cleanliness Programmes" at DNCC mar-

ket in the city's Mohakhali area.

Regarding mosquito eradication, Mayor Atiqul also said, "We will provide all-out support to DNCC workers in this regard, as we understand the difficulties of the workers, but they have to discharge their duties with utmost sincerity."

Warning officials and employees of the DNCC, he said, "I will make surprise visits. At that time, immediate action will be taken against anyone who is found negligent of their responsibility."

DNCC Chief Executive Officer Abdul Hye, Secretary Rabinda Sri Banu, Chief Health Officer Brig Gen Zakir Hossain, and ward councillors were present on the occasion.