

A heritage past its welcome?

Questions over use of horse-drawn carriages as public transport

|| MD FOISAL AHMED ||

Dhaka, like any 400-year-old city would, has gone through a metamorphosis over the course of its illustrious and fascinating history, as have the lives of its inhabitants.

From the Mughal rulers and local zamindars, to British colonial overlords, and past the Pakistan time to independent Bangladesh, daily life practices have evolved over the centuries to make way for newer technology and development. Yet, in pockets -- literal and figurative -- of the old town here and there, parts of that history and heritage have remained encapsulated.

To come across a mode of public transportation introduced over a century and a half ago -- and one that has probably become a novelty decades ago all across the globe -- can be quite odd to the uninitiated.

Yet, from the capital's Gulistan to Sadarghat Road, that is exactly what one would find on an everyday basis.

Some 30-odd horse-drawn carriages still carry passengers on the route, in a striking juxtaposition to the traffic hustle and bustle of one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

While it provides the livelihood of a handful of families and eases commuting for some, animal rights groups challenge its necessity in the 21st century, particularly as there are questions about the wellbeing of the animals.

According to the book "Dhaka - A Study in Urban History and Development: 1841-1921", GM Shircore -- an influential Armenian businessman living in Dhaka at the time -- first brought the horse carriages, or *tikka gari*, as a mode of public transportation in the mid 19th century. The number continued to grow, and by 1889, the number of horse-drawn carriages stood at around 600.

However, with the availability of motorised vehicles, that number naturally fizzled out.

Currently, most horse carriages in operations are part of family lineage. Rubel, a coachman, said, "I have been involved in this business for around fourteen years. My father brought me to this profession, who also came through his father."

Raju, another coachman, said, "We charge Tk 20 for a person for one trip [from Gulistan to Sadarghat]. At a time, eight to twelve passengers can board the cart. On a good day, we earn about Tk 1,500-2,000."

The elderly people and women make the majority of passengers who use this service. "It is a fun and hassle-free journey, and suitable for women like us. We are unable to get into a bus due to heavy crowding," said Sajeda Khan, who regularly commutes on the route.

The carts are also frequently hired for wedding parties, carrying the groom and his entourage to the wedding venue.

"We get between Tk 4,000 to Tk 10,000 depending on distance," Raju told this correspondent recently.

About the costs of running the service, Raju said the major cost is the horse's fodder -- grass, paddy husk, wheat and peas.

"Our horses eat grass worth about Tk 100 every day. We also need five sacks of paddy husk, wheat and pea for every ten days, that costs around Tk 4,000- 4,500," he said.

Other costs include treatment of horses as they sometimes become sick, Raju added.

Asked what happens to a horse when it is no longer capable of pulling carts, Md Salauddin, a lineman of the service, said, "Firstly, we arrange treatment for it. If it is not able to work, we have to free the animal in an open space outside the city."

Further asked what happens then, he said the horses die there.

A few months ago, one such horse was found abandoned in Hatirjheel, and rescued by animal welfare organisation Care for Paws, who took the aged horse to its shelter on the outskirts of the capital.

Despite their best efforts to feed and treat it, the horse, lovingly named Jheel by the rescuers -- died there of old age a few days later -- according to founder of the group Zahid Hussain on Facebook.

People for Animal Welfare Foundation, another animal rights group, yesterday organised a human chain in front of Jatiya Press Club, demanding formulation of a guideline to protect rights of the workhorses until the "inhumane" practice can be banned, finding rehabilitation for the horses and alternate livelihood of families involved in the profession.

Founder of the organisation, Rakibul Haq Emil, told this newspaper, "These horses are not fed properly, or treated when they fall sick. There is no stable for the horses, and they are kept under a flyover, susceptible to the elements." He further said each carriage weighs

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Clockwise from top, A horse-drawn 'tomtom' shares the road with buses, rickshaws and other vehicles on the Gulistan-Sadarghat road; Instead of stables, the animals are kept under the Mayor Hanif flyover, vulnerable to the scorching sun and pouring rain; a group of animal rights activists hold a human chain yesterday in front of Jatiya Press Club, demanding that the animals be treated humanely.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON, PALASH KHAN

FREQUENT POWER OUTAGES Geneva camp residents blockade road



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Several hundred residents of the Mohammadpur Geneva Camp area blockaded the Gaznavi road last evening, protesting frequent power outages in their neighbourhood.

The blockade -- that went on from 7pm to 9pm -- triggered severe traffic

congestion on the adjacent roads.

Roksana Begum, a resident of the camp, said she lives with seven family members including her husband, daughter and mother in a room.

"Three times a day, we face power outage. Each time, it lasts for about six to seven hours," she said, adding that they have been facing the

problem for the last 20 days.

Yesterday, when the power went out at 6:15pm, residents took to the street.

Officer-in-Charge of Mohammadpur Police Station GG Biswas said the demonstrators left the street after the power supply was restored at the camp at about 9pm.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

An homage to schoolteachers

Prothom Alo, IPDC organise 'Priyo Shikhhok Sammanona'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At the age of three or four, she visited her elder sister's school one day. When a teacher asked her name, she said Nasima, although that was not her name.

Asked why she did so, she said she read in her sister's book that "Nasima is a good girl, she goes to school regularly."

Two years later, when the little girl was enrolled in a school, she was registered as Nasima Akter.

This is how the current head teacher of Mymensingh's reputed Bidyamoyee Govt Girls High School started her journey of being a good human being.

Now she is loved and respected by hundreds of students, who affectionately call her "mother".

Yesterday, Nasima and 11 other former and current teachers from primary and secondary schools across the country received "IPDC-Prothom Alo Priyo Shikhhok Sammanona" at a ceremony at InterContinental Dhaka.

They were given the awards, following choice of students and a jury process.

Bangla daily Prothom Alo and private

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Khaleda will not bow down to govt: Moudud

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP standing committee member Moudud Ahmed yesterday said their party Chairperson Khaleda Zia will not compromise with the government over her release from jail.

"Khaleda Zia will not bow down to anyone, as she is the leader of the country's 16-17 crore people. She will either be released through legal process or street movement... no other way," he said.

The former law minister said this while addressing a discussion at Jatiya Press Club, demanding Khaleda's release.

"In fact, it is not possible to free her without a spontaneous mass upsurge of people as she will not reach any understanding with anybody. If needed, she will endure more sufferings in jail, but she will not make any compromise with the current government," he said.

Moudud claimed that Khaleda was convicted in cases that were not filed lawfully. "The cases were filed as per the will of the government, out of political vengeance."

As per the Code of Criminal Procedure, the BNP leader said, the High Court can grant bail to a sick, female or elderly convicted person under any stage of the case proceedings, but a 74-year-old sick Khaleda is not getting bail.

"Even condemned convicts and those who got life-term imprisonment are granted bail. But, not Khaleda Zia," he said.

The BNP senior leader alleged that their chairperson is not getting bail as the government does not want it. "Courts are now regulated with political influence. Judges cannot work freely; an appalling situation is prevailing," he claimed.

The issue of her release came into discussion when BNP lawmakers met her in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University recently. After the meeting, they urged Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to take initiative to release Khaleda.

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Wait continues for Samrat!

Rab DG now asks journos to 'keep patience'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The director general of Rapid Action Battalion yesterday echoed two ministers' remarks, when asked about any development regarding Dhaka South Jubo League President Ismail Chowdhury Samrat.

"Keep patience. We will get all the answers," Benazir Ahmed told journalists, refusing to reply to any specific question about Samrat, who has been at the centre of speculations following law enforcers' recent drives against gambling and corruption.

The RAB DG made the comment while inspecting security arrangements at Banani Puja Mandap in the capital.

Earlier on September 28, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said "You will see... very soon" when journalists wanted to know about the arrest of Samrat. The very next day, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader made a similar comment saying, "Please wait and see. You will soon know."

Samrat is suspected to be one of the main men behind illegal casinos in the city. He has been banned from leaving the country, according to police.

Samrat went into hiding after the arrest of Dhaka South Jubo League organising secretary Khaled Mahmud Bhuiyan, for his alleged links with running a gambling den at a sporting club in Fakirerpool on September 18.

According to Jubo League insiders, Samrat left his Kakrail office on September

22 night and has been traceless since then.

Since the late hours of September 27, there have been speculations that he has been arrested. But Rab and police have refuted the claim.

Amid speculations over Samrat's possible arrest, none from the government, including the ministers are giving any specific development about the Jubo League leader.

Sources in law enforcement agencies however said they were keeping a close watch on Samrat, and waiting for "the green signal from the government high-ups" to detain him.

Since September 18, law enforcers have been conducting drives against illegal casinos, gambling and corruption and have arrested some top leaders of the ruling Awami League's youth front Jubo League and other associate bodies.

RAB NOT THE LEAD AGENCY: BENAZIR When asked if there is a list of those who are yet to be detained in the ongoing operation, Benazir said, "This anti-graft drive is a big issue. Not only Rab forces, but many other agencies are also involved in weeding out those found to be involved in corruption, or the illegal casino business."

Since the prime minister announced a zero-tolerance policy against corruption in this year's election manifesto, all law enforcement agencies have joined forces in the anti-corruption drive, he added.

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Bringing back hope in their lives

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA, back from Mali

Jahara Mohamman, who lives in a small village near the city of Gao in the West African country of Mali, has been suffering from irregular menstruation for many years.

But the 25-year-old has never been to a doctor to discuss the issue, simply because she has never come across a female physician with whom she could talk without inhibition.

Jahara is not the only one; most women in her village are facing the same problem.

So when a team of Bangladeshi soldiers, who are in Mali on peacekeeping duties on behalf of the United Nations, recently set up a medical camp in their village that had a female doctor, Jahara was not just relieved but also grateful.

"When the Bangladeshi female doctor first conducted a medical camp here, I got the chance to share my problems with her for the first time. They also gave me medicine. Now that my problems are gone, I feel very well," she told this reporter.

Jahara spoke to this correspondent with the help of an interpreter.

Hundreds of women along with their children stood in long queues in front of the medical camp, wishing to talk about their gynecological problems with the female doctor -- Maj Ashrafia Shatu -- who could be the only one they are going to see in their lifetime.

"Due to a crisis of proper healthcare facilities, most villagers [in Mali] suffer from various problems. Of them, women are the worst sufferers. They suffer from malnutrition and gynecological problems," Maj Shatu told this correspondent, in between helping patients at



PHOTO: STAR

the camp.

For Malians, healthcare facilities are not very easily available. Geographically, East Jidara, the village where Jahara lives, is not very remote -- it's just 10km from Gao. If there is a serious medical complication, villagers usually go to the city.

But villages located in remote areas of the country, around 8.5 times bigger than Bangladesh, do not have that opportunity.

Absence of road communication, and on top of that, risks of getting hit by IEDs (improvised

explosive devices), landmines, rocket launchers or mortar shells make travelling slow and dangerous.

Then again, just because Gao is a city that does not mean it offers ample civic amenities to people. The city, located near the Niger river, has a handful of healthcare facilities, which are run by the government and are either ill-equipped or hit hard by manpower constraints.

As a result, people of most Malian villages have no other option but to rely on quacks.

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