



Awami League President Sheikh Hasina along with senior leaders inaugurate the party's two-day council at Suhrawardy Udyan yesterday. Clockwise from top left, a section of the guests. A supporter with a replica of boat, electoral symbol of AL. Banners and festoons put up around the venue on the occasion. A large crowd waiting to enter the 21st triennial council.

PHOTO: BSS, STAR

# THE PARROT CARD READERS OF MIRPUR

|| SHAHEEN MOLLAH AND HASAN MEER ||



This duo can be found at the exact same location near Shah Ali Mazar every day from morning to late in the night. Below, Mithu about to jump into action.

PHOTO: HASAN MEER

"Mithu! Hey Mithu!" calls reverberate along the length of the road in front of Shah Ali Mazar on a cool winter midday.

Unperturbed, Mithu hops on a twig from top of a wooden box, and waits till he is brought down over a spread of envelopes.

"His name is Mintu Ahmed," says the man sitting behind the spread. "His star sign is Libra. Pick one for him!"

Nonchalantly, Mithu walks on the envelopes, 50 to be exact, and picks one with his beak and offers it to him.

The man, Monirul Islam Mia, takes the envelope and pauses before opening it.

By this time, others started congregating. Onlookers leaned forward to see what's inside. Mintu was the most anxious. The 25-year-old RMG worker was after all the one taking Mithu's service, and his "fortune" now hanged in the balance -- or rather, was inside the envelope!

Mintu from Kushtia had reasons to be worried. He recently had a fight with his wife. Upset, she went back to her father's house in Rajbari and took the couple's six-year-old son with her.

She had also stopped receiving his phone calls. For the last few days, Mithu had been visiting the Shah Ali Mazar in Mirpur and praying for a solution. He had stumbled upon Monirul and Mithu while walking past the mazar, and decided to give it a shot.

Meanwhile, Monirul pulled out a note from the envelope. He started reading: "Though things are not working in your favour, do not lose hope. This will pass. God will help you. Assist the poor. Keep praying regularly."

Mintu, who was sitting

nervously beside Monirul, let out a sigh. He offered Tk 10 to Monirul, but he refused and pointed towards Mithu. Mithu took the money with his beak, passing it on to Monirul.

There was a murmur among the crowd. Some were asking Mintu to step aside so they could try it out.

Monirul smiled and told everyone to wait their turns, while putting Mithu back on top of the box. Mithu got busy nibbling tiny pieces of nuts next to a small can of water.

The duo -- Monirul the man and Mithu the parrot -- can be seen at the exact location every day from morning to late in



the night.

And they are not the only ones. There are around seven to eight such set-ups on the very road -- engaged in parrot astrology or fortune-telling.

Monirul, however, refused to term it so. "We don't tell fortune. Is that even possible? What we do is advice people when they feel down and out," said the 51-year-old resident of Gopalganj. "Mithu picks up an envelope and I read aloud the suggestions."

He said he has been doing this since 2001. Monirul used

to supply rechargeable batteries but the business eventually lost steam. One day he came to the mazar to pray and met a palm reader nearby, who had a parrot with him.

"He gave me some stones and took Tk 400," Monirul went on saying. "Though I did not believe him entirely, I enjoyed the way his parrot took out the envelope from the stack."

"I told him to teach me the tricks of the trade. And he did. I learnt within a month," he prided. "I've been doing this ever since. There's a satisfaction in it too. I like to think I help people when they're in distress."

He said he makes around Tk 400 a day. On Thursday and Friday, it goes up to Tk 1,000 as more people visit the mazar area. Monirul also claimed that he has been in three TV plays.

Asked if he or others face any problems, he said law enforcers know what they do and let them be. "Distressed, people come to us to seek solace and we try to comfort them by quoting texts from various religious books," he added.

On the same side of the street, sitting beside a closed shop with two parrots, Sujan

Munshi (30), agreed.

The resident of Dakkhin Bisil said he learned to train birds from a Hindu astrologer. "I stayed with him for four years, and afterwards, started on my own."

Munshi said his wife and child live back home in Bhola with his parents. "I send around Tk 3,000 to them per month."

"People mostly try it out of curiosity. Sometimes they get angry if their expectations are not met, but others help me out; we look after each other."

In the middle of the conversation, trader Rubel Reza sat in front of Munshi. "I came to pray at the mazar. When I saw him [Munshi], I became curious," said the 30-year-old.

He waited patiently while a parrot picked up an envelope from the spread.

"God will help you achieve your goals. Stay away from pretenders, they can cause you harm," Munshi read from the note. He also informed Rubel that his zodiac sign is Libra. "Libras are short-tempered," he said.

Rubel agreed, paid Munshi Tk 10 and said he wanted to try again.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the road, right opposite to Munshi, sat 55-year-old Saiful Islam underneath an umbrella with two parrots. The Bhola resident has been in the trade for over 26 years.

He said after passing SSC he tried to go abroad, but that did not work out. So he became a fruit vendor instead in Mirpur around 1993. "It was quite painstaking. There was a person near my business who was a 'parrot astrologer'. I became interested and learned the craft from him."

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## Five yaba couriers held with 22,000 pills

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

For a poultry trader based in the capital, Nazmul's visits to Cox's Bazar were far too frequent.

Posing as a transport worker or day labourer, he used to bring yaba into the city, and was paid Tk 2.5 to 3 per pill for the job.

To dodge law enforcers, the 32-year-old never took public transports. He always tried to travel in goods-laden trucks or courier vehicles.

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab-1) came to know about the techniques after arresting the drug courier from Pragati Sarani in the city yesterday morning.

A team of Rab-1 arrested Nazmul in front of Jamuna Future Park around 7am and recovered 11,600 yaba pills from his possession, Md Kamruzzaman, an assistant director of Rab-1, told The Daily Star.

He said Nazmul was involved with the dealing over the last five to six years, and used to bring two to three consignments every month.

In primary interrogation, Nazmul admitted to the elite force that he is a member of organised narcotics smugglers.

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## DSCC, DNCC polls likely next month

UNB, Dhaka

The Election Commission (EC) plans to hold elections to the two city corporations -- Dhaka south and north -- on the same day towards the end of next month.

More importantly, EC officials said Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) polls will be held using electronic voting machines (EVMs), instead of traditional ballot papers.

"We've decided on principle to arrange the polls in January, and declare the schedules this month," Election Commissioner Shahadat Hossain Chowdhury told the news agency.

EC Senior Secretary Md Alamgir said the EC will arrange the polls in the last week of January next year and declare election schedules by the end of December. "The elections will be held using EVMs," he said.

The commission will soon finalise the specific dates both for the voting and schedule, said EC officials. The EC

DSCC	DNCC
Approx voters: 23.67 lakh	Approx voters: 30.36 lakh
Wards: 75	Wards: 54
100 councillors (75 general + 25 reserved seats)	72 councillors (54 general + 18 reserved seats)

Secretariat is now taking preparations to hold the polls with the existing voter list, as the country's updated voter roll will be made public after the two elections.

The officials said the EC secretariat has already initiated a move to enlist election officials -- presiding officers, assistant presiding officers and polling agents -- for the polls.

It has sent a letter to the Dhaka district election officer and thana election officers concerned to prepare an initial list in this regard, they added.

The 180-day countdown for the EC to complete elections has already started as the two city corporations opened for polls in mid-November. DNCC was up for election on November 14, while DSCC on November 18.

According to the Local Government (City Corporation) Act 2009, election to any city corporation should be held within the last 180 days of its five-year tenure, that starts

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## 'Para Utsab' for better community bonding



DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam and US Ambassador Earl R Miller enjoy a bioscope show at the daylong event in Gulshan yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

UNB, Dhaka

With a goal to strengthen bonding among neighbours, a festival called "Para Utsab" was held in the capital's Gulshan yesterday.

Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) Mayor Atiqul Islam inaugurated the event on Road 62.

The daylong community festival was jointly arranged by DNCC, Gulshan Society and Heroes for All foundation in Gulshan 2. Throughout the day, the area was abuzz with visitors, waking along the street and enjoying various activities.

Earl R Miller, US ambassador to Bangladesh, and Salman F Rahman, private industry and investment adviser to the prime minister, were also present on the occasion.

Mayor Atiqul said such events will have a positive impact on society. "Events like this enhance communication and help us stand beside each other in times of distress

and happiness through strengthening our bond," he said.

The DNCC mayor also wished to introduce the festival to other wards. "I call on all councillors and social organisations to observe similar events in each ward... DNCC will assist you in this regard," he said.

During the event, residents took part in various activities such as traditional sports. Other features included an open mic session among neighbours, storytelling, health and fitness corner, arts and craft workshop and a meet-and-greet session.

There were also arrangements for puppet show, bioscope, and parrot fortune-telling, which children and adults alike enjoyed immensely.

Heroes for All founder Dr Rehnema Karim, Gulshan Traffic Management Committee chief Shayan Siraj and Merrill and Forbes founder Tajrin Manna also participated in the festival.