

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR

Madagascar Memories

I visited Madagascar a little over three years ago. Memories of this unique island in the Indian Ocean southeast of Africa have remained vivid. Why? The unexpected and strangely beautiful forms of life that I saw there are impossible to forget. It was as if time had misplaced this island.

At 592,800 square kilometres, Madagascar is the world's fourth largest island. Over the eons, life here has evolved in its own unique way. About 90% of the flora and fauna found here are endemic - that is, they are found nowhere else. In my trip I sought out some of these.

The Giraffe-necked Weevil is an insect like no other. The size of a beetle, it has a neck thrice the length of its body. It stood still on a leaf, but when my fingers came too close, it flew away instantly.

In Madagascar I learned about locally endemic species. A bird I photographed, the Long-tailed Ground Roller, can only be found within a few square kilometres of the Spiny Forest of Madagascar - and nowhere else in the world.

Normally I am scared of snakes but in Madagascar I lost this fear. That's because all snakes there are non-venomous. I encountered two large boas. One was coiled up as I cautiously came close for a photograph. It did not react. Boas are found only in the Americas and, inexplicably, in Madagascar.

The lemurs of Madagascar were cuddly. They lacked the roughness and sharp nails of monkeys. In a park we played with Black and White Lemurs sporting long, puffy tails as they climbed on our shoulders before jumping off.

There were dozens of endemic birds new to me: not just individual species, but five entire families such as Vanga and Coua found nowhere else. Even familiar birds had a Madagascar twist to them. For example, the Madagascar Magpie-robin looks very much



Giraffe-necked Weevil, Andasibe, Madagascar.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

like our Oriental Magpie-robin (*doel*) except for one thing: it is about half the size. Birds were also fearless. I reached out to a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher while it was incubating and a Madagascar Nightjar as it rested. They stayed still, unperturbed.

There were also colourful and exotic lizards, frogs and chameleons galore.

Primary forests in Andasibe and Mantadia National Parks were filled with towering green. I had seen photographs of Baobab trees, but I didn't know how cool and smooth the trunk of a centurion Baobab was until I touched one in the arid Spiny Forest. In the middle of the desert we found a peculiar, tiny wooden cabin made of narrow planks of wood. There was a tall

skinny cactus plant standing in front like a guard. Our guide explained that the cabin had been constructed from the trunks of dozens of the cactus.

The number of species that have evolved in Madagascar is astonishing. For example, there are over 100 species of lemurs, 62 species of chameleons and 130 species of palm trees. I am not sure this makes evolutionary sense. Perhaps the varied terrain and climate in Madagascar played a role.

I would love to return to Madagascar to observe more diverse and quirky delights.

www.facebook.com/ikabirphotographs or follow "ihtishamkabar" on Instagram.

BATTERY-RUN RICKSHAWS ON DSCC ROADS

Defying ban, they keep on running

RAFIUL ISLAM

"Run," shouted battery-powered rickshaw driver Sajib to his cohorts. A police van was approaching their group of five standing at the Section area beside Gabtoli-Babubazar Road near Kamrangirchar, and they could not afford to stay still.

In the blink of an eye, all five dispersed. From their initial position, they moved to places where police could not get to them. But as soon as the van left, they were back at it again.

This is an example of how unauthorised battery-run rickshaws and rickshaw-vans continue to operate in the city, despite a High Court ban, a scenario witnessed first-hand by this correspondent. The HC on March 8, 2015 banned plying of such rickshaws, as they have no proper licence.

However, six years on, authorities seem to remain negligent in acting against them, even after Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh on September 13 last year announced to go on the offensive against all such vehicles in the area.

Visiting DSCC areas including Kamrangirchar, Lalbagh, Islambagh, Gendaria, Demra and Konapara, this correspondent saw the rickshaws plying here and there. Drivers said it is not too difficult to evade authorities.

"Whenever we see the cops, we flee or divert our direction. If we get caught, they charge us Tk 1,200 as wrecker fee," said Sajib.

Allegations are rife that illegally modified vehicles operate on the roads, despite the ban, by bribing police and ruling party men. Insiders say it is a crore-taka ring, complete with ruling party members, local influencers, and law enforcers as stakeholders.

They allegedly take Tk 20-50 from each driver daily, and provide them with a "permission" card.

But after Taposh's announcement, this card system was annulled in many areas. Battery-run rickshaw drivers said ever since the announcement, police have started to fine them whenever they



Following the High Court ruling in 2015, number of illegal battery-run rickshaws were decreasing in DSCC's streets. However, during the pandemic, when monitoring was relaxed, their presence increased manifold, leading to DSCC banning the vehicles in September last year. This photo was taken from Mugda area yesterday.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

are caught. Despite the fining system, authorities are apparently allowing the unauthorised vehicles to run.

"Before the mayor's announcement, we could freely drive from Azimpur to Lalbagh or Kamrangirchar with permit cards. Now, police are constantly on our tail," said Sajib.

"Sometimes, they give us a fine slip. When we get them, we can go through the day, producing the slip whenever stopped, but the hide and seek resumes the next day," said Suján, another rickshaw driver from Lalbagh.

The actual number of such vehicles is hard to approximate, but DSCC officials estimated it to be somewhere around 30,000-40,000.

According to statistics of Accident Research Institute of Buet, around seven to eight percent of all accidents occur due to such vehicles.

Jahir Uddin, who owns six battery-rickshaws in Lalbagh, said they are still running on the streets, but drivers are now facing more challenges. "A battery-run rickshaw costs nearly Tk 50,000. Drivers pay a daily 'joma' of

Tk 350 per battery-rickshaw, instead of Tk 100 for a regular one. That's why we keep them running [despite the ban]."

Salek Mia of Demra said he bought five such rickshaws on loan right before the pandemic hit. "How will I pay off my debt if we cannot run those?"

DSCC spokesperson Md Abu Nasher said registration and application renewal process of vehicles like rickshaws, vans, horse carts in DSCC has started after 34 years to bring public transportation in order.

"After DSCC started drives since October 4 last year, new requests have started flooding in from owners and drivers of these battery-run vehicles, seeking time to convert them into normal rickshaws," he said. "We have decided to give them the opportunity to convert the vehicles and appeal for registration in the second phase."

In the second phase, from January 10 to March 30, DSCC has already received 20,000 new registration applications. Once it ends, DSCC will take stern actions against the illegal vehicles, he said.

PAPUL'S CONVICTION

Govt graft got 'globally recognised': Rizvi

UNB, Dhaka

BNP yesterday alleged that the current government's corruption has got international recognition through sentencing of Bangladeshi MP Mohammad Shahid Islam alias Kazi Papul by a Kuwaiti court in a bribery case.

"This [Papul's conviction] is a matter of shame for the country. The current government... can't avoid the responsibility for it," said BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi.

He said, "MPs like Papul would not have dared to indulge in reckless corruption without their [government's] patronage."

The BNP leader made the remarks at a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltan central office in Dhaka.

On Thursday, a Kuwaiti court sentenced Papul and four others to four years in jail on the charge of bribing Kuwaiti officials with millions of dollars to recruit Bangladeshi workers and get contracts for his company.

The court also fined them 1.9 million dinars, reports Kuwait Times. The MP is also accused in two other cases on charges of human trafficking and money laundering.

Rizvi alleged that though Papul did not have any political background, he has been made an MP in the 11th parliament only because of his huge amount of money. "His wife has also been made an MP. Depoliticisation has taken place as politics has been criminalised in this way by Awami League," he said.

Rizvi said ACC did not take proper action against Papul's wife, daughter and sister-in-law despite having specific evidence about their corruption.



Abide by party disciplines, rules

Quader urges AL leaders, activists

BSS, Dhaka

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday called upon AL leaders and workers to abide by the party disciplines and rules while doing politics.

"Organisational steps will be taken, if anyone is found involved in wrongdoing by using party identity," he told the introductory meeting of AL women affairs sub-committee at the party president's Dhanmondi political office.

Quader, also the road transport and bridges minister, joined it virtually from his official residence on parliament premises.

He said the government has taken tougher stance against violence against women in the recent period.

About local government polls, Quader said the party will take action against those who will be rebel candidates against party-nominated contestants. Actions will be taken against those who will patronise them. He also said BNP leaders are spreading lies over the CCC polls results.



The rail crossing at Moghbazar had been restricted on both sides with the classic red-and-white striped bars prior to a train's arrival yesterday, but people on bicycles still managed to squeeze under the bars. While the gateman waves a green flag to signal the train, cyclists attempt to pass through within a very small window of time, risking their lives just to save a few minutes.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

ICB ISLAMIC BANK

7 including ex-DMD sentenced to 10 years in Tk 1.61cr graft case

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court on Thursday sentenced seven people, including a former deputy managing director (DMD) of Oriental Bank (now named ICB Islamic Bank Ltd) to 10 years' rigorous imprisonment each in a case filed over embezzling of Tk 1.61 crore.

The convicted officials are former DMD Imam Ul Haque, former senior vice-president Shah Mohammad Harun, former senior assistant vice-president Abul Kashem Mahmudullah, former assistant vice-president Fazlur Rahman, former Executive Officer Torikul Alam, former senior executive vice-president Mahmud Hossain and former executive vice-president Quamrul Islam.

Of them, Imam is now in jail while the rest are on the run. Judge Md Shahidul Islam of the Special Judge's Court-7 of Dhaka handed down the sentence in presence of Imam.

The judge also issued arrest warrants against the fugitives. Punishment of the fugitives will be effective from the day of their surrender or arrest.

They were also fined Tk 20,000 each in default of which they will have to suffer one year more in jail.

The court also directed the authorities concerned to confiscate Tk 1,61,71,523 in favour of the state.

According to the prosecution, it was alleged that Imam in collaboration with other accused misappropriated Tk 95 lakh from the bank in 2005 which stood at Tk 1,61,71,523 in 2010.

On October 28 of 2015, ACC filed a corruption case against the seven with Motiheel Police Station and pressed charges on December 29 of 2016.

The private bank was hit by scams in 2005-06. In 2006, Bangladesh Bank took over the bank and appointed an administrator. The bank was sold to a Malaysia-based business group and renamed as ICB Islamic Bank in 2009.

Wall collapse kills two

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cg

Two persons were killed when an under-construction wall fell on them in Agrabad area of the port city yesterday afternoon.

The deceased are Sahid Ullah (50), a driver of Power Development Board, and Al-Amin (35), confirmed Md Hamid, assistant sub-inspector of Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) police outpost.

The incident took place in Debarpar area around 2pm, he said.

Newton Das, deputy assistant director

of Chattogram Fire Service and Civil Defence, told The Daily Star that the incident occurred at the north side of Debarpar. The accident took place when an excavator was removing sand adjacent to a wall, the official said.

The excavator may have accidentally hit the wall causing it to fall on pedestrians who were coming from a nearby mosque, leaving them seriously injured, he added.

They were immediately rushed to CMCH, where duty doctors pronounced them dead, he added.



A Power Development Board driver and another person were killed after a wall collapsed on them at the Port City's Debarpar yesterday afternoon. According to fire service officials, the accident took place when an excavator hit the wall adjacent to the sand it was removing.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Absence of top officials slowing down BCC

700 staffers go two months without salary

SUSHANTA GHOSH, Barishal

At a time when the entire country is trying to cope with financial difficulties, things are getting tight for around 700 officials of Barishal City Corporation (BCC) - but it is not simply due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Their situation arises out of a staffing issue. Almost three months since the transfer of former BCC Chief Executive Officer Md Israel Hossain, his position is yet to be filled.

As a result, administrative activities of the corporation has, in many regards, come to a halt.

According to BCC's administrative department, since Md Israel left in November last year, executive magistrate Intiaj Mahmud Jewel has been temporarily assigned in his place.

But in absence of permanent personnel, official work has been delayed, which includes disbursing wages of all its employees.

Intiaj told this correspondent that though he is filling in for the CEO, he does not have much executive power nor financial authority.

To add to the woes, just a month ago, the corporation's secretary Ibadat Hossain was transferred, creating a void in another important role.

City corporation sources, seeking anonymity, said many development projects are running deficiently due to the circumstances.

On top of this, members of BCC's engineering department informed that there is no chief engineer in their department, as incumbent Nurul Islam has been imprisoned along with former mayor Ahsan Habib Kamal in a corruption case filed 20 years ago.

Contacted, BCC Mayor Semiabat Sadik Abdullah acknowledged the issues to this correspondent. He said even though there is Tk 30 crore in BCC's fund, salary payment is halted in the absence of a CEO.

"All official letters, including financial decisions, have to go through the CEO. Due to the staffing crisis, BCC activities are being hampered," he said.

The mayor said he is in communication with the Local Government Division, the organisation in charge of assigning the new CEO, and assured that both parties are looking for a swift solution.