

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR

Encounters with New York

“Get your goddamn car out of my way!” The taxi driver yelled at the top of his voice at the car stopped in front of him. It was my first day in New York. On that night in 1977, having arrived late and missed my onward connecting flight, I was stressed. The airline had given me a hotel for the night. On my way there, the loud persistent honking of the taxi driver’s horn reached my ears as I approached the terminal’s door. His anger exploded just as I stepped out - into America.

I was tempted to turn around and return to Bangladesh. But I remained calm. At my university the next day, I was happier. But I avoided New York during those early days in America.

Two years later a close friend from my hometown came to live in New York. His extended family was affectionate and hospitable. They fed me the food I missed dearly. My visits to their Queens home were bright spots in my undergraduate days.

Then I moved to California to make my career in Silicon Valley. Over the years New York receded. Three decades later my son and then my daughter made it their home. New York beckoned again and I started going there.

Then Covid wreaked worldwide havoc and New York became ground zero.

Now I am in New York on my first trip during the pandemic. She is scarred but resilient, warily finding her way back from catastrophe. Restaurants, cafes and movie theatres are open so long as I show my vaccine certificate. New Yorkers walk the streets with the same spring in their steps but they keep their distance from each other. Many businesses are shut; others operate with reduced staffing. Jobs are advertised on store windows. A sober and subdued attitude has replaced the boisterous nature of her people.

Heading over to Central Park I quickly realize have come at the right time. Leaves are turning yellow and red for autumn. I don’t have to look hard for birds. A patch called “Native Meadow” is filled with tall grasses and smaller plants - all native species,



Chrysler Building, New York.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

some blooming, others fruiting. Birds love this area. Two white, fluffy Downy Woodpeckers play with each other while pecking on trunks. Grave looking Hermit Thrushes scurry on the ground turning over vegetation for worms. Bright yellow Pine Warblers flit from branch to branch in search of insects.

Another day I visit Strand, the giant independent bookstore that advertises eighteen miles of books. It is humming with customers.

Food preferences of New Yorkers – in both restaurants and supermarkets - confound me. In the rush for accommodating dietary requirements, political correctness, and exotic flavour, has basic good food disappeared?

Adjectives such as “sustainable”, “line-caught”, and “farm-raised” adorn menu items. At an Italian restaurant I ask for a 7-Up with my pasta. The well-meaning waitress looks flustered and goes away. She returns presently. They have neither 7-Up nor Sprite, but they do offer an all-natural soft drink imported from Italy with hints of peach and cardamom and some other things I can’t remember. I don’t think so; water is fine. One evening I spot a McDonald’s on 3rd Avenue. I run to it and order a Big Mac.

Despite the vexations, when time comes to leave New York, my heart is surprisingly heavy.

facebook.com/ikabirphotographs or follow “ihtishamkabar” on Instagram.

Ghostly presences

Muggers desecrate graveyards by using them as base

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and HELEMUL ALAM

It was around 5 o’clock in the morning. Like every other day, rickshaw-puller Asadul Islam started his day by heading out from his Pallabi home towards his rickshaw garage at Baunia area in Mirpur on a three-wheeler. Asadul was the lone passenger.

As the three-wheeler reached near Kalshi graveyard at Mirpur-11, three youths blocked the way and snatched Asadul’s mobile set and Tk 300 at knife-point. Before he could do anything, the hijackers entered the graveyard and disappeared.

“I bought this mobile set with my blood and sweat. All of the money I earn has to go behind my four-member family. It’ll have to be a while till I can save enough to buy a new phone,” said a despondent Asadul.

“Ever since the hijacking, I start my day around 7am instead of 5am to avoid being mugged. I feel scared to pass the area at night too,” he said.

Asadul’s incident is not an isolated one. Many residents of the area, especially garment workers, regularly fall prey to the muggers of this ilk.

Locals said the hijackers choose the graveyard area as their hitting zone as it provides a safe exit.

Locals said the height of the graveyard’s boundary walls are three to five feet at places. As a result, muggers can easily jump into the graveyard even if they are being chased by police or locals.

Md Suman, a resident of section-12 in Pallabi, recounted his tale around the Kalshi graveyard. “I was first mugged by a group of snatchers on one night in mid-July. They took away my mobile phone set and Tk 4,000. Then in August, I was again mugged, this time around 6 o’clock in the morning. This time, they snatched my phone set and jumped inside the graveyard,” he said.

A worker at the graveyard said most of the area remains dark at night, which gives the muggers such an advantage there.

After jumping inside, the muggers sneak away from one side to another in the darkness, he said.

According to locals, along with acting as an escape route and hiding place, the graveyard is also used as a

drug spot by the muggers.

This scenario is not limited to Kalshi. Some other big Graveyards, like Mirpur Intellectual graveyard and Rayerbazar graveyard in Mohammadpur -- both under DNCC -- are used for similar purposes.

During visits to them, this correspondent found that there is no security guard in Mirpur Intellectuals’ Graveyard, while Rayerbazar graveyard is guarded by a single person. While visiting the Mirpur graveyard at midnight, this correspondent also saw some teenagers doing drugs under the cover of darkness.

Sanowar Hossain, senior mohorar (supervisory staffer) of the 118 acre Mirpur Intellectuals’ Graveyard, said it doesn’t have boundary walls at different points. At Rayerbazar graveyard, the situation is almost similar.

There is only one security guard in the 96-acre graveyard. As a result, it remains unprotected and is being used as a safe zone for criminals.

On February 15, police recovered the body of a youth hanging from a tree inside the graveyard.

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PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

The condition of many Khulna city roads is abysmal. The thoroughfares have taken a desert-like look, as dilapidated roads, brick-chips, dust and more get whipped up by vehicles all day long. As dirt-tracks become omnipresent, the environment, yet again, is set to lose the most from this. This photo was taken recently from the city’s Zero Point.

‘No one shall return hungry’

Madan Mohan Trust’s 97-year journey of feeding the poor for free

DIPAN NANDY

Tunnelling out of Gulistan’s hustle and bustle, one arrives at Nababpur Road. At the Sri Sri Radhashyam Jew Thakur Mandir there, there’s a 97-year-old tradition of feeding the poor and destitute, all in exchange of nothing.

Sunday, 9am. As winter is announcing its arrival, shutters are still down at most of the shops in Nababpur. The temple is located at the tail-end of a narrow alleyway, lined on both sides by hardware shops.

Right at the entrance, this correspondent saw two groups of around 80 people, of all ages, sitting around the corridor of the premises.

Suddenly, a couple of staffers stormed out with three large iron buckets full of steaming hot food: rice, daal, and a mixed vegetable dish. Within a few minutes, they served the food on the waiting crowd’s plates. After a few more minutes, the guests were done with eating and got up to make way for a new group. A lot of them also packed the food inside boxes.

One of the guests, Malek Miah, said he has been coming here for



From steaming hot buckets, staffers serve rice, an assortment of vegetables, and different types of daal on different days for their hungry guests.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Anyone who comes here with hunger shall be fed; that’s our motto.”

He said the trust runs through the Madan Mohan Pal Anyachatra Trust Estate, which has some lands donated by Madan Mohan’s sons. There are six markets in these lands today, and the trust runs with the rent collected from the shops.

For around a decade, Swapan Chakrabarty has been working as the chief cook at the trust.

He told The Daily Star, “We cook for around 200-250 people every day. We cook 40 kg of rice, 60 kg of vegetable, and 10 kg daal. These are the three items we’ve been serving since our beginning. But when it comes to the daal, someday we serve mung daal, other days its chick peas or motor daal.

He said other than the two “ekadoshi” (11th day of the moon) and Janmashtami, the temple runs the food programme all daily year-round.

He said a lot of times, food reserved for staffers had to be given away for the guests, with the kitchen staffers cooking for them again later. “We do this because the trust’s policy mentions that no one shall be returned hungry,” he said.

Murali Mohan Pal, and Priya Nath Pal -- opened the Madan Mohan Anyachatra Trust in their father’s name. Back then, 125 people were fed lunch every day.

Trust manager Parimal Krishna Bhattacharya told The Daily Star, “We’ve been feeding people this way for 97 years, with no regards for race-religion-caste whatsoever.

RP Saha set example through his work

Speakers say at his 125th birth anniversary

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Speakers at a programme yesterday said philanthropist Ranada Prasad Saha, founder of Kumudini Welfare Trust, has set an example through working for the education rights for women and children, and the institutions he founded are still working for the people’s welfare.

The programme was organised at Bharateswari Homes in Tangail’s Mirzapur

yesterday evening on the occasion of Saha’s 125th birth anniversary and the 90th founding anniversary of Bharateswari Homes.

State Minister For Information Ministry Dr Murad Hasan; Lawmaker Simeen Hussain; The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam; Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam; rights activists Sultana Kamal; Attorney General

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

‘Feminist policy must criticise the mainstream’

Says activist Dr Maitreyee Mukhopadhyay at Nasreen Huq memorial event

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

“[As feminists] we stand for emancipation and social justice. We should not just walk within the limits set by the state,” said Indian feminist researcher and activist Dr Maitreyee Mukhopadhyay.

“Our involvement in feminist policy work has to remain a critique of the mainstream,” she added.

She made these observations during a virtual discussion organised by Naripokkho on Thursday to commemorate the birth anniversary of feminist and human rights activist Nasreen Parvin Huq (1958-2006). Until her passing in 2006, Huq worked as country director at Action Aid Bangladesh. Under her guidance, Naripokkho and other development and activist organisations

were able to protest dictatorial legislation and work towards alleviating the health, socioeconomic, and social struggles of women of all ages.

In this first instalment of an annual lecture series dedicated to Huq’s legacy, Dr Mukhopadhyay spoke on “Resisting subordination or extending domination: feminist activism between policy influence and movement politics”.

In her speech, Dr Mukhopadhyay discussed women’s negotiation with the state and its laws as they pertained to their agency, and also addressed the problems faced by women in accessing healthcare in South Asia. Lack of facilities and services, ill-treatment by health staff, steep doctors’

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PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

179th Raseela celebrated with due fervour

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

The day-long 179th Maha Raseela festival of the Manipuris, an indigenous community in Bangladesh, concluded yesterday at Kamalganj upazila in Moulvibazar district.

The festivities were abruptly stopped due to the pandemic last year, but was celebrated with due fervour this year at the Manipuri villages in Moulvibazar, Sylhet and Habiganj. Around one lakh people from across the country gathered for the festivities at Madhabpur and Adampur villages of Kamalganj.

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PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA