

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Red Munia, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Red Munia

The Red Munia entered my childhood through a story about the Creator painting birds after creating them. However, one fidgety bird has flown off before being painted and returns just when He finishes. There are a few drops of paint remaining with which He splatters this bird. And so this exquisite bird was created with spots of white sprinkled on red.

When I came to birding I saw pictures of the Red Munia and connected it with my childhood story. But, while I found and photographed our other munia species, this bird eluded me. In the fields of Purbachol before it was developed, I observed numerous munias in the tall grass, making clumpy nests among the reeds and busily finding seeds and eating them. Four of our five munias were in attendance: Silverbill, Tricoloured, Scaly-breasted and Chestnut Munias. But the Red Munia never showed up.

On two other occasions I saw it fleetingly. Once, in the Padma *chars* of Rajshahi, it flew in and perched momentarily on an *Akond* branch before taking off – just enough time for a glimpse but not for a photograph. Later, while birding in Australia's Northern Territory, I found it among other finches. I got a distant photograph, but the flock flew away as I came closer for a better shot.

Recently, however, my luck with Red Munias changed when friends showed me a spot in Dhaka's Aftab Nagar. At the far edges of this housing development there remains some intact grassland with tall *kash* grass. In this patch, which is next to a *beel*, reside many munias, including red

ones. I was able to spend some time with these birds.

What a memorable time it was. The males were in their breeding plumage. They had a brownish head, black tail, and dark brown wings. But you did not really notice any of that – all your attention went to the body covered in bright red with white dots. Females were grey with a red tail and white spots on the wings. Flocks flew in, landed on the ground, and immediately set about stripping off seeds from grass blades using their strong beaks. On cold mornings they sometimes warmed themselves, perching on a thin reed with their back to the sun. Couples huddled together, often helping preen each other's feathers.

An interaction among them caught my eye. Three Red Munias were perched on the thinnest of reeds: a cozy couple on the right and a single male on the left. The couple's male dozed off and the female started eyeing the single male. At one point she jumped to sit close to her single neighbour. But it did not work – the single male shooed her off instantly, as if rebuking her for leaving her mate. The couple was back together. The episode was so fast that you would have missed it had you blinked.

Incidentally, the Latin Name for Red Munia is *Amandava amandava* – meaning "a bird of Ahmedabad." It is also known as Red Avadavat, "Avadavat" being a colonial British distortion of "Ahmedabad."

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An undernourished nutrition budget

NILIMA JAHAN

Twenty-five-year-old Rima Rani Paul is currently in her eighth month of pregnancy. When she visited the doctor recently, she was recommended a balanced diet, rich in nutrient-dense foods, as the fetus was not growing as expected.

Despite this, on most days Rima's husband Shipon Paul – a street vendor in Kapasia, Gazipur – cannot afford to buy her nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables after providing for their eight-member family.

The situation was particularly challenging during her first trimester, which coincided with the Covid 19 lockdown. Shipon didn't have a regular earning and it was difficult for Rima to put food on the table, let alone have a balanced diet, she told this correspondent.

"Last month, when I visited the local union health and family welfare centre for prenatal vitamin supplements, I was only provided with some iron and folic acid supplements due to supply shortage," Rima told The Daily Star.

"However, the centres are supposed to provide vitamin B complexes and calcium carbonate supplements for free as well," she said.

MALNUTRITION OVERLOOKED

- Direct interventions to improve nutritional status lacking
- Nutrition budget around 1pc of GDP and 9pc of national budget
- Only 2pc allocated for direct interventions
- High suffering for pregnant women seeking free prenatal supplements

Last month, when I visited the local union health and family welfare centre for prenatal vitamin supplements, I was only provided with some iron and folic acid supplements due to supply shortage.

RIMA RANI PAUL
KAPASIA, GAZIPUR

Rima also has no idea how she can receive the government maternity allowance, meant for the poor and underprivileged pregnant women to meet their increased nutritional demands.

According to public health and nutrition experts, despite Bangladesh's significant improvements in various nutrition indicators in the past, the direct interventions to improve nutritional status – such as ensuring maternal nutrition to reduce the low birth weight of babies, managing acute malnutrition, providing allowances to poor pregnant and nursing mothers and so on – require more attention, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For instance, a BRAC study found that 73 percent of women and 67 percent of men did not eat nutritious foods in the pandemic, while the pandemic affected the dietary pattern of 28 percent of households.

However, a recent Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC) publication showed that although the government spent Tk 23,210 crore in nutrition relevant interventions in 2016-2017, which represented around one percent of

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When accumulated water from low-lying areas of the capital overflows, a pump of Water Development Board at Goranchatbari is turned on, draining all of it into the river. The only problem is this water comes from residential drains and factories, which means it is contaminated to a horrifying degree, and hence the foams by the shore. This photo was taken recently from Mirpur-Ashulia-Beribadh Road. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Trapped in poverty

BIDS study reveals gravity of rural households' woes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Forty-two percent of rural households cannot move out of poverty sustainably, while 13 percent households are trapped in extreme poverty, a BIDS study has found.

The paper was presented at the three-day annual BIDS Conference on Development-2021, which concluded yesterday.

The study found that 87 percent of the rural households are trapped between extreme poor and moderately poor, implying their daily income fluctuates between USD 1-2 per day, but cannot move more than USD 2 per day.

Maria Eugenia Genoni, Mansur Ahmed, Pablo Tillan and Madhur Gautam, four World Bank economists, conducted the study titled "Bangladesh Rural Income Diagnostics" by surveying 62 villages and analysing data from a range of recent surveys and censuses conducted by the government and the UN organisations.

According to the researchers, Bangladesh has some remarkable achievements in reducing rural poverty, but these achievements have neither been uniform nor sustainable.

Researchers also pointed out the over-dependency on agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, as the major reason behind such fragile achievements in poverty reduction.

"Although many crops offer farmers higher returns than

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The legend of Ranajit Gharai

Freedom fighter, ex-government official, changemaker

SUSHANTA GHOSH and PARTHA CHAKRABARTHY

"At 71, I spend my time sitting with the village youth and helping them solve their financial issues. I take a dip in the pond every day, to maintain discipline in my life," said Ranajit Gharai, freedom fighter turned agri-entrepreneur, summing up his lifestyle and personality.

Ranajit set up seven ponds across six acres of his parental land in Balabhadrapur village of Morelganj upazila in Bagerhat district. His farm, which he built with the help of 50 youth, have been a source of employment for young men in his community.

Through his efforts, Balbhadrapur has become a green village, where at least eight modern agricultural farms and an animal hospital have been set up.

While walking down memory lane, Ranajit, recounting his time in the



Liberation War, said, "In 1971, I was a 21-year-old student of PC college at Bagerhat. My closest friends – Liakat Ali Khan, Abubakar, Siddiqur Rahman, Mozammel – and I started engaging in politics and even formed our own guerilla group for the Liberation War."

"Our small guerilla group was led by Kabir Ahmed Madhu, a military man who had been jailed by the authorities for beating up members of the Pakistani army. On March 26, 1971, Madhu escaped Jessore jail and returned to Bagerhat. He instructed us to attack the Razakars with home-made bombs," he added.

On April 1, 1971, Chitta and Balahari, two other members of the guerrilla, were preparing bombs to send to Khulna at Nitai Sikder's house in Morelganj Bazar. Suddenly they heard a bomb blast and ran

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'Architects no longer at mercy of the rich'

Rafiq Azam in conversation with The Daily Star



Once architecture was the weapon of kings and regents. They would use architects to erect towers, build tall structures and palaces. This way, they could prove their supremacy. They would enforce rule over others through these feats. However, the days have changed.

MAMUNUR RASHID

"I want to tell the politicians – bring in the architects to transform cities and communities. Create opportunities for them to study more, so they can get better and more competent. It is a tragedy that city planners never get to implement their plans."

This is what internationally acclaimed Bangladeshi architect Rafiq Azam had to say in a recent interview with The Daily Star.

He added that politicians ought to make architects partners in the process of building liveable cities and environments.

Azam is the principal architect of Shattoto, an architecture firm based in Dhaka with a focus on "architecture for green living". Formed in 1995, Shattoto intends to "unearth the lost history and heritage of Bengal and recreate the missing link of its urban and rural culture".

The architect makes a city of bricks and wood come alive, with greenery hanging from every floor, and ponds on the roofs. Every park becomes a meeting place for people from all walks of life. The parks and buildings he designs have no concrete walls.

Azam explained why; they form part of his vision of a city without divisions and distrust, a city that is accessible to all.

"I mainly got this inspiration from

Old Dhaka. The dwellings there were mostly built right next to the streets. Each one had a 'roak' [a common space or porch where people could sit and chat] in front of them. These were places of trust and getting together, where people from the household and the streets could hang out," he said.

"But in new Dhaka, I noticed that each house is protected by walls. Some have barbed wires, while others have warning signs saying 'Beware of Dogs'. What does this say about the relationships we have with each other as members of this society? That we are each other's enemies? I have tried breaking down the walls of distrust through my work," he added.

"Once architecture was the weapon of kings and regents. They would use architects to erect towers, build tall structures and palaces. This way, they could prove their supremacy. They would enforce rule over others through these feats. However, the days have changed. The architects are no longer at the mercy of the rich ones," opined Azam.

He added that although he is thankful for the work he did for his rich clients, which helped him survive, he no longer wants to do their bidding.

"I want to be at the service of the common people. I want to do work that can change a child's life or transform the lives of an entire

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As dawn fell over the city of Sylhet, nearly 1,200 people gathered near Kean Bridge on the bank of Surma, to participate in Sylhet Half Marathon yesterday. The marathon was organised by Sylhet Runners Community, marking 50 years of Bangladesh's independence, and sponsored by Kushiara International Convention Hall. The runners, divided into two segments -- 21.1 kilometres and 10 kilometres -- completed their run at the finish line set in Sylhet International Cricket Stadium.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR