



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

City tails: Coexisting with stray animals



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Most of us who live in Dhaka city are invisible. The moment we become visible, we are either in trouble or become a problem. In some cases, we become news. This applies to both human and non-human species that coexist in urban areas. We often tend to forget that humans are not the only species that inhabit the world. Even our space, which we have curated by manipulating nature, doesn't solely belong to us. However, anthropocentric human perspectives define the relationship between humans and non-humans in urban spaces in hierarchical terms. We assume that, as humans, we have the natural superiority that gives us the moral right to exploit or annihilate others.

The recent poisoning of stray animals in a gated community in Mohammadpur, along with the government's subsequent actions and the ensuing public outcry, highlight the urban dynamics related to human-non-human interactions. The owners' association of the apartment complex considered the feral animals as pests and decided to cull them. However, some residents had earlier reportedly taken these animals under their care, vaccinating and sterilising them. The creatures relied on scraps of food and the occasional act of human generosity. These acts of kindness represent trust and hope that allowed the animals to thrive. To betray this trust with poisoned meals not only highlights the darker side of human behaviour, but also underscores a systemic failure to address the needs of stray animals in urban environments.

The owners' association viewed the animals as a "problem." I suspect they belong to my generation, having grown up witnessing the capture and culling of stray dogs by the city corporation up until the 1980s. Unlike Gen Z, they would not find it unacceptable to remove street dogs. We cannot expect them to understand interspecies dependency and the ethical imperative for shared urban spaces. Hardly would they realise the benefits communities have

from the presence of stray dogs and cats. Urban strays not only inhabit our city but also participate in our ecosystem, aiding in pest control and promoting emotional well-being. For the owners' association, the nuisance value of stray animals was perhaps more pertinent, as these animals barked at night or allegedly posed threats to public health. The annihilation of marginal characters serves as a poignant reminder of our treatment of other peripheral groups, such as vagabonds or beggars, who often live and die unnoticed in public spaces.

It was refreshing to see one adviser of the interim government write to another, reminding her of animal rights, and to see prominent lawyers volunteer to pursue legal actions in support of the cause of the dead animals. Then again, the questions remain: do we apply the same agility in responding to other fringe groups? Do we really know how many members of our floating population suffer or die as a result of our negligence? We hear of forced removal of beggars ahead of some high-profile state visits, or we see signs of beggar-free elite zones. The programmes to rehabilitate our fringe population remain invisible unless they get involved in a newsworthy incident. Urban planning seems to consider some lives—both human and non-human—as expendable. The widespread cruelty towards stray animals reflects a broader indifference to suffering that transcends species boundaries.

When the members of the owners' association in the gated community in Mohammadpur decided to cull the stray animals, they probably assumed a position of moral authority to execute their culturally rooted biases against dogs. People often view dogs as unclean and unholy. This is a limited view as religious teachings provide moral grounds for caring for animals. There are ample examples in the Quran and Hadiths that prescribe kindness towards animals. There are even instances where Prophet Muhammad rebuked a woman for starving a cat

and forgave a condemned man for giving water to a thirsty dog. There are many Islamic scholars who have argued for kindness or care for dogs as sentient beings deserving respect. One solution to the problem must come through a religious awareness campaign against euthanasia or mistreatment of animals.

From an economic standpoint, we do not prioritise the issue of urban stray animals. Our economic constraints force us to prioritise other issues over animal welfare when allocating resources. Legal protection for animals will remain ineffective unless we shift our perspective to acknowledge the ethical consequences of inhumane culling practices like poisoning. We need to adopt a model of human-non-human relations that is both practical and moral.

We can learn from the experience of the capital of Türkiye. In Istanbul, municipalities tag animals to monitor their health and population. The city vaccinates and sterilises the stray animals to control diseases and population growth. It designates public feeding stations and uses apps like SemPati to allow citizens to take an active role in caring for and monitoring stray animals. Istanbul has adopted an animal friendly policy that allows safe feeding zones and accessible veterinary care. Turkish law, which prohibits the killing of stray animals unless medically necessary, also protects the animals. Currently, some local NGOs and voluntary organisations are working in this field.

There have to be visible steps to develop public awareness campaigns in Dhaka—and in the rest of Bangladesh—based on religious and ethical teachings. Additionally, we need properly designed community-driven feeding programmes, supported by local governments and NGOs, that could ensure sustainable care. However, we cannot ignore our fellow human beings while focusing on stray animals either. We must redesign and rethink the city to accommodate all human and non-human inhabitants.

Care for others indicates the moral health of a society. The basis of such a society is a culture of mutual care and respect. We need policies that integrate interspecies dependency insights and are humane. Addressing the needs of stray animals is not just about animal welfare—it is about envisioning a more inclusive and compassionate urban life for all beings.

A pen against fate

How one child's dream echoes countless others



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WAJAHAT SHAMS WAJIH

During my time as a volunteer for the UK Bangladesh Education Trust (UKBET), I was granted the opportunity to provide academic mentorship to a few children. These children were not "ordinary" by any means; they were gifted. Like warriors marching relentlessly to the battleground, these children were armed with a weapon mightier than swords: a pen. Equipped with the pursuit of knowledge, they strode fearlessly towards an unknown life—a life of forced labour.

One of them was Hamza. Unjustly thrust into the harsh world of child labour in a cruel turn of fate, Hamza grew up working with his uncle in their chotpoti shop. While many of us aspire to grand ambitions, Hamza's dream was simple: he longed to know what it was like to sit in a classroom, to be given homework, to call himself a student instead of a worker. He yearned to play football with the schoolchildren he watched through the bars of the school gates. For most of his nine years, he believed that dream would go unfulfilled.

Upon first meeting him, I was warmly welcomed by the ceaseless

first class, I brought small gifts as a customary gesture. To my surprise, Hamza persistently refused to accept them. When asked why, he told me that he had never received a gift from his family, let alone a stranger. I probed further, asking him about birthdays, to which he responded that he did not know when his birthday was. After all, there was never an opportunity to celebrate it.

Looking back, some of the exchanges we all had were truly unique: like the time when Hamza and his siblings ecstatically asked me if I had ever boarded an aeroplane, or when they argued among each other for 15 minutes regarding the price of my iPhone, ultimately concluding that it was Tk 10,000—which, according to them, was also enough to purchase a whole commercial aeroplane.

Needless to say, a Hamza exists in every corner of our country: a child whose talents, qualities, and dreams slipped through our fingers, lost to the eternal chains of child labour. Ambitious children with hopes of becoming somebody washed away with the tides of hazardous labour

pointed to a potential that is almost permanently lost. To think that the talents and skills of such curious young minds may, in some cases, perpetually remain underutilised is an injustice in itself. According to a recent study, over 47 percent of child labourers in Bangladesh were not attending school, and from my own primary research, 73

The effort the children put in every time they picked up a textbook, their competitive drive to achieve higher grades than their peers—all of it pointed to a potential that is almost permanently lost. To think that the talents and skills of such curious young minds may, in some cases, perpetually remain underutilised is an injustice in itself.

percent of them reported a desire to one day receive some form of schooling. Despite their aspirations, they remain in the clutches of often-benighted employers.

As the next generation moves forward, with many of us fortunate



FILE PHOTO: STAR

A recent study revealed that 47 percent of child labourers in Bangladesh were not attending school.

clatter of Ceylon olives crashing against the tin roof of their room, followed by Hamza's radiant smile. From that moment on, our journey together began. I taught him how to convert proper fractions to percentages, while he taught me to see life from an entirely new perspective.

The first couple of months were admittedly challenging. At times, I would sit patiently, awaiting Hamza's arrival amid the turmoil of everyday hardships faced by those living within the crumbling walls of the slums. Mothers shouting vehemently at their children for losing a pencil they had worked hard to purchase, the noise of rickshaws arriving as fathers walked into their homes with barely a few hours' worth of earnings—it all seemed too overwhelming.

Gradually, it started to become easier. Over the course of six months, Hamza, along with his peers, guided me to capture the essence of life from a humbler vantage point. In our

due to societal neglect and ignorance.

In this scenario, Hamza was fortunately rescued by the non-profit I volunteered for. Sadly, that is often not the case with the victims of thousands of cases of child labour towards which we tend to turn a blind eye. For every Hamza saved, there remain 30 more Hamzas who remain bound by the merciless grip of forced labour.

Often, we tend to forget that the children who spend most of their lives next to sidewalks are real human beings, with hopes and dreams just like ours. We pass by them every day, without really noticing, to the point where it becomes so routine that it fades into the background. Yet, if we fail to fulfill our responsibility to show concern where it's needed, and if we don't make even a small effort to be dutiful citizens, then who will?

The effort the children put in every time they picked up a textbook, their competitive drive to achieve higher grades than their peers—all of it

enough to benefit from education, let's commit to taking initiative. Let's strive to make positive changes in society, even if they are small acts, such as offering an extra bottle of water to someone in need. Or perhaps something even simpler, like a warm-hearted smile and a gesture of empathy to a child caught in these difficult circumstances. While these may seem insignificant to many of us, for them, it could make their entire day.

I no longer teach Hamza or his siblings now, and to my knowledge, his family has relocated to a remote village in search of better opportunities. While I do not know what he may be up to these day and if he still thinks that aeroplanes cost Tk 10,000, I sure hope he has been able to find a means of achieving his dreams and ambitions—perhaps starting simply with the chance of sitting in a classroom.

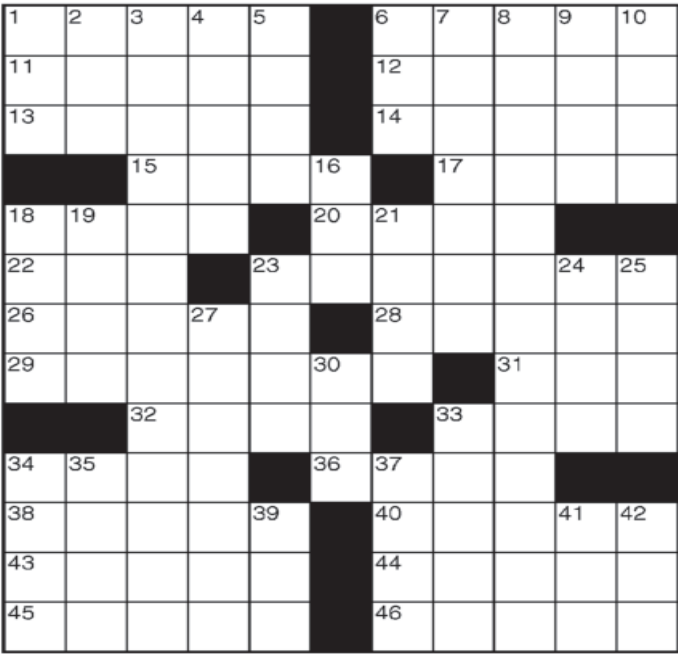
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Moses of the track
- 6 Story with a point
- 11 Long attack
- 12 Close, as a port
- 13 Elite Navy group
- 14 Thou
- 15 Learning method
- 17 Metal sources
- 18 To boot
- 20 Spiders' creations
- 22 Pay stub line
- 23 Sailing event
- 26 Western resort lake
- 28 Different
- 29 Genus subdivision
- 31 Avenue tree
- 32 Euro division
- 33 With skill

- 34 Rooney of "Carol"
 - 36 Cain's brother
 - 38 Unaccompanied
 - 40 Japanese port
 - 43 Namely
 - 44 Half of humanity
 - 45 Thus
 - 46 Forgo frugality
- #### DOWN
- 1 Snaky shape
 - 2 Spotted cube
 - 3 Rules
 - 4 Snow house
 - 5 High home
 - 6 Mideastern fruit
 - 7 Circus star
 - 8 Is responsible
 - 9 Script bit
 - 10 Goals

- 16 Lamb's mother
- 18 Hill builders
- 19 Spring
- 21 They may clash
- 23 Horse halter
- 24 Spill the beans
- 25 Base group
- 27 Maritime
- 30 Seventh letter
- 33 Man of morals
- 34 School subject
- 35 Balm ingredient
- 37 Gift toppers
- 39 Simone's season
- 41 Filmmaker Burns
- 42 What's more



WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

