



THE DECLINE OF TOMTOMS

Old Dhaka's historic carriages fade into history

MD TAREK

The centuries-old charm of Old Dhaka's horse-drawn carriages, locally known as "tomtoms", is gradually disappearing. These carriages have been part of the city's streets for nearly 200 years, but are slowly fading away with time.

At one point, there were 35 to 40 horse-drawn carriages operating in areas such as Bangabazar, Fire Service Hospital, Balsibazar, Narinda, Siddiqi Bazar, and Keraniganj. On the Sadarghat to Gulistan route alone, 33 carriages were in operation. However, with the advent of modern vehicles such as buses, microbuses, and rickshaws, these iconic carriages are on the brink of extinction.

Babu, the owner of a horse-drawn carriage in Bangabazar, said, "A few years ago, we had 40 carriages, but due to the rising costs of kheil [bran], gram [chickpeas], and grains, we have been forced to reduce the number of carriages. We are struggling to pay the salaries of the operators and employees."



He explained that many owners have had to abandon the trade because it is no longer financially viable.

In the past, locals used horse-drawn carriages for various grand events -- including weddings, ghe holud ceremonies, religious processions, movie shoots, and election campaigns. Brides would often travel in these carriages to the

groom's house instead of using a palanquin.

Today, however, the demand for tomtoms has significantly declined, although they are still sought after for special occasions like weddings during the Boishakh season and other festive events.

Horse-drawn carriages were first popularised in our city by an Armenian businessman named Shircore. His company, G M Shircore and Sons, commercialised horse-drawn carriages as a mode of transportation around the mid-nineteenth century.

References to Dhaka's carriages were documented in the Calcutta Review in 1844.

On the business side, a tomtom earns between Tk 1,500 and Tk 2,000 per day, while the coachman typically earns Tk 400 to Tk 500. However, the costs associated with maintaining these are high, including feeding the horse (hay, husk) and buying stainless steel horseshoes to protect its hooves.

Despite their charm, cruelty towards horses is also increasing. Each tomtom carries 8 to 10 passengers, and the horses must navigate heavy loads and muddy roads. Horseshoes typically last only a day, and since replacing them daily is expensive -- one kilogramme of horseshoes costs Tk 500 to Tk 600 -- many owners delay replacements. This leaves horses in immense pain, unable to run properly, and subject to harsh treatment from the coachman's whip.

In today's era of mechanical advancements, horse-drawn carriages are outdated and inhumane. Despite the availability of alternative modes of transportation, the continued use of these carriages highlights a cruel reality. The suffering of these helpless animals, caused by economic pressures and outdated practices, serves as a reminder of the cost of preserving such traditions in a modern society.

PHOTOS: RASHED SHUMON

Students' party by end of Feb

FROM PAGE 1

On a positive note, there've been no major financial crimes, such as money laundering, reported over the past six months.

Overall, there's been no situation that needed the imposition of military rule, even though there could've been -- I see this as a great success of this government.

TDS: Why do you think the law-and-order situation hasn't improved? Were the government's measures adequate? If not, what else could've been done?

Akhter: During the protests, the police turned against the people, leading to a sense of guilt and moral distress within the force that has yet to be overcome. As a result, the police lack the moral strength to ensure significant law enforcement improvements.

While the government has initiated some reforms within the police force and other law enforcement agencies, these are insufficient. We recommend strict departmental and legal action against officers involved in the killings during the protests. Apart from structural reforms in the force, large scale recruitment of new police personnel is required.

On another note, the military has been given magistracy power. Some unfortunate incidents have already occurred. The army has struggled to show its effectiveness against criminal syndicates and extortion rackets.

TDS: What actions of the government do you consider positive, and where do you believe they've failed or need to focus in the future?

Akhter: The government has provided a liberal and democratic environment for political parties, allowing anti-fascist forces to operate freely. The freedom of expression has largely been upheld, and despite criticism, there's been no widespread arrest, torture, or persecution of dissenters, as was common under the previous regime.

However, the government has struggled to control syndicates that monopolise essential commodities, leading to rising prices. Additionally, its efforts to rehabilitate the families of martyrs and the injured have been inadequate.

TDS: Previous governments often reshuffled the Cabinet. Do you think the current advisory council requires any

changes or restructuring?

Akhter: After the formation of the interim government, there were some internal changes, with new advisers added. However, considering the scale of the government's responsibilities, I believe additional advisers are needed.

TDS: Do you think this government is struggling to connect with rural people?

Akhter: The advisory council is relatively small, which presents challenges. Like previous administrations, this government is entangled in bureaucratic constraints. To truly connect with the people, the interim government must overcome these barriers and engage more effectively with the public.

TDS: How far along is the formation of your political party? What will be its core principles and ideology?

Akhter: Since the uprising, we've been discussing the formation of a new political party. We're hopeful of officially launching it by the end of February.

We've already consulted with people across the country regarding the party's name, symbol, ideology, and manifesto. Over 100,000 people have shared their opinions online. We're now working on drafting the party's constitution, declaration, and agenda, while also consulting with experts and seasoned political observers.

TDS: Reports suggest your party aims to contest the next national election. Which voter groups are you targeting, and what's your approach towards Awami League supporters who weren't involved in crimes?

Akhter: Our primary focus is Bangladesh's youth. We also aim to attract voters who've been dissatisfied with the bipolar politics of Awami League and BNP, and are seeking a new alternative.

We also want the support of senior citizens and long-time political observers who've witnessed the country's political trajectory.

Regarding traditional Awami League supporters, there are two groups: one has supporters who've been involved in corruption, vote-rigging, extortion, and even violent crimes, and another has those who've historically voted for Awami League but weren't involved in criminal activity.

For those in the first group, justice is

non-negotiable -- they must face trial. For those in the latter, if they acknowledge the crimes committed by Awami League, the public might forgive them.

TDS: There's mounting pressure from political parties for the government to hold an election. Meanwhile, the government has initiated several reforms. What should its priority be?

Akhter: While most parties are focusing on polls, those who actively participated in the uprising want systemic reforms. The interim government must present a clear roadmap for reforms and begin implementing them before an election, and the next elected government should continue these reforms.

TDS: In the past, numerous reform initiatives were undertaken but never fully implemented. What do you think is the future of the current initiatives?

Akhter: Past failures have raised concerns. This is why we strongly demand that the implementation of reforms begin under this government, ensuring the next one cannot deviate from this responsibility. We urge all parties to align with the people's aspirations and avoid disappointing them. As a pressure group, we'll remain active on the streets and, if necessary, take tougher steps to translate these aspirations into reality.

TDS: You had initiated the announcement of the July uprising proclamation. Why couldn't you announce it?

Akhter: We wanted the proclamation to be based on a consensus among all political parties, which is why Students Against Discrimination chose to step back to avoid division. The government has taken up the responsibility to announce the proclamation with consensus among all parties, and we're hopeful of fulfilling this responsibility.

TDS: Attacks on shrines and places of worship of religious minorities have been reported. The government claims these reports are exaggerated by the Indian media. How does your platform respond to such incidents?

Akhter: The Jatiya Nogorik Committee has expressed concern over the attacks. While some arrests have been made, the threat of further incidents remains. However, certain reports by the Indian media about attacks on minorities are not only exaggerated but outright false.

respondents expressed dissatisfaction with health services with 46 percent terming it substandard.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE? The reform commission reviewed the findings and analysed various documents and books on the public administration to identify the problems like corruption, political interference, inefficiency, bureaucratic attitudes, lack of transparency, poor accountability, limited public participation, and lack of proper coordination.

The public administration needs to be restructured to be more people-oriented, accountable, efficient, and impartial, as well as effective," says the commission report.

Making an efficient administration would require training, capacity building, and development of strategic leadership.

The commission recommends that the goals of public administration should be to become people-oriented, transparent and accountable, enhancement of efficiency and capacity, impartial, proficiency in public services, and effective.

Almost 100 percent of the

command centre would include the members of the police, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), and the armed forces.

"We hope this initiative will further improve law and order in Bangladesh, allowing quick response in any area ...," he added.

WHO ARE BEING HELD?

Analysing reports from some districts, this newspaper found that the arrestees are mostly members of the Awami League and its associate bodies.

Many of them are accused in cases filed after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina-led government on August 5.

For instance, joint forces raided Hatia of Noakhali and arrested seven AL men, including a former union council chairman, on Saturday night.

Officer in Charge AKM Ajmal Huda of Hatia Police Station told The Daily Star that the operation involved members of the navy, the coast guard, naval police, and Hatia Police Station.

The Chattogram Metropolitan Police held 19 leaders and activists of the AL, Jibno League, and the banned Chhatra League.

Law enforcement agencies also detained four AL members from different upazilas in Rajshahi as part of Operation Devil Hunt, said Rajshahi Additional Police Superintendent Rafiqul Islam.

In Kushtia, 13 individuals, all leaders and activists of the AL and its associated bodies, were detained between Saturday night and yesterday afternoon.

In Khagrachhari, police held four

activists of the banned Bangladesh Chhatra League in Guimara upazila, said OC Enamul Haque Chowdhury of Guimara Police Station.

WHY THE OPERATION?

Briefing reporters at the home ministry, Senior Secretary Nasimul said the army was deployed after the fall of the autocratic regime amid an uprising. During that time, the police force suffered significant blows, institutionally, and psychologically. Many police stations were burnt down. This necessitated the continued deployment of the army under the "In Aid to Civil Power" provision, he said.

"In response to the situation, we devised multiple strategies. Some [measures] are already in place, while other initiatives are being implemented. Operation Devil Hunt is one of them," he added.

About the name of the operation, he said, "Every operation has a code name to maintain focus."

The home secretary said that the objective of the operation is to apprehend those attempting to destabilise the country and bring them to book.

On Saturday, Gazipur Metropolitan Police Commissioner Nazmul Karim Khan said, "Operation Devil Hunt will be conducted to combat Awami fascism."

Asked whether individuals accused in cases filed after August 5 would be the target of the operation, Nasimul said, "You will know when the police take action."

He said law enforcement cannot be carried out in the same manner as

Teenager shot during BNP factional clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Saver

A 16-year-old boy suffered bullet injuries during a clash between two groups of BNP over the control of the local jhut trade (wasted scraps of fabric) in Ashulia on the outskirts of the capital yesterday afternoon.

The injured is Kaptan Mia, 16, son of Md Dalim of Habiganj district, and a salesman at a local shop.

Another person, Sheikh Abu Jafar, was also injured during the clash after being hit by a brick.

The incident took place on the Jamgara Bagbari regional road adjacent to Jamgara intersection around 3:00pm, said police.

HM Asaf Uddaula Rizvi, assistant manager of Ashulia Women and Children Hospital, told The Daily Star that a teenager named Kaptan Mia is being treated in their hospital. He was shot in the back.

Locals said Bakul Bhuiyan, vice-president of Ashulia Thana Tati Dal, had been taking jhut (scrap fabrics) from Preeti Composite Textile Limited, a concern of the Preeti Group, in Jamgarh area of Ashulia for a long time.

Recently, former Jubo Dal leader Sharif Chowdhury, a follower of ex-BNP MP (Dhaka 19) Dewan Md Salahuddin Babu, was trying to take control of the trade.

Yesterday, when Bakul's men were collecting the fabrics from the factory, Sharif's men tried to snatch a jhut-laden truck resulting in a chase and clash between the two sides.

Several rounds of gunfire were exchanged at the time.

Sahaluddin Babu and Sharif Chowdhury were called several times on their mobile phones for comments but they did not pick up.

Locals claimed although the factory had an agreement with Bakul Bhuiyan, his son Rony Bhuiyan, a local Jubo League leader, basically controlled the jhut trade.

Rony's men were also present during the clash.

Contacted, Bakul told The Daily Star, "I have been engaged in the jhut trade of the factory for the last six months. This morning, Sharif Chowdhury's people started gathering in front of the factory. Later, I informed police and my men

SEE PAGE 6 COL 7

It will go on until all 'devils' rooted out

FROM PAGE 1

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WE must uphold the spirit of the law. Our goal is to establish a better system, keeping human rights and environmental concerns in mind. We don't want to create another 'Aynagar'.

Instead, we want to leave behind a better environment for the future."

A workshop focusing on human rights and environmental concerns will be held tomorrow where 150 police officials from Dhaka and Gazipur will take part, he said.

When asked why people still feel insecure even six months after the uprising, Nasimul said, "In countries where there have been revolutions, the defeated forces are not allowed to stay. But we could not be that inhumane. Some officers engaged in wrongdoings out of fear and pressure, while die-hard loyalists of the previous regime have fled. Actions are being taken against them."

He said police morale has been significantly damaged. "We are making a sincere effort to bring about genuine reform in the police. That's why they are being actively counselled," he added.

After the fall of the Hasina-led regime, mobs looted firearms and bullets from different police stations across the country.

Joint forces, comprising the armed forces, BGB, coast guards, Police, Rab, and Ansar, were deployed on September 4 to recover firearms and maintain law and order.

On September 17, the interim government gave the power of magistracy to commissioned army officers.

Economic growth lowest in 4 years

FROM PAGE 1