

## Metropolitan

## Dhaka Day by Day



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## NOTICE

The offices of The Daily Star will remain closed on the occasion of holy Eid-e-Miladunnabi today. There will, therefore, be no issue of the paper tomorrow.

## Dhaka Day by Day

## Peddling Miles Away

by Fayza Haq

Mary Francis Dunham, 62, uses a collapsible bicycle wherever she is — in Bangladesh, China, USA, Europe or wherever. She is here in Dhaka for a year doing a research on *Jaart Gaan*, and she does not go anywhere without her two-wheeled contraption.

Mary has travelled on her bicycle in Calcutta, New Delhi, Colombo, Kunming (China), Paris, London, Washington DC, Boston and New York City, undaunted by the traffic anywhere. "It is my exclusive means of transportation. I rarely take anything else. There are 2000 like myself in New York City alone. Cities now in America, Canada and Europe realise that cars are polluting the atmosphere and are the real cause of congestion," Mary comments.

"Cars have long been considered the vehicle of the future, yet countries that now rely on cars pay a heavy price of road accidents, air pollution, urban congestion and oil bills. Despite improvements of road safety, a quarter of a million people worldwide die in automobile accidents each year, and millions more are injured. Developing countries — with fewer automobiles but more pedestrian traffic and no provisions for separating the two — have fatality rates per vehicle mile up to 20 times higher than industrial countries and road accidents have become a leading cause of death. Cars and other motor vehicles create more air pollution than any other human activity. Gasoline and diesel engines emit almost half the carbon monoxide hydrocarbons, and nitrogen oxides that result from all fossil fuel combustion worldwide," she adds.

"The economic and social costs of congestion, already overwhelming, are bound to increase if travelling by car continues," she points out.

At the age of seven Mary was riding a bicycle in France and she has always liked the independence that riding a bicycle gives. There are no complications with car maintenance, space needed for cars, or the cost of petrol, she points out.

"In the 1970s people in the West began to realise that fuel was getting short, that cities were becoming crowded and that too many cars were causing accidents and air pollution. Many groups began to lobby for better public transportation. Today such cities as New York, Los Angeles, Amsterdam and Turin have laws that reserve streets for pedestrians and cyclists. In New York they have even begun a rickshaw business," Mary informs us.

"The traffic problems in Dhaka are the same as in New York City. Congestion fatal accidents and air pollutions in the two cities are similar. In both the cities I must ride skillfully weaving

in and out of rickshaws, handcarts, pedestrians and other traffic. There is a wider range of vehicles in Dhaka e.g. pushcarts, tempoos, baby-taxis, rickshaws, and vans carrying heavy cargo. Each of these types of vehicles have a different style of motion. I must anticipate the motion of each kind. I have had no accidents in Dhaka or anywhere else but that is because I peddle slowly and patiently," she adds with a smile.

Caught in the overwhelming enthusiasm about bicycles Mary says, "One of my bicycle activities in New York is teaching children how

to cycle safely. This also teaches them how to be good drivers, later, when they grow up. I write articles for magazines that are devoted to promoting bicycles as a means of transportation."

Mary is so used to heavy traffic that she is not frightened by city traffic. It is overwhelming for people who have not ridden a bicycle but Mary finds riding a bicycle in traffic is safer than riding a rickshaw in Dhaka and it is less likely to be harmful to someone else, she believes.

"Bicycling invigorates you. It keeps your mind alert. Today more and more people are using folding bicycles in cities because they can be taken into offices and homes," she asserts. In New York, when Mary rides her folding bicycle some

people ask her "When will it grow up?" or "Did your bicycle shrink in the rain? Here in Dhaka the children seeing the bicycle being folded ask, "Has your bicycle broken?" When she was in China the people there longed to copy the folding bicycle.

Commenting about her experience of vehicles Mary says, "In central Calcutta currently there are very few bicycles and many cars, with traffic jams lasting up to half an hour. Calcuttians like cars because they are protected from beggars, the deteriorating sidewalks and the heat and rain, because they are often air conditioned they are also a status symbol. Cities in Northern Europe are far ahead of those in America in providing conveniences for cyclists e.g. in Amsterdam even in the centre of the city there are bicycle paths and lanes. Many European cities allow bicycles to be put on trains and buses for long distance travel."

She takes her bicycle in a suitcase whenever she travels overseas, and she has been to every corner of Dhaka including the old city. "Sometimes I have to walk pushing my bike due to the crowds but this is better than sitting in a vehicle trapped in a jam," she adds.

It would be a healthy sign indeed if more people could take to bicycling like Mary, with her ready smile and easy flowing conversation.



A bicycle woman with a conviction.