

Dhaka: Yesterday, today and tomorrow

Dr Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, Head, Department of Architecture of University of Asia Pacific, environmental activist and heritage aficionado shared his views on Dhaka with Durdana Ghias of Star City.

Star City (SC): What is your first memory of Dhaka?

Dr Abu Sayeed M Ahmed (ASMA): I saw Dhaka in three different ways. Firstly when I was a child, secondly when I was a graduate student and thirdly when I came back to Dhaka after being abroad for ten years. In each way I rediscovered Dhaka in a new dimension.

I came to Dhaka in 1965 from Comilla by launch with my father to treat my ailing mother. Then I was seven years old. In my journey from Chandpur to Sadarghat I saw many colourful sailing boats plying the water. Now those are replaced by engine boats. Today's children cannot imagine how different and colourful each sailing boat can be. Now we can see those in the pages of calendar only.

We stayed at a house in Siddheshwari, which at that time was like a village. Wari was the posh area of the city. There was a zoo in Kakrail in the place of the present Matsya Bhaban in Segunbagicha. I saw a python for the first time there. That was very exciting. In my later years when I told others about the zoo everybody laughed at me saying that there was never a zoo at that place except one in 19th century, according to Muntasir Mamun, and dubbed me as someone of 1800-1900.

Another thing that fascinated me at that time was the abundance of monkeys in old Dhaka. They roamed everywhere and took away small household things and foodstuffs like banana.

SC: What was the city like in the early days?

ASMA: After passing intermediate from Comilla Victoria College in 1976 I came to Dhaka to study at the graduate level. This time Dhaka bore another dimension to me. I got admitted in the architecture department of BUET. I stayed at the dormitory like most students coming from district towns. That was a different environment. The memory of those five years in BUET is very special. It was the tradition of the architecture department students from all batches, both boys and girls, to work all night. At night we took our meals at Chawkbazar or at Nirob restaurant in old Dhaka and in the morning we took breakfast at Nilkhet. Lassi, paratha and bhaji were our favourites. Now this tradition does not exist mainly due to security reasons.

We watched movies at 'Star' and 'Moon' cinema halls. In the evening we took strolls in the New Market, Suhrawardi Uddyan and Ramna area and sat for adda. It was students' refreshment. This trend is almost nonexistent now. Life, now, is too fast and stressful for a student to take carefree strolls in the evening. Instead he would prefer studying or browsing the Internet for more information to remain ahead of his classmates.

SC: What memory of Dhaka do you cherish most?

ASMA: One day in 1978 when I was in a first year student of BUET our teacher Prof Habibur Rahman asked us to go with him to save a big canopy tree in front of Salimullah Muslim Hall. Instantly

we followed him to the spot and climbed up the tree like monkeys. When they tried to fell the tree they did not dare to do that as we were sitting on the branches. It was an innovative way to save the tree. Later we designed posters to save the tree where I drew the picture of our sitting on the branches dangling legs.

A few days ago I went to save Achin Brikkhay near Botanical Garden. I was sad to find a few environmentalists from Paribesh Bachao Andolon, some residents and a couple of journalists. It struck me that nowadays people are not that enthusiastic to save a tree like we were in the earlier days. I made some posters for Achin Brikkhay and hung those from the branches. While doing this I was wondering if we could replace the posters by sitting on the branches of the tree to save it like I did in my student life.

SC: What are the changes of Dhaka that you have noticed over the years?

ASMA: After passing graduation I was out of Dhaka for ten years from 1987 to 1997. At that time I did Phd in history and conservation in Germany. When I came back the city was totally different from what I had left ten years ago. It was crowded and chaotic. I started comparing Dhaka with cities I had seen in other countries. I wanted Dhaka to be as beautiful from river Buriganga as Florence looked from the sea while coming from Turkey by sea routes.

SC: Which part or what about Dhaka you are proud of?

ASMA: I am proud of Dhaka and



Sayeed (3rd right), with other environmentalists, discussing strategies to save Achin Brikkhay at Mirpur recently.

the sense of civic pride among the city dwellers is very important for a city. After studying architectural history and conservation my pride and interest in old Dhaka multiplied. I started seeking the roots of architecture in Dhaka. Another thing that I take pride in is the cultural facet of Dhaka that celebrates pohela boishakh, ekushey, boi mela, pohela falgun and bijoy dibash with much fanfare.

SC: What do you envisage for Dhaka in the next 20 years?

ASMA: It is true that we have damaged a significant portion of Dhaka but if we can save whatever is left this city can revive. Around eighty percent people in Dhaka commute on foot but our footpaths are in a bad shape. Only

around five percent people use private cars and we are busy chalking out plans for their convenience. Most educational and financial institutes are concentrated in Dhanmondi. We can shift the Kamlapur station in Tongi and utilise around 20 km distances between the two places by shifting these institutes to the existing land of railway. If we can construct a subway and utilise the circular waterway then one group of commuters will go underground and another group will use the waterway. It will reduce the pressure on certain busy areas.

As an architect I think Dhaka owns three vital raw materials to become a beautiful city. These are -- the old city or old Dhaka, which bears the testimony of her affluent

past; a rich culture and a nice river. We have to utilise these three gifts. But we lack a city square. We can develop a square centering the shadhinota stambha where people will come in the evening to spend time. The area from Curzon Hall to Shahbagh intersection should be declared the cultural zone of the city. Bangla Academy, Ramna and Suhrawardi Uddyan will be included in this zone.

Deafening noise

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"If this is the message from the government to drivers, how could we expect unnecessary honk to stop," questioned a Rampura resident.

However, in the DMP message motorists are advised not to hoot in front of schools and hospitals.

Sources said the message came from DMP high officials when the traffic channel was launched two years back. This means that the DMP Traffic's high officials are apparently unaware of the problem.

Solaiman Haider, assistant director, technical, Department of Environment (DoE) when contacted said honking itself is unlawful let

alone unnecessary honking. That is why it is not included in the act. In the silent zone honking is totally forbidden. Unnecessary honking depends on driver's attitude and awareness.

"If the horn is hooted exceeding a certain sound level determined for a particular area, the authority concerned under this rule will take action against the offenders," he added.

He also said all areas of the country falls under this rule. About the implementation of the act he said that DoE would work with the help of law and enforcing agencies.

City's poor to face greater

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At the root of the city's constantly deteriorating housing problems is the exorbitant land price. The high price has virtually made it impossible to make affordable houses for the under privileged section of the city population.

Statistics show an increase of 400 percent in land price in the city since 1974. Land price is now about Tk 20 to Tk 50 lakh each

katha -- ranging from Tk 1,500 to Tk 15,000 per square feet within the city.

As the land margin in the city continues to shrink, real estate developers eye the vast low-lying water bodies and flood flow zones on the city outskirts. Even banks of the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya and Bali have been filled up for commercial housing projects.

Gulshan Plot

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"But that particular provision is no longer in effect," he said.

Syed Rizwana Hasan of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) agreed that a well-organised syndicate of influential land grabbers in connivance with some government officials is active in grabbing prime land across the city.

The land has gone back to a private owner through derequisition, said a highly placed source at Rajuk's planning department.

"But Rajuk's estate department has to accommodate a genuine plot allottee by shifting to another site in case an ownership of a plot is changed through derequisition," he said.

As per the documents that Masud produced, Azizul Haq sold 0.0825 acres or five kathas to one Khalil Shikdar of Jatrabari, Demra for Tk3.5 lakh on November 23, 1999.

On the same date, Haq had sold another five kathas to three brothers named Md. Wahidul Islam, Hamidul Islam Talukder and Md. Azharul Islam Talukder of Louhajong in Munshiganj under the same CS mark number.

Haq had further sold another three kathas of land on the same date, under the same CS number to one Md. Nasir Uddin Ahmed and Mohsina Bipasha Alam of Louhajong, Munshiganj.

He had sold yet another five kathas on the same date under the

same CS number to one Jesmin Shikdar for Tk3.5 lakh.

But Khalil Shikdar and others including Nasir Uddin Ahmed applied for land use clearance to the Rajuk on May 14, 2006, seven years after the land purchase.

"The land lay abandoned for seven years as we were busy with other businesses," said Nasir Uddin Ahmed.

Replying to a question on the sale of land, Nasir said: "We sold the property to a person capable of establishing possession on it. We also found it very difficult to get a job done from Rajuk and decided to sell the land to one who is able to get possession clearances from Rajuk."

Mosaddak Ali bought the land on July 23, 2006 and the land use clearance was obtained on October 11, 2006.

"We are yet to apply to Rajuk for transfer of the land to Mosaddaq Ali's name (mutation)," said Masud.

Jabbar Chowdhury retracted from his position and declined to speak any further on the matter let alone sharing any evidence in support of his claim.

Haliuzzaman, Dr. Abdul Jabbar Chowdhury's nephew who first spoke about Ali's men taking possession of the land said later: "My uncle does not want to go public on the issue."