

The Lakes of Dhaka An Appeal to the City Fathers

by Shah A M S Kibria

A friend of mine once asked me why did I always write about serious subjects. He has obviously no interest in national or international politics. When I asked him what I should write about, his surprising reply was: lakes of Dhaka. We were at the time taking a walk along the side of the Dhanmandi lake and looking around me, I could see why he thought this was a good subject to write about. It was just a coincidence that I love lakes. For me it is a serious subject. I am no expert on lakes but I am fascinated by them. Those who may have seen the ethereal beauty of sunset on the Dal lake of Kashmir will need no persuasion to be convinced that a beautiful lake can add new dimensions to the pleasures of life in a city.

In the olden days cities used to grow along the banks of rivers. Thames and Seine are famous because London and Paris grew along their banks. We all know about Buri Ganga flowing by the side of Dhaka. But these rivers are the arteries of commerce and communications. Their importance is not in their beauty but in their utility. Some rivers are of course also very beautiful and even majestic. However, lakes, specially small ones, are different. These are not usually associated with commerce or indeed any business activity. These are just natural or man-made reservoirs of water. Human settlements often grow up around them but there are some lakes which have been just left alone. What attracts me most in lakes is their serenity. The calm and placid body of water can have a tranquillizing effect on the mind. In the course of my travels abroad as a diplomat I have had the good fortune to see some of

the most famous lakes. For three years I enjoyed the beauty of the famous Geneva lake. People's life in that famous city has grown around it. On a bright summer day one can see hundreds of sail boats passing by lazily on the grey blue waters of the lake while thousands of fashionably dressed men and women strolling along the tree lined shady banks. Long boulevards with flower beds by their side



Dhanmandi lake: Shanties along the bank.

clear and bright blue waters of lake Anancy surrounded by dark green woods and the gentle waves sparkling under the sun seemed to embody the very finest that one can expect by way of natural beauty. The Westlake in Hangchow — a garden city not too far from Shanghai — is famous for its legendary city not too com-

pared to the Dal lake of Kashmir, it was a vacation resort of Chairman Mao who spent holidays in a bungalow on the banks of Westlake.

Of course I have not yet seen any lake as beautiful as the Dal of Srinagar. The snow-clad mountains in the background, the majestic Chinar and poplar trees on the banks and the dark green foliage and the lovely flower gardens seem to cast a spell on one's imagination. The colour of the water seems to change every hour. In the morning it is grey and misty but the sunlight coming through the mist creates the illusions of a shimmering cloth of silver spread out in front. In the afternoon the lengthening shadows play on the dark green waters and by sun set the subtle change of colour — one can notice this almost every minute — is a rare experience that one will treasure for ever. Unfortunately the lake is almost dying because of pollution and the growth of thick under-water vegetation. The house boats on the lake maybe adding to the problem of pollution. Its beauty is so unique that in my view the Dal lake should be declared a precious heritage for the entire mankind. Instead, much to my regret and sorrow, its peaceful waters are today getting reddened by the blood that is flowing in that unhappy land. I had the privilege to live for three years in Canberra —



Crescent lake: Maintained as yet.

the capital of Australia. When the city was established — I believe at the turn of the century — the area had only rolling farm land. By harnessing the waters of a small river which has been dammed down stream a magnificent lake was created. Lake Griffith divides and dominates the city and gives it a character. With elegant parks on all sides, Canberra looks in summer more like a huge park with a lake in the centre. Boating and fishing in the lake and long walks in the pleasant parks along the banks make life in Canberra idyllic indeed.

The contrast, I am afraid, with the lakes that I have seen abroad and those of Dhaka, fill me with distress and despair. What a mindless waste of opportunities! Are we really lacking in ideas and imagination? What about our vaunted artistic talents? Or, is it a case of lack of initiative? Perhaps all of these are responsible for our failure to make proper use of the wonderful possibilities offered to this city. These lakes are essential for the city's drainage system but like parks, we could make them centres of recreation as well. I know some people will immediately jump up and say: this is a luxury and any way, where is the money? As if the money would be spent on cleaning up and beautifying the lakes if a lot of it was there. This excuse is offered for our every failure. In

the case of the lakes it is certainly not lack of money which is responsible for their miserable condition. It is the lack of interest. Also, if I may say at the risk of hurting Bengali ego, lack of initiative and imagination.

Money is, of course, a most important factor in life. But one does not need money to keep the lakes free from squatter settlements. All that one has to do is to enforce the existing laws rigorously and strictly. On the water's edge of the Dhanmandi lake a whole village has come up. Perhaps this has escaped the attention of the city fathers. Doubtless these squatters are poor people who deserve everybody's sympathy and support but is this how we should demonstrate our humanitarian concern? To permit illegal squatter settlements on a precious public facility on any pretext

whatsoever is a crime. I am afraid many others besides the squatters are involved in the thoughtless destruction of the lakes. I was amazed to see some fishing enthusiasts sitting patiently in the sun with fishing rods in hand. How can any fish survive the polluted and filthy waters of the Dhanmandi lake is a mystery to me. Banani lake, apart from the squatter settlements, is a breeding ground for

can an average family enjoy a simple outing? We owe a debt of gratitude to Silpacharya Jainul Abedin for developing Sonargaon as a tourist spot. Where else can they go for a picnic? Bhowal National Park? It is too crowded in winter and a bit far for most families. A nice, clean and attractive place within the city limits will be a great boon for the average family of limited means. A great city is judged great not by the number of people who live there but by the wealth of its cultural and intellectual life as well as the urban facilities that it offers. The lakes, if these are cleaned up and if simple attractions such as sailing and canoeing are introduced, can change the look of the city. It is also possible to make them self supporting. In fact, a truly imaginative entrepreneur can invest in these lakes to turn them into sources of profit. I am however not suggesting that we commercialize these public facilities but even without going that far it is quite possible to support the maintenance cost with relatively modest investment.

First and foremost, the city fathers must look at these facilities with a positive attitude. These are not waste land or public conveniences or dumping grounds for garbage but precious resources of the city with a vital role in public welfare. Society must find home and shelter for the homeless but not at the cost of what I would regard as priceless public assets. A bit of imagination and some initiative is needed. The first item on the agenda should be to clean up the lakes. In the process the city fathers will earn the undying gratitude of the Dhakaites for removing the mosquito breeding grounds as well. Next, the adjoining lands must be landscaped and turned into proper parks. Facilities such as sailing and boating etc should be introduced in the next phase. Fishing can also be a source of fun for those interested in it, provided of course, the waters are reasonably clean. Is this too ambitious a programme? Despite our poverty Dhaka can become an attractive city with green parks and sparkling lakes if we really take some interest in the matter. After all, even a poor family has a right to expect to live a decent life with facilities for recreation.



Dal lake, Kashmir.

Courtesy: Nissho Ixal

Assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, was a great tragedy for human civilization. It was a deeply shameful event, caused or prejudiced. If human progress is dependent on scientific methods then this violence is an act of gross ignorance. It is ignorance of scientific facts about man and the range of his diversity. It is needless to say, the human diversity which is mostly responsible for the great material and cultural progress of mankind.

The problem of human differences is not new. The doctrine of inherent inequality of men has been developed by many thinkers, starting with Plato. More recently there was the Comte de Gobineau who thought that the intellectual and emotional differences between the great white Nordic race and the inferior whites, yellows and blacks were clearly innate. Certain of the Latin whites — French, Spanish and Italian — whose blood had been polluted by mixing with unworthy lower races were bound to decay. There was even a good scientist, Max Muller, who used the word 'Aryan race' to describe the people who spoke a certain group of languages. Muller soon recognized his mistake.

All peoples have recognised the diversity of human individuals. Most often they have taken it for granted that physical and mental differences are inborn inherited and unalterable. The belief that the differences between men and races are inborn and unalterable is probably older and more widespread than the other view that human appearance and personality are formed wholly by the influence of environment in which people live and by the training which they receive. Both extreme views are wrong in the light of today's biological knowledge. It is known now that many hu-

On Human Differences

by Dr Noazesh Ahmed

man traits, such as blood group, colour of eyes and many other characters are inherited while many others such as susceptibility to diseases, education, crime are not controlled by heredity but by our environment. It seems for many characteristics there is no hard and fast line between the so-called hereditary and so-called environmental traits.

Until recently the views relating to the problem of human diversity had no scientific foundation. However many attempts have been made to examine scientifically the questions about human differences. Many of these attempts failed because scientists often succumb to prove some preconceived views about human affairs. Francis Galton and Gobineau propounded the view that most human difference are innate due to nature rather than to nurture. Present-day biologists view human difference as facts which call for understanding and interpretation, not as qualities to be either condemned or praised. In describing groups of men in biological terms, categories define as good or bad, superior or inferior are not recognized. It is human nature to believe that one's own family or race is better than others but it is relatively new idea to ascribe this superiority to inherent biological qualities. The Greeks thought that they were better than non-Greeks. Herodotus in fifth century BC wrote that the Persians looked upon themselves as very greatly superior in all respects to the rest of the mankind.

People differ in the colour of skin eyes and hair, in stature, bodily proportions, and in many other traits. Each trait is determined by several

genes. How many variable genes there are in man is unknown; certainly hundreds, possibly thousands. Because of this some of us have prominent and others flat noses, some are tall and others short. It happens that certain genes are more frequent among the inhabitants of some regions than of others. Thus, blue eyes are very common in most parts of the United States but rather rare in Mexico. Recently the blood groups of the people in all parts of the world have been studied. The most interesting result of these studies has been that with few exceptions, nearly every human group examined has been found to consist of a mixture of the same four blood groups. Universal donors (group O) are found in every race and are generally the commonest type, group A is also common while B, and especially AB, is less common. The most important lesson we can learn, from this is that the races differ in blood group type only in a relative way.

Now the question is: do human races differ in mental capacity? This is no simple question to answer. Here again quite a few extreme views exist even today. It is viewed that breeds of dogs differ markedly in temperament and in responsiveness to particular smell. The differences in temperament between polo ponies and draft horses, which are certainly conditioned in part by their heredity which fit them for different functions. It has often been argued by analogy that differences in biological heredity lie at the bottom of human intellectual, emotional and temperamental dif-

ference between races and between cultural and social groups. It is also viewed by some that races arise as a part of the evolutionary process within a species become adapted to a particular environment. Racial variation in skin colour has for example, been viewed in this way. If biological evolution has caused races of man to diverge in physical character, should it not have done the same for mental capacities and aptitudes of these peoples?

Both of these arguments by analogy are unconvincing because they are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of biological heredity. What is inherited is not this or that trait, but the manner in which the developing organism responds to its environment. For example the blood group is rigidly fixed by hereditary factors. But the skin colour is not rigidly fixed, since it can change rather rapidly depending upon the exposure of the skin to sunlight. Again whether or not an individual gets into conflicts with the law depends upon the person's upbringing and circumstances and also upon the kind of laws which the society sees fit to frame. Human behaviour is quite plastic and can be changed by the living conditions.

The important problem is why some traits are more and others less fixed or plastic. The fixity or plasticity of a trait is a matter of evolutionary adaptation. Dobzhansky, a famous American geneticist, pointed out: it is obvious that different social positions and different trades call for somewhat different behaviour patterns. The mentality of a nomadic hunter is usually different from that of

farmer. But the prominent requirement of living in any human society is very nearly always the same: it is the ability to learn from experience and to adjust one's behaviour to the needs and circumstances. This requirement is fundamental for living in any culture or civilization, from the most primitive to the most complex.

The process of selection which has been, and still is most powerful and persistent in human evolution is that for the ability to learn new ways of behaviour and new skills. Human species as a whole has developed always from genetic specialization and fixity of behaviour and towards educability. This is true for all races of man and for all climates. Therein lies the most important biological feature of the evolutionary pattern of mankind. Breeds of dogs or horses have been deliberately fashioned for performances of different services by making their genes different. Man is certainly capable of pursuing a great variety of ways of life. But he is enabled to do so by different training and education, not by acquiring different hereditary factors. Educability permits a vastly greater diversity of human personalities than could possibly arise if human mentality were genetically fixed as it is for example in the inhabitants of the ant hill.

Present democracy accepts human diversity as fact of experience but nevertheless holds that all men have the same inalienable rights. Democratic society should be adapted to the variable natures of its members. It would create such political, social, and economic conditions as would furnish to each member opportunities to develop the best potentialities of his personality and creative energies. In so doing democracy would take advantage of human diversity.

Tiger, Tiger, Burning Out?

Shrinking habitats, poachers and traditional Chinese medicine are threatening the tiger's survival into the 21st century, Mahesh Uniyal of IPS reports from New Delhi.



SOON, pockets of jungle in South and South-east Asia may be the last home of the big cat whose roar was heard from the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Japan a few decades ago.

India is home to nearly two-thirds of the world's roughly 6,000 tigers. According to a 1989 census, some 4,300 wander 19 natural reserves spread over 29,716 sq km. Indian wildlife officials at the meet said the country can support up to 25,000 tigers.

"We rely greatly on India to take the lead to save the tiger into the 21st century," said Peter Jackson of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) 'Cat Specialist Group'.

But experts warn only joint international action can save the world's remaining big cats from going the way of the Caspian tiger, which became extinct in the 1970's.

The major threat to the tiger now is from poaching to feed the growing trade in tiger bones for medicinal use. The trade goes back centuries and a Chinese medicine manual from the year 1,597 lists detailed descriptions to tiger bone products.

Bones from the tiger's forelegs are used for making a variety of popular Chinese medicines to treat rheumatism, burns, typhoid and malaria. A tiger bone brew is said to ward off nightmares.

Traffic International Director Jorgen Thomson says a kilogram of tiger bone makes 50 half-litre bottles of 'tiger wine' for rheumatism pains. These sell for US\$84 a bottle.

A Taiwan brewery imports as much as 2,000 kg of tiger bone annually to make 100,000 bottles of the wine.

In 1991, Chinese indigenous medicine firms exported more than 15,000 cartons of tiger bone tablets, 5,250 kg of confections, and 31,000 bottles of tiger wine. A medium-sized bag of tiger bones sells for anything up to US\$20,000.

"So far conservation has mainly been as an issue involving countries with tigers," said Thomson. "But the only long-term solution can be found through a dialogue between countries with tigers and those which are using tiger products".

He says Traffic International is now trying to develop contacts with the traditional pharmaceutical indus-

try in countries in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. During the first international conference on the tiger here last month, more than 300 wildlife experts and officials from around the world agreed to set up a 'Global Tiger Forum' of countries with big cat populations to save the species from extinction.

The conference was called by India to mark two decades of its tiger conservation success story. 'Project Tiger', launched in April 1973, is the only systematic effort so far in the world to 'protect the striped feline in its natural habitat'.

During the 1930s and 1940s, thousands of tigers were killed in China because they killed livestock. The feline's South Chinese and Siberian cousins now number a bare 30 to 40 each.

In the early 1990's Nepal's royalty took British guests on extraordinary elephant-back shooting sprees in which hundreds of tigers were massacred. Nepal's tigers nearly vanished, but conservation has brought their numbers back to 300. Now, they are facing a new threat from poachers who poison them with pesticides.

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