

Alternatives

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
— Albert Einstein

Why a special section on Alternatives

From the *Alternative Team*

Bangladesh is faced with a multitude of problems, some big, some small. Poverty, hartals, traffic jam, polarized politics, maldevelopment, corruption, violence against women, pollution, water crisis, loadshedding, student mastani, and many more. While the social, political and psychological impacts of each of these problems are themselves immense, far more critical problem has been the lack or want of ideas and practices in confronting or overcoming these problems. Most of us are either engaged in the art of reproducing wisdom devoid of any relevance to our society or even worse, resigned to a state of hopelessness. It is in the midst of this crisis both in real life as well as in our thinking that alternative ideas and practices need special nurturing, lest we find ourselves engulfed by all these problems and make our living perpetually hellish!

The purpose of this two-page 'Alternatives', therefore, is both very broad and specific. On the one hand, it seeks very concretely new ideas and ways to confront problems faced by the people and the country, while on the other hand, it aspires to create a space for imagination and insights towards resolving some of these problems. With this end in mind, the following themes have been identified for a critical intellectual and practical intervention: (1) State of Politics: parties and hartals; (2) Environment: garbage, public toilet and housing; (3) Development: from economics to people's economics; (4) Female/Male House Workers; (5) National and Societal Security: from national defense to local mastans; (6) Audio & Visual Media: freedom or domination; (7) Education: curriculum, governmentalization and teacher/student politics; (8) Water: access to fresh water; (9) Tourism and Recreation; (10) Transportation: from rickshaw to automobiles; (11) Hazards of Bills: from overbilling to paying bills; (12) Hazards of International Travel; (13) De-governmentalizing Governmentality; (14) Traffic Jam; and (15) Health and Hospitals. Each of these themes or a part of it will be covered on a fortnightly basis starting today.

The maiden issue has focused on the 'Access to Fresh Water' for two important reasons. Firstly, Bangladesh has more often been referred to as the 'Land of Waters', but then it had the misfortune of finding itself not only in floods (the cause for the name) but also in the midst of polluted and arsenic contaminated water. Secondly, given the dimension and the complex nature of the problem, few noble ideas rooted in Bangladesh and the region has come to inform and seek solution to the problem. This is particularly surprising when so many scholars and researchers in this country are engaged in the water discourse. The articles that are presented here include both concrete suggestions to some of the problems related to water as well as methods and approaches to overcome the stereotypes and cliches of the past on the issue of water. This is, however, only the beginning of the exercise, more alternative thoughts on the water issue will follow in times ahead. It may be mentioned that neither The Daily Star nor the Centre for Alternatives is responsible for the views expressed in 'Alternatives', only the authors are. Readers' response and contribution are essential in making 'Alternatives' a success.

'Karbala' Syndrome: Dhakaite's Cure for It

by Sohela Nazneen

If you give me a bucket of water I'll answer all your question on water crisis in this area." A dejected high school student from Goran commented after being asked about the water crisis in his area.

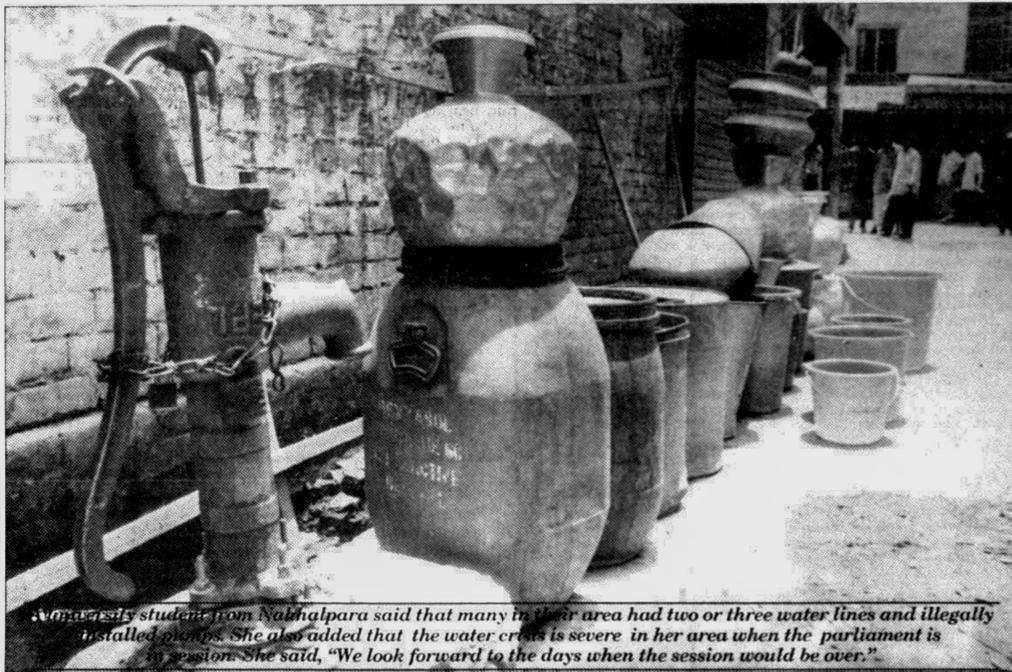
In recent years a considerable section of the Dhakaite's have had the experience of their area turning into a mini 'Karbala'. Everyday the nine million Dhakaite's need about 140 crore litres of water. The WASA deep tubewells supply about 90 crore litres of 'arsenic-free water' which means the water supply shortage in Dhaka is an unbelievable 50 crore litres per day!

The Dhakaite's are facing a situation no less worse than Imam Hossain and his followers. Rationing drinking water, water for cooking, washing utensils is a 'normal' daily occurrence for the 'Dhakaite's' living in mini 'Karbala's'. The list of sufferings of the 'Dhakaite's' is very long indeed. Not taking a bath for several days, not being able to wash clothes, utensils or cook, standing several hours in line for WASA water supply vans, spending hours to find alternative water sources, having fights with the tenants over water rationing process, spending enormous amount of money to buy water from WASA — all are common experiences of the inhabitants of these mini 'Karbala's'.

Last year one middle class family in Old Dhaka spent about Taka 55, 000 buying WASA water. Last month the residents of Madartek were out of water for 25 days. The people of Nakhhalpara were not able to take a bath for seven days. The female residents of these mini 'Karbala's' suffer the most since they have to carry out the daily cooking, washing chores, and are in charge of the water 'rationing' or finding alternative source process and face the 'wrath' of tenants for water shortage.

Recent reports have appeared in the print-media about the sufferings of the people living in area struck by 'Karbala' syndrome. WASA has announced that it will take steps to mitigate the situation. What has been overlooked in all the hoopla about water crisis in the city is how the primary stockholders of the following areas could be covered: Elephant Road, Goran, Kakrail, Madartek, Maghbazar, Sonargaon slum area. Among them were university students, homemakers, part-time houseworkers, serviceholders, school teachers and small businessmen.

As it always turns out to be the case, people are quite aware about the causes of this severe water shortage. Moreover, they have proposed some innovative and basic solutions. Not all of these solutions may seem 'practical' or 'feasible' but those who have the most at



University student from Nakhhalpara said that many in their area had two or three water lines and illegally installed pumps. She also added that the water crisis is severe in her area when the parliament is in session. She said, "We look forward to the days when the session would be over."

Why Has All the Water Gone?

Everyone interviewed is aware of the fact that the population of Dhaka has increased tremendously over the past decades and that Dhaka WASA does not have the capacity to meet the current demand. One of the part-time houseworker ('kajer bua') who lived in Sonargaon slum area explained it simply. "There are only two water supply lines in our slum. And everyday the slum population is increasing."

However, the 'Dhakaite's' interviewed also felt that excessive demand and increasing population are not the only reasons for the current water shortage. Homemakers who live in high-rise apartments pointed out that the apartments were one of the major factors for water crisis in their areas. Power failure and frequent loadshedding were mentioned as major reasons behind water supply shortage by everyone.

Aside from the change in the city's demography and the lack of basic infrastructure, everyone mentioned that illegally installed pumps and water supply lines in their areas, corruption and irregularities in WASA as central causes for water crisis. One elderly homemaker from Elephant Road complained that the influential people of the locality bribed WASA officials and have installed their water pipeline four feet below the legally approved level. Now whenever the water supply is short in that area water flows into those pipelines

only.

A university student from Nakhhalpara said that many in their area had two or three water lines and illegally installed pumps. She also added that the water crisis is severe in her area when the parliament is in session. She said, "We look forward to the days when the session would be over." The MP hostel is near Nakhhalpara and when the Parliament is in session the water supply is diverted to meet the need of the MPs. She wished that there were some ways to make the MPs feel the agonies of water shortage!

Lack of integrated urban planning between the various relevant sectors (Rajuk, DESA, WASA, PWD) was stated as a major cause for the severity of this crisis. The same elderly homemaker from Elephant Road said that they (Rajuk, DESA, WASA, PWD etc.) do whatever they want, wherever and whenever they want. Do they sit down and inform each other about their future steps and plans? We are all 'jinnis' (hostages) in their hands." A part-time houseworker of Sonargaon slum area summed up the situation aptly. "The government and those who are supposed to look after things (institutions) do not care about us, they do not take us into account."

Dhakaite's Cure for 'Karbala' Syndrome

The 'Dhakaite's' did not fall short of ideas for solving this crisis. They came up with the following ideas:

1) There is Not a Crowd (Monitoring of Supply Lines): Everyone wanted the illegally installed pumps and supply

lines in their areas to be cut off. Even those respondents who have illegally installed supply lines wanted the illegally installed lines to be cut. What should be noted is that everyone wanted the disconnecting actions to be monitored by a 'credible' third party along with the WASA people. Some suggested that NGOs should be involved in monitoring although some others were against it.

2) It Takes Participation (Community Initiatives): The creation of a local committee for monitoring water supply, WASA's performance in the areas concerned, disconnection of illegally installed supply lines and pumps, and creating social pressure on those with illegally installed water supply lines were mentioned by many of the respondents.

As a part-time houseworker from Sonargaon slum area put it, "Collective action is needed. If we all get together, discuss what can be done, voice our opinions and pressure the chairman something is bound to happen." A few women pointed out that there should be separate local water group for the women in each area so that the women are not marginalized. However, many were concerned that these local committees would be politicized.

A university student from Madartek said "I want a local committee. But once you have such a committee, people will discuss only what happened during AL or BNP regime regarding water supply. This is a human issue. But that would be overlooked and the committee would be politicized." Many also pointed out that the local committee may not be effective since the influential people of the locality have illegally installed pumps and supply lines

BARELY five years ago, just outside the office of the Deputy Commissioner, stood a sixty year old widow, along with her a few hundred women, all shouting slogans against the (in) famous FAP-20; we do not need you to plan our rivers for us. None of your projects are good for us. Break the dams!

Sitting inside, the officers of Tangail Zilla, listened in dismay and contemptuously commented: "All these foolish women (Jato shab boka meye manush)! What do they know about water management? They should all be locked up in their kitchens!"

The silent half that seldom mattered in matters of the "state" and "development", whose usual quiet and patience, make us forget their power, suddenly broke out in thousands and in anger against a project that was destroying the flow of water and their only source of protein - fish. It was destroying their environment and nobody wanted to know about it - nobody wanted their opinion. They speak of people's participation and only ask men's opinion. Are men alone "people" if they protested. That day 10,000 women made themselves heard - stop FAP, grow forests they shouted. That day women stood strong to protect their heritage and environment. Women spoke for the community, spoke for the preservation of nature and spoke for the future of their children.

It started as a gender division of labour: and women are the water bearers, users and providers of family hygiene and cleanliness, and their chores have developed into a feminine

specialization over the years. Surely, none knows better than the shoemaker how best to make shoes! Surely, no man can claim to know more about water management than the woman who has been managing it for centuries! Yet, when dams and bridges are built, tube wells and toilet sites are selected, no one talks to this "specialist!"

The songs and poems about the Bahga Lalona depicts her deep relationship with water, with river: "kolshi kankhe ghate jal", "Tuni kader kuler bou gou tumi kader kuler bou, Jamunay Jaal ante Jachho tumi, shange naito keo", "ekhane romonigulo nadir moto nodi o narir moto kotha kol". Her relationship with

water is that of love and freedom. "Water is freedom. Only when I go to collect water, there is no bar to my movement", says 40 year old Asimunessa from Mymensingh. This is when she meets her "shoi", this is where she can open her heart to her sisters. This is her own time — her own little space in a society that gives her little! This love affair with water is so precious to her!

The freedom of movement which a woman is denied, by prohibitions in the name of religion, is given back to her so

steps can be created if a massive campaign against corruption is launched. This should be spearheaded by the government. Such a step will be successful only if the government is able to convince the people that they mean business.

It should be noted that in spite of gross irregularities in the water sector — the majority wanted the government to manage it. Only a few of the respondents mentioned privatization of WASA as a solution.

5) A Stitch in Time (Long Term Plans): To meet the immediate short-run water shortage many respondents suggested that more pumps and deep tubewells should be sunk. However, they also expressed concern about the falling of underground water below the desired level and wanted other long-term measures to be taken. A few demanded that water refinery should be built. Some, especially the homemakers, suggested that ponds and lakes should be excavated and the water bodies of the city should be preserved. University students also added that the local people should not wait for the ward commissioners, MPs to take actions to preserve the water bodies in their areas. They suggested that the "educated" young persons, students can take a leadership role and start a campaign.

6) Second to Last Point But Not the Least (Other Suggestions): Some of the respondents wanted the government to enact laws against constructing anymore high-rises in the city, strong punishments and implementation of these punishments for those who do not pay WASA bills. From Nakhhalpara it was suggested that WASA emergency water supply trucks should be sent to the affected areas on a "first-come-first-serve" basis and the VIPs should not get priority over common citizens who "may have been waiting in line for seven hours."

7) "...For the People." (Political Will): It was interesting to note that everyone stressed the need for political will and accountability of the government for any effective measures to be taken in solving this crisis. However, many dejectedly pointed out that 'accountability' and 'political will' were buzzwords in the political arena that would never turn into reality.

The university student from Madartek summed up the situation. "CHT may be a hot issue for the government and the opposition, but the basic rights of the citizens are never focused upon in our political culture except as an election-winning issue."

The 'Dhakaite's' are aware of the situation and they know what they want — a committed effort at all levels to solve this crisis. The question is, are the key players at all levels willing to make that commitment? The present situation in water sector and political arena point to the contrary. The government, political parties, WASA, local elite have a long way to go if they want to focus on these alternative solutions and make the water crisis solution process participatory.

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Water Discourse

Where Have All the Women Gone?

by Sharmeen Murshid

that she may go about doing a "lowly" task that no man would do — fetch water! (Twenty three-year-old Zohura fetches water everyday. When asked whether her husband helps, "Never! He considers it a lowly job", came the answer. Even during pregnancy she had to carry this heavy load until one day she protested against it.)

No man can even begin to comprehend what water means to a woman — the intensity of its meaning in her life. It is she who lives with it, loves it, fights against it, and cares to protect it — as these 10,000 women wanted to protect it. The upshot was that a major disaster was averted.

The frailty of women has

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been disproved again and again. The heavier the load they carry, louder is the male verdict on female weakness and incapability. "Living with Floods" tells us amazing tales of how women give birth in floods, manage food supply, save their children and property. The tactic they acquire, the ingenuity with which they cope is unbelievable. When relief reaches only 20 per cent of the affected people the question arises how does the remaining 80 per cent survive? Women's amazing tactic of survival and the lessons they learnt from it are what need to be discovered and utilized for development strategies.

Studies show that during floods and cyclones women and children die in much larger numbers than men. Very often women die trying to save children and property. It is felt, that it is the main responsibility of women, to first save the children and then the animals and the house. One survivor of the 1988 floods did not leave her house and property for safety for fear of being "blamed" for the losses by her husband and family. To make matters even more cruel, the women, even under such crises, are subjected to purdah and fatwa by the local mollahs and matobbars! Women starved but could not go out of their houses, with what ever available to cover themselves, to collect relief because they had lost their clothes in the disaster. Says one Mosameth Begum, "We can cope with nature, but we cannot cope with the social 'laws' imposed upon us by men."

Historically, women in Bangladesh have been the key players in water conservation. As water bearers and users, they have expertise of their own for preserving and managing the water needed by the family.

Society has contributed, through mal hygiene practice and unscrupulous dumping of industrial waste, to the rapid destruction and pollution of its surface water bodies. Thus traditional sources of water such as ponds and lakes have become unusable. Tube wells became the only source of portable water. Today, this too is threatened. Not only because the water table is shifting deeper into the soil, but also due to contaminants such as arsenic and lead. With the introduction of 'modern' approaches, traditions have broken down and the community and women have, again, become subservient to a 'masculine reductionist science'. They have been displaced from their natural sources of water, the environment has been abused, old systems have been destroyed and new alternative systems to meet the present crisis have not yet fully evolved. Alternatives have to be found in 'feminine' knowledge and a value system of preservation.

In Bangladesh, the position of women is influenced by unequal access to resources, social customs, and patriarchal social structures. The water and sanitation sector works at the periphery of this problem. The various policies of the government and the donor agencies such as the World Bank, are shifting, indeed, very slowly towards the feminization of the WSS (Water Sanitation Sector). It has begun to create conditions for the involvement of women in it by ensuring equal opportunities or mechanisms for their participation.

The inclusion of women in development appears to have become an imperative of planning. Every project proposal demands the inclusion to be accepted. Every project claims to be participatory and 'gendered'! Unfortunately, it is more rhetorical than real. So much so that concepts of 'empowerment', 'awareness raising', 'involvement' and 'participation' have acquired little operational definition and empirical meaning. Including women in development projects brings in money and, therefore, is popular to talk and write about. It becomes inevitable component of project proposals arousing vague expectations. Ill thought suggestions without deep analy-

sis may boomerang against women.

There is need for great caution and careful consideration of what should be women's involvement, otherwise women will take on an increased workload in the name of participatory development. One fears that this is already beginning to happen.

Women's burden increased when they were targeted for family planning (not to mention this to be one of the major reasons for the limited success of family planning). Women's burden will again be on the rise because WSS policies are targeting their special position as water bearers and family health educators.

While collecting water is a freedom for the woman, it is enslavement when she has to carry this burden even when pregnant. Let us not make the same mistake of leaving the man out of 'water and family health' as we did in family planning! A true development approach will be one that will bring women and men on an equal footing without re-enforcing gender stereo types.

With gradual changes in policies women are taking on non-traditional roles of tube well mechanics and are participating in community WSS committees in selecting sites for tube well installations. However, it is far from being a widely practised phenomenon (except perhaps among some NGOs). Local politics centered around 'he who controls water controls power', remains strong. Very few local leaders and Chairmen who influence distribution of tube wells would consider the woman's need in site selection (or agree to women deciding where to install a tube well). Election of women ward commissioners at UP level and their participation in decision making in local projects may well be the latest threat to unilateral male control of resources.

Recently, a grave scarcity of water hit the capital (and this time not due to floods but sheer waste and mismanagement), and once again, it brought the women out on to the streets. They barricaded roads with their kolshi. They called hartals, while the public looted the water tanks of the WASA carriers! Once again we hear the voices of women fighting for their right to water.

All these efforts are all very well. These approaches, although important in a limited sense, do not look at water as a whole. They separate the rivers from the sea and the sea from ground water. Understanding of water must be based on its 'intrinsic function in nature', in its value in maintaining the balance of the natural ecosystem. In one part of the world the water system is destroyed its repercussions is felt in other parts. If the natural course of water in Nepal or India is affected, how can we not be? The challenge is to integrate the global with the local, break narrow national interest in the interest of the world system. The unscrupulous plundering of water resources by the world elite will be the cause of future wars between nations — and not oil or politics, predicted the Vice President of the World Bank in 1995. The day is not far, when water will be bought by the poor nations from the rich nations that will sell it as an essential commodity commercially.

'Man' has bought and sold land upon which all creation of God was to roam freely. He will now buy and sell water, perhaps the ocean, the sky, even the very air that we breathe! Surely, there is something terribly wrong with such a system.

Where are we going wrong? What is the alternative? It is true, both globally and nationally, that women have been the strongest voices of protest against government and social mismanagement of our environment. They are the first and the hardest hit! It is time to turn to them for answers. So ask women.

A land of rivers and rain cannot have a scarcity of water. There will be reservoirs in every village protected by the people. Nepalese women built reservoirs in the mountains where fresh water collects from streams and they have successfully protected these from contamination by children and animals. While men dig canals and dredge rivers, women will work to protect the fresh waters that will flow out of it. Rain forests will bring rain, improve the level of ground water and contain desertification. During the rainy season women will develop a system of rainwater conservation for use during lean season. Bangladesh must begin a movement toward social water management as she has initiated movement for social forestry.

If we have lost sight of the feminine perspective, the feminine values, let us bring them back before it is too late, and mellow down the masculine values and build a system that is more rational, eco-balanced, and, therefore, lasting.

The writer is Chief Executive of 'Brotee'.