

Garbage in Dhaka City

Threat to Health and Habitation

by Md Asadullah Khan

It is a combination of slothful municipal authorities who refuse to change outdated waste disposal practices that can no longer keep pace with population growth, new kinds of trash like plastics and ploythenes and a near total apathy of citizens that has made the garbage management problem so much precarious.

THE Dhaka City's poor garbage management system, to say the least, appears to be scandalous. The city has a host of ills starting from noise and vehicular pollution, untreated sewage, pitted roads, open manholes and ignominious sidewalks or footpaths swarmed by hawkers and other petty business groups. But surpassing all these ills is the deplorable state of the garbage bins that are overflowing all the time. City dwellers, even out of dire necessity are afraid to use the paths that are choked by mountain of garbage and the air around these dumps smell foul.

Dhaka City's garbage dumps that pose a severe threat to health and hygiene include both biodegradables like fruit and vegetable peels as well as non-biodegradables like plastic and ploythenes bags, metal containers, bottles, sachets of everything from hairsprays, shampoos, detergents to provisions and what not. City Corporation trucks collect the garbage from bins quite infrequently and dump it in some landfills on the outskirts of the city in places like Mirpur and Mirpur. But most often the bins are not cleared and cables are giving off foul smell in the surroundings.

There are dangers on the other way round. Since the sides and bottom of the land fill sites are not water-proofed, residues from these places reach and poison the sub-soil water. Household discards can be dangerous: broken thermometers and used batteries can poison the garbage with mercury and lead. Adhesives, glue, varnishes and shampoos contain formaldehyde which is carcinogenic (cancer causing).

Traces of these harmful chemicals or metals are absorbed by plants and enter the bodies of animals which feed on the garbage. And these chemicals reach our body when we drink the milk or eat the meat of one of those animals.

As our experience suggests, almost two-thirds of the city's garbage simply isn't picked up. In the teeming neighbourhoods like Gandaria, Wari, Purana Paltan, Arambagh, Azimpur, Lalbagh filthy water in choked drains stagnates throughout the year and residents have as such learnt to live with frequent attack of dysentery and diarrhoea. The city's garbage collection points are nothing but rotting open heaps of refuse.

human excreta, animal wastes, poultry residues spill directly over open sidewalks and flow into surface drains. The dawning realisation that most people in the city have now is: this city that could once boast of its greenery and clean neighbourhoods is now collapsing under mountains of garbage and seas of sewage. All these garbages are unattended, festering and stinking to become a breeding ground of diseases. With such a rising population having no access to sanitation services and sewage treatment facilities totally absent, residents are sending their wastes into the river Buriganga and Shitalakhya.

Some statistics reveal that each family in the city produces on the average 2 to 3 kg of garbage every day. More than eighty per cent of it is kitchen waste: Potato and onion peels and other vegetable waste as well as egg shells and fish scaling. All this does not rot at first but returns to the dust it came from. The other waste of the family — plastic containers, scrap paper and cans are sold to hawkers. In the affluent localities the trash generated from each household is 3 to 5 kg and may be more in many cases. More than half is not biodegradable. There are plastic bags, plastic bottles, tins and cans that cannot be recycled. If slums and poor households produced as much trash, they daily mountain of garbage would grow to about 10,000 tonnes in place of 4,000 to 5,000 tons at present, as one statistics from the City Corporation source reveals.

Happily, in some cases the informal system of waste recycling through a vagabond group of rag pickers operates in some localities. But estimates on the amount of waste picked up by these group range from 15 per cent to 20 per cent of all solid wastes. Many advanced countries in Europe, America and even in Asia have achieved overall recycling rates of 65 per cent. And with the failure to recycle or reprocess waste, cities namely Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna are running short of space to dump the accumulating mountains of garbage. With the advancement in technology, growth of fast food shops, processing plants of different household provisions, these types of garbages are piling up. In most areas of the city, there are no bins near houses consequently thousands of 'unofficial' dumps occupy the city area.

Worse, the city's landfills are hotbeds of diseases and a variety of poisons are leaking into their surroundings. They are not really landfills; they are just stretches of land where garbage is dumped. If the City



Corporation would have desired to improve things, they could have sought suggestions from the experts in the Civil Engineering Department of BUET for design of landfills that are most ideal and scientifically perfect. It hardly needs to be told that wastes putrefy in the open, inviting disease-carrying flies and rodents and a filthy poisonous liquid called leachate which leaks out from bottom contaminating ground water, as has happened in the Rayerbazar and DND area situ-

ated in the periphery of the city. Reports have it that poisonous effluents from the Rayerbazar tannery complex have affected the water pipe spread over the Sultanganj area, and west Dhanmondi. This has resulted in large scale diarrheal diseases in the area. Modern land fills — built with impervious layer of clay or high density plastic to prevent leachate from seeping through and laced with pipes that carry out the liquid and methane

produced by fermenting garbage — would of course cost a high price at the beginning but unless landfills are built that way threat to public health and sanitation would always remain there. On the other hand, to get rid of such a menacing situation, more and more citizens must get involved in garbage disposal. People have to realise that garbage is also a person's responsibility and he or she should take some initiative to remove it.

City Corporation, in a novel gesture could supply bags of two different colours to the residents and ask them to separately deposit bio-degradable and non-biodegradable refuse into, say, red and black plastic bags for proper disposal. Given good will, initiative and societal agreement, problems however daunting can be solved. Reports have it that in Tamil Nadu of India, a movement called 'Civic Exnora' collects

Rs 10 to Rs 25 from residents and hires 'street beautifiers' to cart away trash on a tricycle. Kitchen and garden waste which comprises half of urban garbage is converted into rich compost, later sold as fertilisers. Paper, glass and metals are recycled and rubble used for construction. There are at least 3000 exnoras — each covering 75 to 100 households — all over urban Tamil Nadu who have taken charge of their own garbage. Many people in other parts of the world have learnt this dictum 'Trash is treasure' and the movement that started in 1989 in India has made a long headway paying off enormously. Garbage it must be noted again, is a local problem and must be handled locally. When we are dumping it in the city's dustbins, we are only shifting the problem, not solving it.

Delhi's remarkable social and environmental activist Iqbal Malik's effort in garbage management is most inspiring. She has a cleaning brigade of about 100 boys who collect garbage from 7000 homes in nine neighbourhoods and one university. What they do is sort out the garbage into two lots. One is of biodegradables and the other is of non-biodegradables which contain things like plastic bags, tins, glass and scraps of metal. These biodegradable heaps, they turn into organic manure by burying them into a compost pit and the non-biodegradables they sell to scrap collectors for recycling.

The scheme has proved to be effective because it decentralises garbage disposal. Every neighbourhood's garbage is disposed of within the neighbourhood. And the scheme finances itself because the small charge these brigades might take from homes would be distributed among the cleaning boys catering for a sort of self employment of a group of youth who are desperately looking for work. Could not the government, City Corporation, NGOs and people at large give some thought as to whether this sort of garbage disposal system be replicated in our cities? If it could be done, it would do our environment a lot of good. Happily, reports are there that in some areas of Kalabagan and Mirpur in the city, this sort of cleaning brigades are operating.

There should be responsibilities and obligations blended together. City Corporation officials can't just shelve their responsibilities by placing some bins on the streets here and there. Calcutta that was till recently a dirty city buried in heaps of trash looks much cleaner now because of the effort of Corporation Mayor and officials there. Garbage trucks

now roam the city quite regularly. Illegal street markets are being cleared. If a hawk-eyed municipal officer catches anybody littering the street, he will be fined Rs 50 instantly.

"We will rest only when Calcutta is squeaky clean", so says Kantil Ganguly, mayor of the city of 12 million population, more than the size of Dhaka. "It is a fight to the finish", so declared the mayor. The city has roped in film stars and writers to transmit the message. And that's the type of resolve the city father of Dhaka needs to usher in a programme of cleaning and development. Expectedly, people would have desired the mayor to come out in public and visit some market places namely Newmarket, Kucha Bazar, Shantinagar Bazar and Thatari Bazar and the bus terminals in the city to see it for himself how dirty and smelly condition prevails there. People do not expect that these places would smell roses but the present appalling condition might show an improvement.

How Garbage Can Be Re-used

Organic waste: About half of the country's urban garbage consists of vegetable peelings and other kitchen wastes. These can be converted into compost quite easily.

Bioreactors: Vegetable matter is thrown into a vat and methane released. It can be used as cooking fuel.

Fuel pellets: Organic waste is dried and then compacted into fuel pellets that can be used as firewood substitutes by the urban poor.

Compost: Garbage can be converted into rich, chemical free fertiliser. It's either turned over by worms (vermicomposting) or broken down by microbes over a period of a week to half a month.

Plastic: About 60 per cent of the country's plastic waste is useless, littering and choking drains, sewers and landscape that create water logging during rainy season. Thin plastics like vegetable bags are too costly to recycle. The only option is to reduce the use of plastics.

Precisely true, it is a combination of slothful municipal authorities who refuse to change outdated waste disposal practices that can no longer keep pace with population growth, new kinds of trash like plastics and ploythenes and a near total apathy of citizens that has made the garbage management problem so much precarious. But we have to be careful right now. Because the city is running too short of spaces to dispose of the refuse and danger to human health is rising fast.

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Looking Back with Feeling

by Julian Francis

I found that the returnees had mostly grasped their new opportunities, had been working very hard and, in many cases, they have already managed to get their agricultural cycle going again.

LAST month, I spent a week that was both a fascinating and thought-provoking one, and one which has brought back many memories for me on two counts.

First, there was the Peace and Chittagong Hill Tracts Conference in Dhaka which I attended. As many said at the Conference, it is probably the first time such a peace accord has been reached without any outside intervention. I was very interested to listen to the views of all concerned with the preservation of peace in and the development of the Hill Tracts, as I had recently visited all the thanas in which the returned tribal refugees are now in the process of settling down.

I had been visiting Khagrachari in connection with the supplementary food distribution there of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, which, at the request of successive governments of Bangladesh, has been made to all registered refugees who have returned to Bangladesh from Tripura since 1994.

My mind went back to June 1971 when, while working for

Oxfam-UK, I had been responsible for the supplementary relief assistance (food, medicine, clothing, blankets) to about 500,000 Bangladeshi refugees in India, a large number of whom had fled to camps in Tripura, and so it was a strange feeling, on this occasion, 27 years later, to be assessing the rehabilitation needs of refugees in 1998 returning from Tripura.

On my recent trip to the Hill Tracts, I found that the returnees had mostly grasped their new opportunities, had been working very hard and, in many cases, they have already managed to get their agricultural cycle going again. Now, working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and working closely with the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, I made sure that I understood the overall humanitarian needs of all sections of the population of the area, and not just the returned refugees.

My impression, based on personal visits, what I learnt from government authorities and members of the tribal communities, was that only about 10 per cent of the returned

refugees had been unable to occupy their lands, and the settling of these land cases was under process. In Khagrachari District, I found the Deputy Commissioner, the Superintendent of Police and all the Thana Nirbahi Officers, very open and helpful to me, and very committed to all the extra work which has come their way as a result of the Peace Accord.

The second event which made me go down the memory lane was the colourful opening of the bridge over the Jumuna River, which as one journalist put it, "stands as a confluence of hopes and aspirations of the entire nation". My mind went back thirty years when, in Bihar, India, I worked closely with the village development programmes of the Gandhian leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, who during the 'Quit India' movement in the 1940s, had blown up bridges to frustrate the British authorities.

I also remembered my first visit to Dhaka in January 1972, when I drove an Oxfam vehicle from Calcutta. The journey was slow, not only because the roads were choked with happy

Bangladeshis returning home, but also because bridges and river ferries had been badly damaged during the Liberation War. I had the opportunity of calling on Sheikh Mujib soon after he returned to Dhaka from Pakistan. I told him that Oxfam wanted to support rehabilitation and development work and preferred not to carry on with further distributions of relief supplies.

I asked him what we should do. He said that as I had driven overland from Calcutta, I should have a good idea of the needs of Bangladesh. I replied that communications seemed to be in bad shape, and so, as a result of that and other discussions, Oxfam was able to fund the purchase and repair of ferries which are still plying on the rivers of Bangladesh to this day. So, travelling over the bridge on 23 June made me remember my connections with bridges and communications in this part of the world.

The writer, from the UK, has worked in relief, rehabilitation and development in the sub-continent and other parts of Asia for the last 30 years.

Never-Say-Die Women Activists Want Quota Bill Through

by Rupa Chatterjee

WOMEN activists have strengthened their resolve to ensure passage of a bill to reserve a third of seats in the Indian Parliament and state legislatures for women despite the government's failure to legislate on it.

Though angry with the political parties for virtually going back on their stand to support the radical measure, women's rights groups seem all the more determined to step up their movement in its favour.

"If anything, our resolve has grown stronger," said Veena Nayyar of Women's Political Watch (WPW). "We have got free advocacy. For me it's a positive development as every woman in this country has been watching and following this," she said of the "unparliamentary" behaviour in the Lower House when the bill was snatched from Law Minister M. Thambidurai's hands before he could introduce it.

"They (the bill's opponents) were desperate, they knew that it would go through" if it had been voted upon on July 13, Nayyar told IANS. "I hope they do the same a few more times so men and women get repulsed with their behaviour. Women will just not vote for them." Activists claim the legislation's opponents had come up with no fresh objections. "It's (opposition to the bill) is not sudden at all," said Brinda Karat who heads the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA).

She was referring to demands that women from communities referred to in official parlance as "backward castes" as well as minority religious groups be given a quota within the 33 per cent seats that the bill seeks to set aside for women. These objections have cropped up each time the bill has been taken up for debate.

"We believe women should not be divided on the basis of religion or caste (as) they have common problems...they are equally marginalised and discriminated against," said Jyotsna Chatterji of the Joint Women's Programme (JWP).

"We were never against giving place to women from backward castes and minorities," said Ranjana Kumari of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti (Society for the Emancipation of Women). "Let them at least reserve 33 per cent seats, then it's up to them (government and

Parliament) to decide on the distribution." Women's rights activists would "intensify and continue the movement," Chatterji said. "We are now seeking another meeting with the (Lower House) Speaker." Activists have come down hard on attempts by Speaker G.M.C.

Balayogi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government to pass the blame for the bill's failure on to the other. While the Speaker points to the lack of consensus among political parties over the bill and says he can reintroduce it only if he is asked to do so by the government, the ruling coalition claims Balayogi could easily have introduced the bill for voting despite the pandemonium.

Karat described these reasons as "just a pretext" to ensure the bill was doomed. She claimed the bill had fallen through due to "the government's lack of political will" while Kumari felt "the Speaker was unwilling to bring it (the bill) up" for discussion. "As it stands today, it's (the bill) is no more on the agenda (of the Lok Sabha) and it seems at the moment that reintroduction won't be possible in this session," Chatterji told IANS, adding the current situation made it all the more important for women's groups to step up pressure on the government.

Activists have for years alleged that Indian politics is male-dominated, pointing out that women have never occupied more than ten per cent of seats in Parliament since India became independent. They say as women form at least 40 per cent of the population, it is time men yielded political space.

Affirmative action such as reservation, they feel, could help national policy become more sensitive to women's concerns, which are common, no matter what their social, economic or religious backgrounds.

Karat, Kumari and Nayyar claimed the movement to press for women's reservation had been intensified since last week and protests were being organised in various parts of the country. At the federal level "we'll now try and get the bill introduced in the House" all over again, Karat pledged. She alleged there was a

move afoot to dilute the percentage of seats to 15 per cent from the 33 per cent the Women's Reservation Bill in its pre-

own Janata Dal party who said reservation would benefit only affluent urban women at the cost of those from poorer sec-



sent form sought to set aside. "That's the game," she told IANS, Chatterji concurred.

The Women's Reservation Bill has proved to be a thorn on the side of three successive prime ministers. When H.D. Deve Gowda's government tabled the bill, it was sent to a parliamentary committee for changes following objections. His successor I.K. Gujral was humiliated on the floor of the Lok Sabha by members of his

tions. Last week a downcast Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee described as "most shameful" the incidents that led to the snatching of the bill from the Law Minister's hands and the government regretted the fact that even parties like the Congress, which initially supported its introduction, later went back on their word.

— India Abroad News Service



Garfield

