

# Alternatives

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## Fresh Air is All that We Need

From the *Alternatives* Desk

TAGORE made it quite clear in *Sadhana* (1914) that modernity in so far as it was based on cities and city life was bent upon destroying the nature. In this campaign, as Tagore maintained, modernity not only separated human beings from nature but also took "pride in thinking that it is subduing nature." In contrasting modernity with the ancient civilization of India, Tagore opined in favour of the latter for it succeeded in making a fusion between the circumstances of forest life, in which "our civilization" had its birth, and the eagerness of the mind to remain free from the desire to dominate and extend the boundary walls of cities. At no point of time, as Tagore went on to say, did we think of destroying the nature or even forest for enriching "our civilization."

Keeping aside the strength of the argument posed against the eco-bashing modernity, Tagore's intervention at this stage was critical from two standpoints. First of all it was full of fresh air, bringing home the point that there are things in "our civilization" (the union of man with nature for one), which need not be discarded as matters of tradition and feebleness, instead they require to be cultivated further. More important, however, is the second point. It brought home the point that the power of modernity (and by extension, colonial domination) has so crippled our mind that we now glorify the city and see nature as an obstacle to our growth and development. Despite our struggle against colonialism and entry into the post-colonial era, this is something that has continued to inform and influence our minds and activities.

If we are to merit Tagore's wisdom, it is hardly a surprise that the modernists of our time, including the government, would continue to 'subdue nature' and replace it with man-made monuments! It is this "colonized (modernist) mind," so to say, that has led the governmental planners, including the sycophants of the latter, to opt and support for the replacement of the greenery of the Osmani Uddyan with soulless cement and concrete.

The overturning of things at the Osmani Uddyan, however, will not be easy to accomplish. But then, not for the easy reason that the society is highly polarized and therefore the Awami sympathizers, at least on this issue, will be soft on attacking the government, but more because the opposition to the governmental plan remains less cohesive and consistent in putting forward the reasons for their opposition. In fact, a senior colleague of mine, who is otherwise quite active in the pro-eco movement, once told me that a reporter of a newspaper called him to know whether the current activists protested when trees were cut down to make residential quarters for the University teachers! The critique here, however, does not justify supporting the governmental plan at the Osmani Uddyan. It only shows that the goal of keeping the Osmani Uddyan green must be inclusive of a larger goal of reproducing life and living based on the fundamental union of man and nature. Our national anthem, again a Tagore verse, has the larger goal in clear terms. What is required is only fresh air for the government, sycophants, passive on-lookers and the like to breathe, feel and understand the message it carries. But then, Dhaka is already covered with bluish, foul air....

## Lest We Sink

by Serajul Islam Chowdhury

*In fact it would signify a denial to the citizens the fundamental right to breathe freely. Construction of an international hall at the most busy and crowded part, indeed the heart, of the city would contribute negatively to problem of traffic jam. The Uddyan is public property, building a hall in it would amount to refusing the public access to its use.*

IT is easy to sink; and indeed we are doing that, even if unknowingly. The United Nations Human Development Report indicates that we have gone further down. Last year we were 146<sup>th</sup> among 174; this year we have sunk to 100<sup>th</sup>. It is not unlikely that we will continue to do so unless we try to swim. And swimming means resistance. We must resist of the many things we as a people will be required to do, unless we decide to go down, is to take care of our environment, both human and natural.

The human environment is worsening, so is the natural one. Seemingly nature is friendly - but it also knows how to be revengeful, and the revenge of nature can be crueler than that of man. Collectively as well as individually, we have been not only indifferent but also cruel to nature, not with standing our famous love for it; and nature is retaliating. The phenomenon is global and not local, but the local suffering is none the better. In fact it is worse. The real, if hidden, enemy is capitalism. The capitalist ideology is, unapologetically, a believer in making profit, and it is, of course, profitable to the open market, compellingly. Marginalized although we are, we are not outside the parameters of the capitalist system and its ideology. We are perpetrating savagery on nature.

For example, this monstrous city of Dhaka had once its parks and gardens. Shahbag, Paribag, Lalbag, Hazaribag, Se-gun Bagicha, Kalabagan, Sobhanbag, Kathalbag, Dhooop

Khola Math, Armanitola Maidan, Sirajuddoula Park, Coronation Park must have been open spaces at one time or another, but they have disappeared, with their names being mocked at by the jungles of concrete and bricks that have taken over, illegally no doubt. The town was well known for its markets and lanes. It was a conglomeration of fifty-two markets and fifty-three lanes, they used to say. Well, the market and lanes have proliferated, like worms - ugly and harmful, to the historical detriment of life saving open spaces. The growth of markets and lanes is not accidental, it is all of a piece with ideology and philosophy of capitalism, whose helpless victims we all are, and will continue to be, unless resistance is created.

It is not only the gardens that have disappeared. The river, the Buriganga, which could be should have been, the life-line of the city has ceased to exist. The town had canals which have been allowed to be transformed into markets and lanes. All these are supposed to be developments. What has really happened is that the quality of life has declined. The governmental decision to destroy Osmani Uddyan in the interest of building an International Conference Hall has astonished us all. But it is not as surprising as it looks. For governments are agents of capitalism, and they cannot afford to be friendly towards nature, to do so would mean the collapse of their very raison d'être.

But we, as citizens and vic-

tims must protest and resist. The decision is immoral and illegal. It is immoral because the destruction of the garden would mean adding to the health hazards of the citizens, which already have become ominous.

In fact it would signify a denial to the citizens the fundamental right to breathe freely. Construction of an international hall at the most busy and crowded part, indeed the heart, of the city would contribute negatively to problem of traffic jam. The Uddyan is public property, building a hall in it would amount to refusing the public access to its use.

The action will be illegal as well. A thing call the master plan exists for this city, which is a document prepared by the government itself. The plan shows the Uddyan area as a green spot. The government seems to be bent upon violating a plan preped by experts who must have gone into all aspects of town planning. Individuals are not allowed to disregard the town plan; should the government, which is supposed to protect the city and not destroy it, be allowed to do so? We understand that the government had consulted town planning experts on the question of site selection for the proposed conference hall and was told, unanimously, that of all the possible sites suggested the Uddyan is the worst. The public also thinks so. A public opinion survey shows that 90% of the city dwellers are against the government decision. That was before the Citizens' Movement for protecting the Uddyan had made its presence felt; since then more dwellers have become aware of the consequences of the destruction, and the opinion saying us to the government's decision is likely to have risen to 99%. How can a government disregard this public opinion, whatever be its own private inclinations? The government owes its existence to the support of the public, to turn against public opinion is not legal, taking law in its wider con-

notation. [N. P. What the citizens' resistance movement is doing, on the other hand, is both moral and legal. It is the moral right of a citizen to stand up against an immoral act. What is more, the constitution of the country enjoins upon its citizens the duty of protecting property belonging to the state. (Clause 21, Article 2)]

Osmani Uddyan is a test case. In a sense it optimises the very spirit and history of our liberation war. The issue at stake, is not a park, it is much more than that. People's right to live freely is being threatened. The question really is, which should prevail: public opinion or the anti people and arbitrary decision of the government? To lose this battle would mean making way for further losses; because other parts will fall, like nine-pins; what is more, people's opinion will be defeated.

This we cannot allow to happen. For we must not sink. Parks have their history. It was, in a mango grove that the East India Company had won the battle of 1757. A hundred years later the sepays rose in a war of independence against the regime; and in a garden in Dhaka which the English later called Victoria park to signify their victory, many of the rebels were hanged. What is now called the Suhrawardy Uddyan was an open space in 1948 in which Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the "Father" of the Pakistani nation, had declared that Urdu alone, should be the state language of Bengal. People were astonished, they said no; that no became louder defying all the guns of state power to silence it. And it was in the same garden that the Pakistani occupation army had to bow down to the no-saying Bengalis, surrendering their arms as well themselves. History is perhaps going to be made in Osmani Uddyan - once again.

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Traffic jam: Perennial problem.

— Star photo

## Managing the Dhaka City

by Shamim Ara Begum

*In any event RAJUK would publish the scheme and notify people as to the same and shall only finalise it having due regard to the objections raised by the people. In all the incidents of lake fill-up for creation of plots or construction of roads, RAJUK has consistently violated this requirement and people at very late stage could only see the implementation of such secret schemes in favour of few advantaged.*

DHAKA is badly served for open space according to any per capita measures. Besides this the distribution of open space does not correspond to population distribution. Indeed the more crowded area, the less open space is available. This is quoted straight from the Master Plan prepared for the City of Dhaka to guide the future development and expansion of the City between the years 1995-2015. The same document tends to define "open space" as "any portion of a zoning plot essentially free of structures that serves the purpose of visual relief and buffering from building and structural mass. These areas may be privately or publicly owned and may or may not be accessible to the general public. Open space includes but is not limited to parks, playgrounds, play fields, botanical gardens, fountains, reflecting pools and other bodies of water, walkways and non-buildable rights of the way. In determining whether an area is open space, the following shall apply. (a) It shall be unobstructed from its lowest level to the sky, except for natural vegetation, roof eaves and permitted roof overhangs. (b) It shall be at finish grade unless otherwise specified in the chapter. (c) It shall not be used

for parking, manoeuvring of vehicles, or storage of equipment or refuse. (d) A required side, front or rear yard may be considered open space."

It is, therefore, clear that the existing controversy over the use of various lakes, parks and Uddyan of the City has a legal basis that is in fact rooted into the Town Improvement Act, 1953. This Act creates an authority for "the development, improvement and expansion of the Capital of the Republic and Narayanganj and Tongi Municipalities and certain areas in their vicinity and the constitution of a Kartripakkha". That authority is Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkhya or RAJUK which was previously known as Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) suggesting obviously a "trust for improvement". This contemplation of trust as appeared in the name could not be justified with the acts or omissions of that agency and in recent times, it is under fire from the city dwellers for abuse of power and denial of legal requirements and public consultation in management of public properties. This dissatisfaction of the city-dwellers is not a direct consequence of a single irregularity rather is the outcome of long tenured malpractice and indifference of the authorities for which people have fought in the past, though not in a very systematic manner. Fortunately for the nation, people are uniting and have started opening their account for authorities like RAJUK to deposit their answers in support of actions connected with the Constitutional responsibility "to manage public property on behalf of the people in an efficient and dynamic manner" as per Article 13.

Is there any lake in the City of Dhaka that has managed to escape the planning of RAJUK for structural interventions requiring essential change in the characteristics of open space? The answer, in definite terms, is "no". The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Article 15 states some basic necessities that not only include provisions for food and shelter rather aims to provide the people with reasonable recreation. Let us now hear the stories of some of the Lakes that are still striving to serve the drainage purpose for the City and also the recreational thrust of the City dwellers bearing undue interference from RAJUK.

The local residents of Uttara Model Town accused RAJUK for filling up part of the Uttara Lake in violation of the original

Master Plan and the agreements with the allottees. A legal action against the same before the High Court resulted in an injunction on the filling up for housing purpose. The Gulshan, Banani, Barishara Residents Welfare Society (GULBABS) sued RAJUK for allotting plots over the lake area and filling up the same that has been stayed with a direction from another direction from the High Court.

While politics determines the negative factors in compromising with environmental requirements, the same seems to be a very important factor in addressing environmental demands of the people. The residents of Dhanmondi always complained of the ignorance of the various agencies responsible for managing the resources of the Lake. The conflicting authority of the agencies could not be resolved till the change in the political scenario and the people are now observing a development plan being implemented to improve the state of the Lake. While this may be encouraging it was the same politics that kept people in total dark about the components included in the scheme and also the budget for the same.

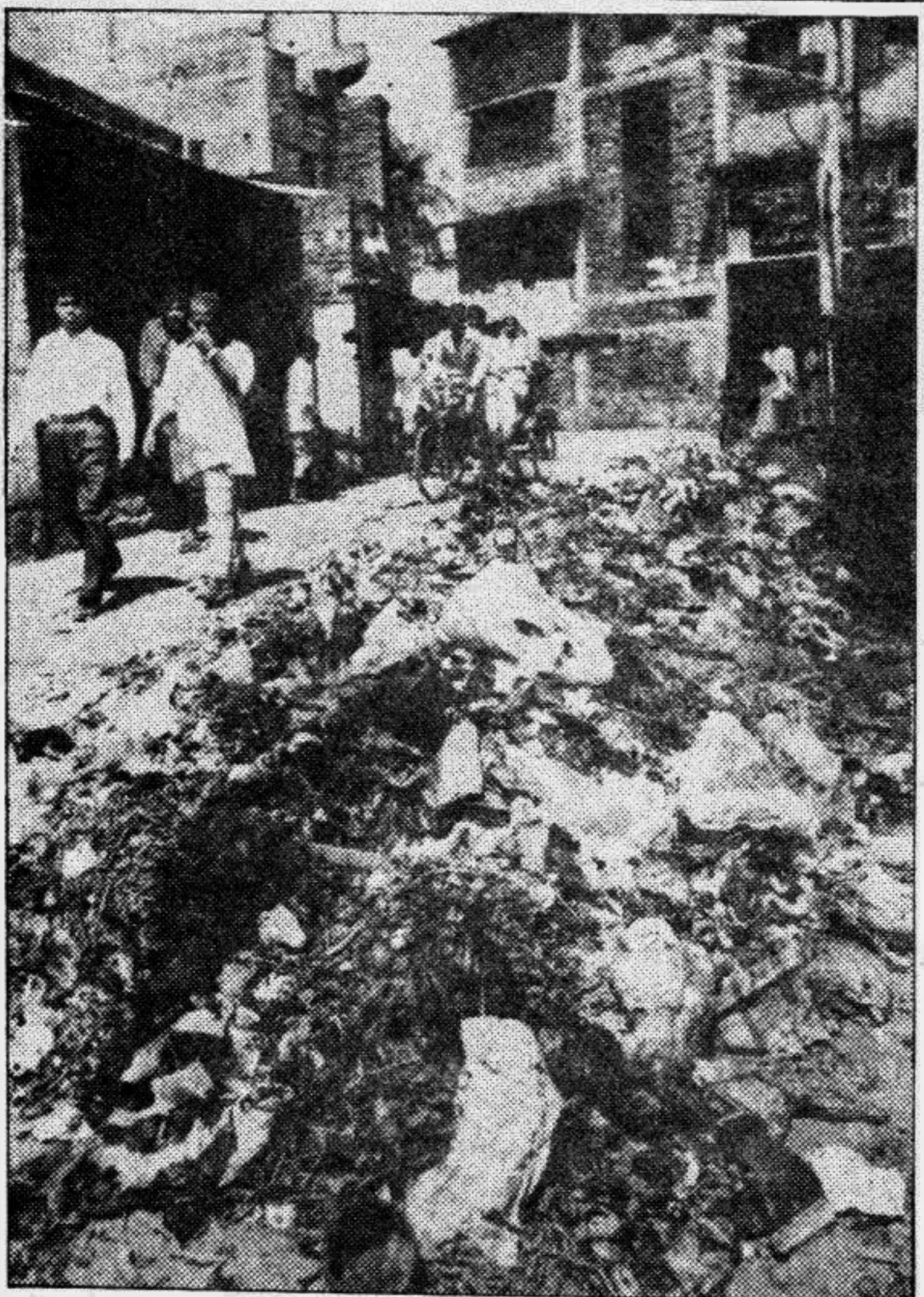
The need for housing is something that falls within the legal responsibilities of RAJUK. There is no disagreement that RAJUK has to address the issue of housing but that has to be done with due diligence and having regard to its other responsibilities that include providing of open spaces. It always remain unclear as to why a handful of people would need housing complex in the prime residential areas of the City at the cost of the open spaces when millions of others are in search for a place to spend some time with the nature.

We may now turn to the state of other open spaces like the Parks and Uddyan. Majority of the areas in the City does not have playing grounds or parks for children. The Government is spending crores and crores of taka for afforestation to save the country from environmental hazards. People of Bangladesh who have a long standing tradition of planting trees are being told under the afforestation programmes of the Government to plant more trees. Realising the importance of open space and expressing concern over the trend to destroy such spaces, a direction was also issued from the office of the Prime Minister in April '98 not to interfere with the nature of an open space and permit any construction

thereon. Yet it is the same Government which is deciding to take away the only available open space in the nature of an Uddyan between the old and new City! One may logically ask that who are the people managing such changes and depriving the ordinary people with limited means of access to such public places. What rationalises the encroachment over the only available open space of an overcrowded vicinity? In supporting its attempt to destroy the beautiful greenery, the Government pleaded forward the issue of a deteriorated law and order situation in the Uddyan. If the maintenance of law and order for 21 acres of land requires 120 crore taka, would anyone calculate how much would be needed for securing the whole of the nation. The strength gaining exercise of the Department of Environment that was gradually showing up in recent times suffered another dilemma, as the DOE appeared to be helpless in protesting the government decisions regarding the Uddyan.

Much to the disgust of the City dwellers the Dhaka City Corporation has failed to fulfil its commitment with regard to observance of legal provisions in maintaining the urban environment and has rather supported the proposed construction. The DCC has respectively constructed a National Open Drama Centre and multi storied building in the name and style "Mahanagar Natyamancha" and "Udayan Market" in side the Bangabhaban Park in the master plan of RAJUK/DIT. RAJUK had objected to the said construction, which has simply denied. The DCC defy the mandate of RAJUK very often in all their relevant affairs and hardly bother to take permission from RAJUK for constructions proposed by them or take note of people's demand for a green and beautiful City. A conflict over jurisdiction of authority has led to the failure of RAJUK in exercising its jurisdiction regarding matters falling within the auspices of the DCC. Rather in every single instance of violation of law it has been blaming the political powers of the previous regime for influencing its decision in allotment of plots. It would be interesting to see what RAJUK would say now regarding the allotment and subsequent cancellation of plots in the prime residential areas of the City severely criticised on the ground of misuse of power and abuse of trust.

The Town Improvement Act, Continued on page 7



Dhaka is often called a city of garbage. Rightly so. In each and every street, in each and every locality, one has to come across such heaps of garbage as shown in the above two pictures taken from two different areas of the city. These accumulated garbage spill over a considerable area and not only pollute the environment but also obstruct passage of pedestrians and traffic, as evident from the pictures.

— Star photo