



# Dhanmondi: Reviving a lost haven

**Deliberations at The Daily Star -BUET-Bangladesh Scouts Workshop held in collaboration with Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote on 24 January 2003**

**Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed, Moderator:** This workshop on Dhanmondi has been convened basically from the general concern for lakes around residential areas or conversely residential areas around the lakes. These lakes in the recent past have been victims of rampant development. There has been a lot of development much of which the residents do not like, or the citizens do not like. There has been the violation of rules, bending of rules and also maybe formulation of rules to benefit certain quarters. There has been an increase in social nuisance in these areas over the last decade or so, security hazard has increased and from what should have been a blissful and serene aspect of the landscape, the lakes and the residential areas surrounding them have become an eyesore, a social hazard, a marketplace, or whatever you call it.

Today the Daily Star, BUET and Scouts have joined hands with the Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote in their concern to reclaim the lost haven as we, those of us who have seen the area, are calling it.

This is in a series of seminars, workshops and roundtables that this Agenda for Urban Concern has discussed over the past two and a half years, and we follow a certain format. We think that because we are architects, engineers, newsmen and scouts, our seminars and meetings are more solution oriented. We have to listen to certain problems obviously but we would like to listen more on how to solve the problem. That is why we shall have two separate sessions. For the first 50 minutes or so we'll have some discussion and then we will break up into groups.

**Mahfuz Anam, The Daily Star:** I have nothing much to say other than welcoming you. I feel joy, pride and honour that you all have decided to answer our call and join this programme. As a newspaper, how we can be of assistance to you is our agenda for the day. We feel that all the newspapers have a significant role to play on this issue. Our role can only be invigorated with your active support. If you are conscious about protecting your own environment and surroundings, only then can we echo the same sentiment strongly in our reports.

Today we are talking about Dhanmondi. In the past we have worked with many other groups in Dhaka in trying to solve certain problems but we haven't been that successful. But we can create an example with Dhanmondi. If we can firstly put a brake on the destruction of Dhanmondi, that will give belief to others that civic action actually does produce something. And if that civic action is taken in partnership with a newspaper, that will give you strength and us renewed enthusiasm to work.

I guess we all know where the main problem is. To be more specific, our homes are being destroyed. I am a son of Dhanmondi. I can remember the kind of environment I grew up in. There was greenery, flowers. We had fields to play and places where friends could pass time. I can imagine the plight of someone of the same age in today's Dhanmondi. He doesn't find those things when he looks around.

So I believe that the first thing that should be done is to prevent any more damage to Dhanmondi. Can't we find the exact number of hospitals, clinics, schools etc. in Dhanmondi and say that from now permission won't be given to establish such institutions anymore?

The next step would be to withdraw the permission given to schools, hospitals, shops and supermarkets that exist in the area at present so that the residents can get back some semblance of lost serenity.

We are basically the support group but the main initiative has to be yours. We

are prepared to back your steps all the way and let me assure you that The Daily Star is committed to the issues of urban concern, civic and basic human rights of all of you.

**Habibul Alam, Bangladesh Scouts:** I just want to narrate to you one small incident that happened yesterday between 4-5am at Gulshan. A young man of 26 years was killed in an accident in front of the Azad Mosque in Gulshan. I had to bring out his dead body from the police station and it was a very moving and unfortunate moment. You might have read about it in the newspapers but the reason I'm telling you this is because I'm afraid we are responsible for the death of that 26-year-old. He was at the peak of his youth and had just joined a business... perhaps the reason for more young people meeting such tragic ends these days is because there's so little space around them now than what had been when we were young.

Your sons and daughters who might be studying in schools colleges and universities are mostly preoccupied at home in front of the television, computer or with the telephone. This is simply not good enough. They need fields and fresh air. So my earnest request to all of you is think about your children. Those of us who are in our fifties have had the chance to breathe clean air and enjoy open spaces in our youth. Let's now try to give something like that to the present generation. We are building impressive new apartments everyday and the builders, engineers, architects, owners and contractors all of us are making money but we have to think about the future too at the same time.

I thank you all for coming and specially The Daily Star who has come forward

city. We can shift the Dhaka Central Jail to the outskirts of the city and establish a park in its place because the area is fast turning into an over-commercialised zone.

I also believe that there's no point in keeping Peelkhana inside Dhaka City. It should go, so that we can use it as an open area. Some of the commercial structures that are bringing in the crowd to Dhanmondi can also be shifted to Peelkhana. That way we may also be able to address the traffic jam that occurs in Dhanmondi.

My second observation is that this lake is an unfinished lake. You can see that it has suddenly come to a stop on its northern side. We need to stretch it more towards the north. We also have to extend it on the Southern side as it once could have had a connection with the river via Peelkhana. So we have to look into ways to develop and extend the lake and also keep its water clean.

The third step, as Sultana has pointed out, should be regarding the management of the lake. This is very important. I feel that there should be a committee to look after that lake and its members should be elected from local residents. The City Corporation can set it up, but residents of Dhanmondi will run it.

I also have an idea on how the committee can raise funds. There are many restaurants and similar establishments in the area. If the committee is given the responsibility of managing those establishments, then it can collect the monthly rent from those restaurants, shops etc. I also want the fishing culture to return. There was a time when people could catch fish here. That should restart. We still have the 'Matsha Shikari Samity', which should be revitalised. Its members could organise the fishing and they can raise donations for the lake. I'm sure both locals and people from abroad will be interested in contributing.

**Iqbal Habb, Architect:** As I have been involved with the Dhanmondi Lake development project, I would like to take this opportunity in giving you an over-



Dhanmondi lake: This serenity is threatened by vices of pollution and encroachment.

without reservation whenever we have approached them. Let's work together. I firmly believe that if we work together we will achieve our goal.

**Ms. Sultana Alam, Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote:** I think we have already struck the principle theme the Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote was formed on. Unless our environments are calm, unless they have assumed a certain form and shape and aesthetic quality we begin to deteriorate as human beings and with us the social fabric begins to disintegrate. We have to think very, very seriously about what kind of mental health situation our children are running in to. A child that can not run around, a child that can not learn to socialise and make friends, climb trees, have fights, come back to the home to be consoled and go back again to the same friends he hated a minute ago is a malformed child. It is not the kind of social human being that we can afford to rest our future on. There's been some sort of misperception on my part or miscommunication. At one point I thought from the Jote's point of view we don't know enough and we needed to educate ourselves. In order to give solutions it has to be based on certain amount of information. So we needed to know about the legal aspects. We have already spent 18 crore Taka on the lake. I believe it was well intended, well meant. We don't have any more but we now need to turn around the design. We need suggestions. Therefore we have asked Mr. Mazharul Islam (Architect) over here.

Mr. Mahfuz Anam talked about the operations that are there with permits having to be withdrawn. The main problem is that most of the operations over there are operating without permits, without licenses. The PWD knows it, RAJUK knows it, City Corporation knows about it and they do absolutely nothing about it.

Let's go into the brief synopsis of the kinds of things I wanted to talk about. One of them is unless we have an agreement on what we mean by a community's use of open spaces, we will end up comparing mangoes with jackfruits.

First of all what does the Jote mean by community ownership and identification with the lake and open spaces around it? It means a place for our children to play, it means having access to places where we can set up a few structures that are not invasive and do not destroy the natural aesthetics of the lake, where our children can go over the weekend for art, for judo, for whatever, while we, who are in our sixties and feel abandoned by our children can learn to console ourselves, learn to take strength from each other, learn to be creative and take on the challenges of our lives.

It means contributing to our major social and economic problems. We could use part of it as a renewable energy farm, maybe a whole set of solar panels and sell the energy back to WASA, DESA whatever. It means a place for community celebrations, fairs, etc. so that we can have a sense of community our fathers and our mothers had. There was Salam Shaheb, Hatem Ali, Begum Sufia Kamal and they all were part of our family. We need to renew that feeling because we can't go on with this meaningless superficial life and the lack of content in our social relationships.

I would also like to point out that for us community identification with the lake and open spaces also means community management. We should at least have a say over the management, a say that the maintenance and security of the lake has been privatised. But in this context of corruption we live in, what does it mean? It basically means that the sub-contractors get money from the Dhaka City Corporation and then they also let shop vendors in and take toll from them. So we have a situation here with schools and colleges coming in illegally, and also this informal sector moving in and taking over what little space we had. We women cannot walk around, our teen-aged daughters have no places to go.

So we also think that there is a major problem in the management structure of the lake. It is presently spread over PWD, which owns it, RAJUK, which makes plans about it and Dhaka City Corporation which somehow feels free to lease it out for 99 years. It has already leased out one stretch of the lake near the Dhanmondi Road 32 to an organisation for 99 years and we don't understand how this comes about. Where do we as a community come in on that?

I'd request you to address the issues of the design of the lake, the architecture of the lake that can be turned around and the management aspect of the lake. The Jote also believes in taking legal measures. We feel that as long as there is just speeches and things like that, the offenders are not affected. That's why we ask someone to show the legal path to reclaim our lost haven.

**Prof. Sirajul Islam Choudhury:** The first problem I see is crowding of open spaces. The whole city converges on our lake and its open spaces. I agree with Sultana that our children do not get the privacy they need here.

At first we need to find out why people from all over the city come to Dhanmondi Lake.

The reason I think why people flock the Dhanmondi Lake is because there's little alternative. We have other parks and open spaces like the Suhrawardy Uddyan and the Ramna Park, but for obvious reasons, atmosphere at those places are not fit for the general people.

To solve this problem, I would suggest creating more open places around the

view of the project. I would touch upon the present status of the lake, what has been done in the past and what can be done in the future so that all of you can have an idea about the project.

When we took on the project, we had a land area of 31 acres and waterbody of around 54 acres. So we were told to try and develop an area of 85 acres. The waterbody in this stretch of area was truncated. Historically the lake was once connected to the Balu River. There was a canal where the Pantapath is now. The lake was connected through that canal bypassing Begunbari and Gulshan with the Balu River. On the other end, it had connection with the Buriganga River. The name Dhanmondi, as we have learned from the books of Muntasir Mamun and Hakim Habibur Rahman, came from the historic paddy (*dhan*) market that once existed in the area. So you can understand how good the river connectivity was with the lake.

The first problem we noticed with this truncated lake was its multiple ownership. Its water was owned by the Fisheries Department, PWD was responsible for its land and the Dhaka City Corporation controlled the various services related with the lake. This situation meant that it was nobody's property, no one really cared for its development.

When we started planning for the lake we had a panel of advisors consisting of senior architects, artists, cultural personalities and writers. At that time, there was a plague affecting fishes of the lake similar to the one that happened at the Gulshan Lake a few months ago. The level of dissolved oxygen in the lake was 0-3.5 percent in different segments. The lake was not a complete one, it was segmented in five different small bodies. This happened because over time waste material was deposited. The main reason behind it was some 79 illegal connections. Some of those connections were private and the others were public, meaning that of the PWD and the City Corporation. They had started using the lake as a dump yard and such was the extent of that dumping that when we tried to remove a sludge to restore flow, at times we had to remove up to 12 feet of garbage stack.

Because it had become stinky and inaccessible due to the grilled-fencing around it the lake had turned into a crime-prone area with drug peddlers, prostitutes, etc. moving in. It also became a popular spot for car-washers who took the opportunity of cleaning the vehicles in segments that were accessible; the open stage that you see now was one such spot.

Those who did fishing or ran fisheries in the area also contributed to the general deterioration through their negligence and ignorance. To attract fishes, they used a type of plant but never took them out. After some time the plants grew to an extent when it became a part of pollution. So all in all the lake was absolutely a dump yard.

Let me tell you a couple of incidents. When we were in the planning stages, two dead bodies were discovered at two different areas of the lake. One was of a chauffeur and the other of a newborn child. So you can see that it was even a dumping place for bodies.

Amidst all the difficulties, some had been using the lake for a long time like the Dhanmondi Walkers Association, Dhanmondi Women Walkers Association, and other organisations. They started voicing their demand of saving the lake. At one stage, the commissioners of the area including Mr. Bablu, who is amongst us today, also felt and demanded that something had to be done for the lake. At this point, the government decided to take up the issue.

So in this backdrop, we took on the project of developing the lake. There were certain elements of this plan. The quality of water was much deteriorated. It was a stalled water body. As we couldn't connect it with any other river or make its two ends meet to create a tidal flow, we drained off all the water of the lake. Next we had planned to remove the sludge in various layers of the lake. We tried to develop the lake's edge or the shore by building retaining wall at places where the walkway had collapsed or in most cases by staging the soil.

To prevent encroachment in future and to make the lake accessible for all the local residents, we planned building walkways all around its shores. We also defined the characteristics of its legal shore and created some activities for retaining its originality.

What we see now is implementation of only a portion of the development project. There's a lot of work left to be done under the actual scheme and it has not happened due to certain factors. Especially the ill attempt to divert a large amount of funds from the original project by creating exorbitant bills showing work that never took place, is one of the chief reasons why the project has remained incomplete.

The management problem has been added to that. We desperately tried to ensure the participation of local residents into the development process and tried to create a management system. We sat with different local organisations and representatives to make them involved with the lake project despite severe pressure from the government's side. There's a management system now in place officially but it doesn't exist.

The management is a two-tier one. The first tier was a nine-member advisors council headed by a (Government) Secretary. There were five local representatives, one person from the Bangabandhu Museum and a Joint Secretary. Recently two more local representatives and one more member from the Bangabandhu Museum have been added to that committee.

The management committee will work under the advisory committee. The advisory committee is responsible for overall maintenance, further development and policy making and monitoring of the facilities that have been created to ensure sustainability of the project.

The management committee was made up of technical persons. It was headed by the chief executive officer of the City Corporation. The other members were chief engineer City Corporation, chief engineer LGED and so on.

**Barrister Dr M Zaheer:** When I returned from the United Kingdom after completing my Bar, I used to walk around the one-bigha residence, around my father's house built on Road No. 17 and marveled at their beauty. Now look what has happened. Dhanmondi is sprouting with commercialisation. I must say I'm alarmed at the remarks of the minister for public works that; 'As Dhanmondi has become commercialised, let's declare it a residential-cum-commercial area.' That is a very escapist attitude. Today we must form a plan and show the resolve to protest and request the minister not to turn Dhanmondi into a commercial zone.

We should define commercialisation. If someone rents his house or area, it's a kind of commercial purpose too, but we have to look into what type of establishments they are letting in. If it's for office purpose or a school or college or university, then the next consideration should be what kind of traffic jam are they creating. If we see that these establishments are bringing in the mass then they must not be allowed.

There's a shopping mall near the Dhanmondi playground, which has already come up despite The Daily Star's drive to stop it; and the minister's remark will only encourage more such structures.

Another suggestion I want to make is...well as Mahfuz Anam has said that what already exists can remain but no more permission should be given for commercial ventures. Besides that, the schools, colleges, clinics, shopping complexes and offices which enjoy all the advantages of our Dhanmondi should pay a special rate of tax to do business here. It's impossible to move around Dhanmondi from 7am to 8pm in the morning and from 3pm onwards because of them. They just can't go on making money while ruining our peace. The extra tax should be paid to the Dhanmondi lake development fund.

I also firmly believe that there should be a committee to monitor regular excavation of the lake.

I also demand that no more structures should be built until there's a joint finding of the various utility service providers like WASA, DESA etc. that they can ensure that they can provide gas, water, electricity, sewerage facilities for new buildings without disrupting the lives of other residents.

My final suggestion is that there should be no more new schools, colleges, and hospitals cluttering around Dhanmondi. There is a rule that a college/university should have at least a certain area of land. I want to ask the minister concerned if that rule applies to Dhanmondi also and if so, then how many universities in Dhanmondi abide by that rule?

**Dr Nizam:** Thank you Dr Zaheer, I believe the requirement is at least five acres of area for a university. However, we have to be careful about the loopholes in this rule. One of our students was doing a study, and he found out that the university had beaten that rule by having an area of barely 1 and a 1/2 acre in Dhaka and 8 acres in Gaibandha, which they are calling their outstation campus!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK