

Can we save our water bodies?

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Professionals and citizens of Dhaka city at a roundtable recently urged the government to demarcate water bodies, to formulate an integrated plan to protect ever-shrinking wetlands and to publish a list of flouters of the law and encroachers.

They also demanded to form a task force on water bodies with the representation from the members of civil society, organisations like Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA) and others as well as from the government agencies like WASA and Water Development Board.

They also emphasised the need for good governance and political will to preserve the water bodies and to prepare the list of encroachers.

As part of its Urban Agenda, The Daily Star and Remians Business & Professionals Forum jointly organised the workshop titled Waterbodies of Dhaka at the conference room of The Daily Star.

Addressing the workshop, steering committee member of Global Water Partnership Lailun Nahar Ekram described the strength of water and stressed the need to have an integrated water management.

Lailun Nahar Ekram said, "Dhaka city has 25 khals. If we can connect these khals of the city like Badda, Meradia to the Buriganga, Shitalakhya and other rivers it will help transport more people of the city through the rivers, which ultimately lead to reduce the traffic congestion."

Lailun Nahar Ekram also said that we should concentrate on delineating rivers, lakes and other wet lands of the city which will generate economic activities. "In India, economic activities centring around the rivers have been very successful," she said.

Secretary General of Gulshan Society Saiful Islam came up



Demarcating water bodies was a priority, at the recent roundtable, to guard against encroachment.

with an idea of constructing foot bridges over the lakes of Gulshan, Banani and Baridhar to save these from encroachment and grabbing. He lauded the initiatives of RAJUK which are constructing walkway along Gulshan and Banani

Saiful Islam also said that although lakes and wetlands were grabbed people at present are more aware against the unlawful activities than before.

Naval Architect Dr Reaz Hasan

Khondokar expressed his frustration over the ever-neglected water transport in the city. "Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) can introduce water circular vehicles for the city dwellers. If we can introduce high-speed water vehicles for the existing waterways of the city it may help reduce traffic congestion in the city."

He also spoke of the economic of water.

Vice President of Baridhara

Housing Society Munira Moyeen said that some of the influential people involved in the politics are behind the encroachment of water bodies and lakes. "Pollution in Baridhara lake is rampant owing to no scientific sewerage system. The frustrating aspect is that even after specific law about the wetlands, encroachment has not been stopped."

Dhaka WASA Chief Engineer Quazi Mohammed Sheesh compared two cities of Asia with each

other which evolved as capitals of these two countries along with the banks of two different rivers over the centuries. Sheesh said that Hun river of Seoul has been one of its life lines because it is widely used for water transports and provides drinking water to the city dwellers.

"In the past, many activities including economic and entertainment had grown around Buriganga. In 1874, first water treatment plant was installed at

Chadnight of Buriganga river. As the years went by, the facilities around the historic river have shrunk. If Balu and Turag rivers can be connected to Buriganga properly then it can widely be used similar to Hun river," said Mohammed Sheesh.

The WASA chief engineer vented his anger over the clinical waste along with other wastes flowing to the rivers unabatedly owing to its adverse impact on the fish habitat.

Secretary General of BAPA Abu Naser Khan said, "If water bodies disappear from the Dhaka's landscape anymore we won't be able to save Dhaka city."

Abu Naser Khan also alleged that the more intense the movement against environmental degradation the more the RAJUK officials as well as many of the environmentalists start making money.

Former inspector general of police ASM Shahjahan said, "The contemporary activities of RAJUK to preserve water bodies is very encouraging. Without political will, different partnership initiative to protect the water bodies and environment will not work."

Imminent urban planner Dr Nazrul Islam said, "Despite having master plans for Dhaka city over the centuries, nothing is implemented. We should have a plan to live with water. Arrangements should be made to bring the benefits from lakes."

"In the past, the lakes of Bangkok used to spread acrid smells. Living in Bangkok seemed to be very difficult. With the help of the World Bank, the lakes have been filled," said Dr Nazrul Islam.

"The master plan for Dhaka city was approved in 1997. Despite six years gone-by, the plan is not unfortunately followed. There are 26 water retention ponds in the city. We should fully restore these ponds," said Dr Nazrul Islam.

Suruj Mia spoke on behalf of Barogram Unnayan Sangstha at the workshop. He described how the khals like Norai, Deb Dolain and Balu river became polluted by the industrial and sewerage wastes of Dhaka city over the years.

"Now it is becoming increasingly difficult to live along these khals and rivers owing to bad odour emanating from the water of the river. Everyone there is now conscious of the pollution and raised their voice against it," Suruj Mia.

"At present, one will not find any insects in the river water, let alone the fishes. But our ancestors used the river water in manifold. We arranged rallies in the last three consecutive years but couldn't yield any outcome. Although there were pledges from the government to install deep tubewells in my village but one of it was installed," regretted Suruj Mia.

Syed Saiful Haque said, "Most of our domestic helps are from the slums which are located on many water bodies of the city. Their toilets are also on the water. They live in a very hazardous condition and transfer the health hazards to the households."

"These water bodies should be demarcated. The government should evict them from there and rehabilitate them elsewhere for our betterment," said Syed Saiful Haque.

Rajuk Chairman Iqbal Uddin Chowdhury said, "The Banani-Gulshan lake is still not free from encroachments. 32 acres of the land of the lake have so far filled under many pretexts."

Expressing his frustration over the filling of the lake, the RAJUK Chairman said, "Only Almighty knows how will we be able to protect this lake. It is very easy to talk about the encroachment and its remedies. I have felt the heat when I started the construction of the walkway to protect the lake at Baridhara."

Editor of the Daily Star Mafuz Anam said, "Many open spaces including water bodies of the city are under the illegal grasp. Whatever we have to do to protect these water bodies has not been effective. The destruction of water bodies is going one after another. Ashulia is one of its example."

Mafuz Anam also said, "The city is facing a lot of pollution. Everyday it is penetrating. I express sense of concern that we may not be able to leave any space for our next generation."



Lost lakes, ruined rivers

As we lose more precious water bodies, it is not just a matter of the city's survival, but the well being of its citizens

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

He still cherishes the memories of his olden days. Memories of walking beside the river Buriganga or sitting on its bank enjoying the soft breeze and imagining water nymphs moving in the water. Mizanur Rahman, an old inhabitant of the city could never thought of seizing his evening walks beside the river.

Gone are those days. The man left behind his prime as the river lost its splendour. He lost it following the laws of nature while the river lost splendour due to manmade disasters. Beauty of waterbodies or even their existence is now confined within the memories of older generation.

Apart from the lakes, at least 25 small and big canals are there in the city of Dhaka connecting the circulating rivers. But increasing encroachment and continuous sedimentation led them to a bad shape. Shallow depth and narrow waves is what they are left with now.

Dhaka has waterbody that is 10 per cent of its area though a

city should have waterbody that is at least 25 per cent of its area. Very few ponds and lakes exist in Dhaka. Dhanmondi lake, Gulshan Lake, Parliament building lake and some ponds at old part of the city and at Dhaka University area can be mentioned among those few. The lakes are not natural lakes. However, these waterbodies have tremendous influence on our environment. "We can say these lakes act as lungs of the city," said Nishat Islam, an architect and planner. Hardly anyone will contradict her.

Lakes have socio-cultural impact on society since they are the place where people throng. It helps people in their social interaction. Not only young lovebirds are found chirping there, but lakes also attract elder people. They are seen sitting or walking beside the lake recollecting the good old memories in tranquility. Though gradually waning, amateur anglers still try to fulfill their passion at some of the lakes and ponds.

However, lakes turn burden to us when they are ill maintained. They become den of anti socials and common mass lose their access to them.



What the experts recommend

Develop water action plan and water zoning for Dhaka, particularly (Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan) area and Plan for living with water. Also prepare and publication of a layman's guide to the DMDP Master Plan in Bangla. Length 20-25 pages. Publish in RAJUK's Website to give access to information.

Immediate demarcation of existing lakes, rivers and other water bodies in Dhaka city. Make these available through gazette notification, publication and peripheral demarcation has to be followed.

Form a Task Force on water bodies in Dhaka, with 2-3 representatives from the civil society (eg BAPA and others) including other government water agencies.

RAJUK should form a cell to monitor water bodies within DMDP area.

Maintain, dredge and improve water channels for integrating circular waterways with Dhaka's urban transport.

Buriganga River should be fully restored.

Effective and pragmatic steps should be taken to take care of the waste effluents of industries discharging into the rivers and water bodies. Incentives for mandatory implementation should be given to industries to install Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs)

List and declare names of encroaches/violators of water body rules. All illegal allocation of filling activity and encroachment should be stopped on the basis of the directives given by the Honourable Prime Minister on June 6, 2002.

Lake associations, task forces, societies to be formed at national/regional level e.g Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banai, Baridhara and Uttara Lakes as to ensure public/community participation the study, design implementation and maintenance of lake sides and lake. This would help sustain lake and lake side protection and development.

Continuity and connectivity of the remaining city lakes to the rivers should be ensured.

Good governance and political will must be there to look through the issues and list the encroachers. Polluting industries must be removed forthwith.

Recommendations are listed in the right hand box for saving the city's various types of water bodies: rivers, natural wetlands, lakes, artificial water bodies and jheels.