



The Daily Star- Remian* Business and Professional Forum (RBPF)

The Water Bodies of Dhaka -- Part III

Let us all be law abiding

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

In seeking to ensure a better civic life, our foremost challenges have been to cajole government agencies running with taxpayers' money into providing some of the basic services for which they were brought into being. The honourable chair will not bellow, 'Order! Order!' even if we were to rend the air with unanimous cries of 'shame!' For the feeling is undisputed.

It is largely true that most of the public bodies and many of their (oh so carefully selected) personnel have not done justice to their position and responsibility, thereby transforming the capital into a hard-surfaced quagmire, where, in the very near future, the only fresh air may be on the top floor of a 20-storied slum. Alongside that fact, it is also unfortunate that as individual citizens not all of us have proved worthy. We too need to do our part. For running a city the size of Dhaka is a mammoth task that demands the cooperation and commitment of all and sundry, persons and groups, big and small, private and public.

It is not defensible that by only dutifully paying taxes (an obligation and not a favour lest we forget) one shall be guaranteed public services while failing to fulfil one's legal and societal responsibilities, one of which must be to abide by building legislation at unit level.

A factory owner will serve the community well by conscientiously handling the effluent and not dump it into the nearest waterway. A house-

owner must maintain the mandatory open space all round the building so as to make his contribution to the free flow of air and natural light. An owner cannot let out a residential building as a hospital or a commercial outlet and then start yelling at every public body for the degraded environment.

In violating rules and regulations we become no different from the public servants that we criticise and blame for our woes. While their shirking of responsibility may have more visible implications, as individual encroachers, violators, abusers of social status and so forth, we add up to be no less. The government agencies and servants are accountable to the public and their respective higher authority, we are to our conscience.

The author is Consultant to the Editor on Urban Issues and Professor, Dept of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka



still going on in the Banani-Gulshan Lake. That caught me by surprise because I have cancelled the allotment of a lot of plots that had no existence and were planned on the water.

Unfortunately, through all these meetings, we have only received assurances from the authorities but very little have been done. There has been no change in our fortunes. Work of a deep tube-well has been completed but it has still not started functioning.

Ayesha Khatun (Consultant, The Hunger Project -- Bangladesh): I have worked in the Barogram area with Suruj Mia and noticed that when you pumped a tube well, sand came up with the water. We went to the Jahoshastho Prokosholl on a number of occasions. We also learnt from the local ward commissioner that a good number of tube wells have been promised. Two deep tube wells were promised three years ago.

We have a sanction order with us that were issued two years ago regarding those but so far we haven't got anything. We have tried to trace the whereabouts of the sanctioned tube wells but have failed. I would like to know whether they have just disappeared or have they been allocated somewhere else.

I would also want to know whether the plan to build a water treatment plant in the area, which the Dhaka Mayor had told us, has progressed any further.

Engr. Iqbaluddin Chowdhury, RAJUK Chairman: A few days ago, a top official told me that filling was

land on a water body, you can not change the character of that land without the approval of the competent authority. We are fighting with that.

But that creates the confusion regarding RAJUK's motives. A man came up to me a few days ago and said that he had a land on the water body and wanted to construct something there. I said that it's not within the law. Then he told me that if he cordoned off the land and started a fishery there, and in five years gradually filled it up with earth, could I do anything to stop him?

So this is the problem. As Dr. Zahir (Barrister-at-Law) said, I am still waiting for that verdict. Without that verdict, I'm not sure how long we can fight on.

I give you another example. The chairman of REHAB was constructing a house on the lake near Gulshan 1. I spotted it during an inspection and had to cancel it. I thought that if that building was erected, it would create another example like the Marium Tower. He was not very pleased but I explained the circumstances to him. I am trying to give him another plot. So this is the state of the Gulshan-Banani Lake.

Now let us come to the Gulshan-Bardhara and Uttara Lakes. We have taken a 72-crore Taka development project regarding these. It's mainly for building walkways and some repair works. It is lying with the planning commission now.

Building the walkways is a mighty difficult job. There is about 63,000 feet of walkway to be built around the three lakes. We have completed only 2,500 feet thus far on the Gulshan-Bardhara Lake. Even then I had to face a lot of trouble.

When we tried to acquire land, no one was willing to spare land. Some had land on the water. I have already cancelled some plots. There were even 5x70 (five by seventy) feet plots which I have cancelled.

We say a lot of things but when it is on us, we are not prepared to sacrifice. Now I am doing a detailed survey of individuals who have encroached or are forcibly grabbing the land. The Principal Secretary of the Prime Minister's secretariat has been given the responsibility. I have been instructed to find out the names of the people who have unlawfully grabbed land which are to be used for various beautification projects for Dhaka including its lakes.

While surveying, I have come across people who had 23 kathas (16560sqft) of land but had still built a six-storied building on 9 kathas (6480sqft) of RAJUK land. I have even told some people that their boundary wall was on the line of the proposed walkway. If you let go of this very small stretch, I'll build a wall for you. Even then they are not willing. There is a provision in the contract between the owner and the RAJUK that if required, the RAJUK can take the land for its use. But to implement that, there is a lot of hassle.

I was asked why I did not go for demarcation. Well, the reason was that demarcation was dependent on approval of the project. So I had to wait. Again, it would have involved consultants and much nitty-gritty. So I went for the physical way through building walkways.

On the Uttara Lake, I cancelled ten plots which were encroaching on the lake.

So this is the situation of the lakes. I hope the lake development project is approved soon so that we can go ahead with the work.

I just want to point out a slight discrepancy between the 120 crore Taka project and the 72 crore Taka one. Just by making walkways, we can't save the lakes or save the people of Barogram.

One of the major components of the 120 crore Taka project was that all the garment and tannery waste



Reclaiming the Buriganga: This time for real?

Session moderated by Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed, Professor, Dept of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka, and Consultant to the Editor on Urban Issues.

Md. Suruj Mia (President, Barogram Unnayan Sangstha, Trimohoni, Khilgaon, Dhaka): I am a resident of Barogram which is located on the outskirts of Dhaka. Over the last 12 years, Dhaka city's wastes have passed through our area to the estuary of the River Sitalakhya by Narai Khal, Debdulai and Balu rivers. Naturally the water of these rivers has become polluted and you can understand it by taking one look at the colour of the water. We have the Barogram Unnayan Sangstha which is working tirelessly to raise awareness regarding the environment and there has been a positive response.

The youth and the women of the area have come to the fore. They have felt the necessity to do something radical to improve the situation. People, who come to our area, have to hold a handkerchief under their nose because of the stench. A boat ride on the waterway becomes unbearable due to the bad smell. At one time, our mothers and sisters have washed clothes, and used the river's water for cooking and other domestic uses. But it's unthinkable now. Even insects can't survive in such pollution.

The community movement we initiated resulted in the first environmental meeting on 11 March 2001 at Trimohoni. There, around 10,000 people of the 36 villages were present.

The next gathering was on February 7, 2002. Next, we did a protest on the Rampura Bridge to protest against the environmental hazard that has been thrust upon

us. Make these available through gazette notification and publication; and physical demarcation should follow.

2) Lake associations, task forces, societies should be formed at national body levels like the RAJUK, WASA and relevant authorities. And local bodies of Dhanmondi, Bardhara, Gulshan, Banani and Uttara Lakes have to ensure public and community participation like study, design implementation and maintenance of lakesides and lakes. This will help corroborate sustainable lake and lakeside protection and development.

3) All illegal allocations, filling activities and encroachment should be stopped according to the directive of the Prime Minister given on 19 June 2002.

4) Continuity and connectivity of the remaining city lakes with the rivers should be ensured.

5) Good governance and political will must be there to look through the issues and to list the encroachers.

6) Polluting industries must be removed forthwith.

7) Form a social movement for the implementation of the master plan.

8) Publication by the authorities of the list of encroachers.

9) For the sake of equity, we suggest that those who give us their development rights should be adequately compensated. This is not applicable for the encroachers.

Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed (President, Barogram Unnayan Sangstha, Trimohoni, Khilgaon, Dhaka): Through our discussions, we have realised the importance of the circular water channels. Maybe the city's future lies in developing those water channels. That will also decrease the load on the

present traffic system.

We have also learnt that we should have a balance between the environment and the social system, the economics of the city. There should be social justice.

We also found out about the successes of the Poribesh Andolon. Despite the frustrations along the way, we are really hopeful with the work the BAPA and other organisations are doing. We look up to them always.

We are trying to raise the quality of the life of the citizens. I believe the media is with us and very sincere about projecting our problems, and what we are trying to say. So we have to use this to our advantage.

I believe it is time to go for action. We have talked a lot. As Professor Majumdar has said, we have one plan and let's go for it.

We are already seeing the cooperation among the different bodies. We should not neglect the pollution aspect. The worst thing is that all our waste -- hospital, industrial -- everything is going into the river and we are drinking that water! Maybe there will come a time when we have to stop eating fish.

Thank you all very much for making us enlightened. We'll meet again. Cheers.

*Remians are Old Boys of Residential Model School/College, Mohammadpur, Dhaka