

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

I N 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



Today we bring to you the third and concluding part of the excerpts of the discussion held on 22 July 2003 at the workshop on the water bodies of Dhaka. The First Part appeared on the Agenda for Urban Concern page on 5 September 2003 and the Second part on 19 September 2003, which we declared as the 'concluding' part. We apologise for the inadvertent mistake.

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

Md. Suruj Miah (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 environment 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 pail-procession on the Rampura Bridge to protest against the environmental hazard that has been thrust upon us.

We had a third environment meeting where Dhaka City Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka came. Even he was appalled at the condition we were living in.

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 Janoshastho Prokoushali 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

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.

Let me explain something before I proceed any further. The lakes at Banani, Baridhara and Uttara that you see now are nothing but earth cuttings. The earth dug up while developing the housing estates and residential areas were eventually filled up by water and that is how they became lakes.

In 1969, the RAJUK decided de-requisitioning a portion of Banani-Gulshan Lake from Niketan to Gulshan 2. It was low-lying earth-cutting area and at that time, as there was plenty of open spaces around, it did not matter that a portion of the Lake was being taken.

That letter was issued in 1969 by the RAJUK. There was a clause that said that if the land was kept, then the owner had to pay compensation. In 1970, a new chairman of RAJUK declared that there was no need for de-requisitioning. A letter was sent to the land ministry for approval but that letter was never processed. In 1971, the people who bought the land, lodged cases based on the 1969 documents. In 1981-82, some of them won. After that they have started pressurising us constantly. There was 32 acres then. Now about 16 acres of it is not under RAJUK anymore. And this piece of land is mostly inside the water body.

Fortunately, the water body act of 2000 has come to our rescue. It is stipulated there that if you own a

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-Baridhara and Uttara Lakes. We have taken a 72-core 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-Baridhara 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 (16560sft) of land but had still built a six-storied building on 9 kathas (6480sft) 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 dependant 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

from Pragoti Sharani to Badda was flowing into the lake. No matter how aware the Baridhara Society is, the fact remains that there is no drainage system in Baridhara. Furthermore, all the water of new Baridhara's J Block, which is on the other side of Baridhara, has been channelled into the lake through the DUTP project.

In the 120 crore Taka RAJUK plan, we had incorporated that the water should flow into the lake only after a minimum treatment.

Even in the dry season, satellite pictures will show you that the water is clogged. Even after that it has been segmented into four or five different segments. The pollution capacity of these segments has reached such proportions that fish of that water has become inedible.

A BUET scientific evaluation has found out that the amount of lead found in a nine-inch fish from those waters is good enough to kill a seven-year-old.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dr Nazrul Islam (Dept of Geography and Environment and Chairman, Centre of Urban Studies (CUS), Dhaka University): Our committee consisted of Architect Lailun Nahar Ekram (Member, Steering Committee, Global Water Partnership, Stockholm), Architect Iftekhar A. Khan, Mr Habibul Alam (1st Vice Chairman, World Scout Bureau), Mr Shakil Ahmed Khan (Staff Lawyer, BELA), Dr. Ayesha Khatun (Consultant, The Hunger Project -- Bangladesh), Engr Kazi Mohammad Sheesh (Chief Engineer, Dhaka WASA) and myself. We have gone beyond the stipulated five recommendations. They are:

- 1) Develop a water vision (broad), water action plan and water zoning for plan for Dhaka, particularly the DMDP. We have suggested what sort of plan it would be. It should be a plan for living with water. That should be the consideration.
- 2) Identify and classify water bodies of Dhaka and publish the list.
- 3) Form a task force on water bodies of all kinds in Dhaka with at least two or three representatives from the civil society. We are not sure how many members will be there in the task force. I think the Save Buriganga task force can be a good example. They have three representatives there from the BAPA in the government task force, which is one of the reasons for the work making progress.
- 4) More specifically, we would like the RAJUK to form a cell to monitor the water bodies in the DMDP area.
- 5) Emphasise on rule of law. Strictly enforce implementation of the DMDP plan; and participation of the civil society in this regard can be considered.
- 6) Maintain dredge and improve water channels for integrating circular waterways with Dhaka's urban transport system.
- 7) The Buriganga River should be fully restored and the task force should be made fully effective.
- 8) Effective and pragmatic steps should be taken to take care of the waste and effluents of the industries dumped into the water bodies to pollute those. Incentives for mandatory implementation should be given to industries to install effluent treatment plant.
- 9) List and declare names of encroachers and violators of water bodies.

Ms. Munira Naim (Vice President, Baridhara Society): My group had Planner Golam Hafiz (Town Planner (Director), RAJUK), Mr Abdul Rouf (Joint Secretary General, Baridhara Society), Architect Iqbal Habib, Remian Ahsanul Karim Swapan, Remian Syed Saiful Haque and Mr. Sohail Islam (Staff Reporter, The Daily Star). Our recommendations are:

- 1) Immediate demarcation of existing lakes and other water bodies of Dhaka City should be

made. 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, Baridhara, 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.

Dr. Badiul Alam Mojumdar (Country Directors, The Hunger Project - Bangladesh): Our Group included Dr. Md. Reaz Hasan Khondoker (Professor and Head, Dept of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering, BUET), Ms. Sultana Rahman (Staff Reporter, The Daily Star), Architect-Planner Ishrat Islam (Asst Professor, Dept of Urban and Regional Planning, BUET), Remian Farid Bakht (Member, Notundhara), Remian Dr. Syed Khaliduzzaman, Dr. Iftekhar Hossain (Director, BEEPP), Dr. Mustafa Majid (General Manager, Dept of Public Relations and Publications, Bangladesh Bank Head Office), Mr. Manzoor Elahi (MD,

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 Mojumdar 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 to Demra after which it is flowing 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.

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Reclaiming the Buriganga: This time for real?