

## City lakes must be restored to their past glory



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considered in tandem with housing, health and social development.

As much as the developing world will be urbanised, its water crisis will deepen. Large cities like Dhaka, Mexico city, Lagos and Cairo largely rely on ground water but aquifers take decades to recharge while the population growth in these cities is exponential. And as urban demands for water increases, supply for the developing world's already water-starved agriculture is further affected, thereby creating a monumental food-security crisis. Bangladesh is already bearing the brunt of this crisis. The report published in a section of the press on April 12 quoting the Agriculture Minister indicates that by June this year food deficit in the country will touch on 20 lakh metric ton, understandably creating a profound strain on its fragile economy.

Hydrologists say that the world's water supply is finite – less than a million cubic kilometres – which, according to the United Nations, is not sufficient for its population which is growing at the unsustainable rate of 110 million annually.

In the context of such terrifying prospect, Bangladesh has to take some aggressive measures to conserve its water resources starting from the urban to rural areas. The greater tragedy is that Bangladesh has enough water to go around for its 140 million people but not enough people to handle the present critical situation. Buriganga and Shitalakhya, once sources of fresh water have shown marked falls in levels of dissolved oxygen. An estimated 90 percent of sewage of Dhaka city and Narayanganj is discharged into rivers and lakes of these cities without treatment. To make things worse, supplies of fresh water that might dilute the sewage are also dwindling. These rivers which are among the most polluted in the world contain ten times as many bacteria from human waste as waterways in developed countries.

Shockingly, Uttara lake, a vast water body has just been reduced to a narrow creek because of indiscriminate dumping of household garbage and wastes. With effluents, sewage and waste water flowing into the lake at the behest of WASA, RAJUK and DCC it now serves as a giant sewer. More ominous, innumerable slums have sprung up on both banks of the lake and slum dwellers having no facilities to construct pucca latrines in the vicinity of their makeshift houses have put up kucha latrines over the lake. The adjoining places reek with horrible stench coming from the lake. Normally rivers and water bodies have the capacity of self-purification – pollutants are diluted and slowly absorbed – but with the lake silting and drying up and waste water discharges increasing by the day, the death of the lake is inevitable. As these lakes and water bodies at

Uttara, Gulshan and Baridhara wither away and the little water left there become contaminated, the residents living around these lakes find their lives in peril. As one survey in the recent past indicated the water in this vast stretch of lake was so polluted that bacteria

which is already scarce. Delhi, the capital city of India is experimenting with a waste absorbing plant called duckweed: work is afoot to set up these sewage ponds for the entire city – and regenerate dead streams and lakes. Our country, however, does not

culture, heritage and pride. Gulshan-Baridhara, and Uttara lakes are essential water bodies that are disappearing fast mostly due to governmental indifference and human greed. Running across sector no 3, 5, 7, 13, and 11 Uttara lake is a water body

about 4 km long and 400m wide that continues to be sullied by raw sewage, garbage and waste water from the residential houses. The lake still exists even if by name but today it is a cesspool of blackish stagnant water. The lake's poisoned water now symbolises

not life but death. Shockingly, the garbage thrown from all around remains piled up on the roads and during rains ultimately spills into the lake.

Much of the blame rests with the city development agencies like RAJUK, WASA, DCC that have allowed these residential areas to become squalid wasteland. The squalor and dirty business that we see here are the result of complete breakdown in urban planning. It is here only in this country that 'development' has happened before urban

planning. How could our city development authorities think of draining all the sewage and waste water into a mass of water body flowing close to the residential quarters? We only wish: Let good sense prevail on them now!

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**Other than being sources of fresh water, water bodies have symbolized culture, heritage and pride. Gulshan-Baridhara, and Uttara lakes are essential water bodies that are disappearing fast mostly due to governmental indifference and human greed.**

feeding on the waste have proliferated anywhere between 20 times to 100 times over safe level counts.

Paradoxically, on the occasion of the observance of the World Water Day on March 23 last people in the country felt vastly amused when they heard some ministers and water experts speaking glibly in a seminar about conserving the surface water to meet human needs without putting too much strain on underground water that is getting exhausted fast. Precisely known to all, surface water helps aquifers being recharged. But the looming question that strikes people is where are these sources to be found if we are either willfully destroying or contaminating them?

The need of the hour is less noise and more work and action oriented programmes. The best way to clean the natural sources of water – either a river or a lake – is to leave them on their own without barraging or closing at any point. There has to be sluice gate tacked with spillways with facilities of closing or opening at the hour of need. Nurtured fish can be protected by positioning a network of iron sieve at the far point where a water body meets the big river. At the same time sources of

seem to be clear minded about its own national mission in the face of determined and reckless destruction of natural wealth like water and forest resources. Maybe the familiarity with the polluted atmosphere and the near permanence of it has made the national conscience dull and inactive. Because we get sufficient rain during monsoon and our villages, towns and cities go under waist-deep water in consequence of the heavy surge from the upper riparian countries, we tend to care less about utility and conservation of water. Officials and politicians are now reluctantly agreeing that the simple task of collecting the rain and letting it percolate down is vital to recharge depleted underground aquifers. While WASA is on its avowed mission to rejuvenate the old canals by demolishing the illegal encroachments and structures built over them it could hardly fight shy of the onerous responsibility of restoring Uttara, Gulshan and Baridhara lakes to their past glory. The lake water is now full of detritus and looks like coloured soup.

Experts say that high level of pollution in lake water imperils not only the health of the people living by the lakeside but also aquatic and terrestrial



Part of Uttara Lake: Abuse must stop.

pollution must be stopped mainly by treating domestic sewage and clamping down on industrial effluents or other harmful discharges thrown into the water body.

Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), the supreme body invested with the responsibility of providing clean water and maintaining and preserving public health and sanitation in urban areas must think afresh and before it is too late about investing a sizeable portion of its fund for installing sewerage line with treatment plant in tandem. Discharges from all the sectors that now flow into the Uttara lake have to be channeled elsewhere for clean up and treatment purposes.

Undeniably true, in absence of clear foresight, vision, and proper planning, Dhaka city has turned into a cluster of apartments and markets. With the last remaining open spaces and water bodies fast disappearing due to illegal encroachment and willful destruction the city has become a concrete jungle. Understandably, the economy of the country is in a shambles and the government will find it dauntingly difficult to implement any project that involves massive investment as a sewerage line installation would do. Either WASA, or RAJUK, or DCC could try a novel way that worked wonderfully in Kolkata, India, a city inhabited by about 1.2 million people but having no sewage plants. Much of its sewage is treated by green plants.

Waste courses through eastern wetlands where special plants first segregate the sewage. Rising tides of sewage seem to overwhelm the system but the idea is sound enough to replicate in three towns: Titagarh, Bally and Panihati. Sewage here flows through an artificial complex of ponds and plants instead of further fouling the already murky Hooghly. No mechanical plants are needed facilitating power savings.

So cities must look at innovative methods of treating sewage without costly machinery that needs power

ecosystems on which life depends. Undeniably true, there is a close link between economic growth, human development and good management of the natural resource base – mainly water bodies and forests. Unfortunately socio-economic development appears threatened by environmental degradation through polluted water and extinction of forests.

Despite an overall improvement in the living standard marked by fast paced urbanisation, the outlook for sustainable living in big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong is not encouraging. The gains are being offset by certain negative trends, such as the growing scarcity of fresh water and the rising number of desperately impoverished people. The most enigmatic planner and enthusiastic environmentalist now see the contours of Dhaka's endangered dream in about 60 percent of its population that lives in slums and shanties in Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Uttara, Banani and Gulshan. The stark reality is that the most glittering Baridhara, Gulshan and Dhanmondi areas are equally gloomy and frightening.

It is now evident that DCC-WASA-RAJUK triumvirate will continue to gloss over the city's problems for short term gains. It is not hard to find out how this pollution scenario of lakes and rivers has exploded on the face of the citizenry. In the teeming city that now accommodates 10 million people, about 10 lakh cubic meter of human wastes stagnates in the choked drains and ultimately find its way into lakes and rivers. It is now learnt that about 30 such drains are connected to all such lakes. Clearly this hazardous waste problem has been ignored too long. More so in case of a still water body without having any connection with any big river. Experts believe that toxic waste and effluents flowing into the lakes have wrought havoc on fish population by reducing biochemical oxygen demand in the water.

Other than being sources of fresh water, water bodies have symbolized

5X2

17x4

5X2

4x2