

DHANMONDI EIDGAH

Mosque committee steals age-old trees, grabs land

WAHIDA MITU

A local ward commissioner in Dhanmondi with connivance of mosque committee of Dhanmondi Eidgah chopped down at least 16 large trees over the last four days for what they said, the trees were making the area "dark" and "creating obstacles to movements."

The felling of the 20-year-old trees took place secretly within the premises of the historical Eidgah, which is surrounded by fence. DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) workers noticed the act and immediately informed the higher authorities.

A DCC team of high officials lead by chief conservancy officer Sohul Faruque arrived on the spot on Monday morning and stopped the plundering.

Atikul Habib, general secretary of the mosque committee, said that shadows of the huge trees were making the area dark. Besides, "The elderly of the area complained to us that those trees were creating obstacles to their movements."

"The trees were sold at Tk 3,000, Atik added.

"The decision to chop down a few trees were taken with the consent of the committee members including local commissioner Abul Khaer Bablu who is also the vice president of the Dhanmondi Eidgah mosque

committee," added Atik.

He informed this correspondent of a future expansion plan for the mosque and said, "Then we have to chop down more trees...."

However, Bablu denied having to do anything with the felling of trees and said they were only trimming the branches of the trees. "It was Atik bhai, the general secretary of the mosque committee, who told me to clear the area of the trees this morning. In fact, I stopped the workers from felling the trees."

This correspondent talked to at least half a dozen locals present on the scene who clearly pointed their fingers at Abul Khaer Bablu as the person behind the felling.

A caretaker of the area who identified himself as Gazi, quoted Bablu as saying the trees needed to be felled to enable the passers by to have a good view of the historical Eidgah Maidan.

Sources in the area also pointed out that the ward commissioner and the mosque committee are cooking up a plot to grab a chunk of land, approximately one bigha, situated between the Satmasjid Road and the historical Eidgah Maidan.

"The mosque committee has already plans to build a shopping complex cum a madrasa on the piece of land," said a long time resident of Dhanmondi requesting anonymity.

"Local commissioner Bablu is backing up the plan of the mosque committee with the understanding that he would receive half a dozen shops from the proposed market," he added.

The mosque committee claimed that the whole area inside the boundary fences of the Eidgah Maidan including the piece of vacant land situated between Satmasjid Road and the west side boundary fence of the Eidgah is the property of the Waqf.

However, Public Works Department (PWD) officials admitted being aware of the tree felling and claimed that the historical Eidgah belongs to the Department of Archeology while the mosque to the Waqf. But the remainder of the land, an area of 2.5 acres, definitely belong to PWD. The mosque authority has only been using parts of their land upon receiving permission from PWD.

"This is not for the first time the same mosque committee chopped down trees. On December 22 of 2006, they illegally chopped down a number of trees from the area that originally belonged to PWD. As a result PWD filed a case," said an official concerned at PWD.

Last year, on June 11, Ministry of Housing and Public works approved to convert the PWD-owned vacant land next to the historical Eidgah Maidan into a

roadside park.

There are had been only two similar Eidgah's built in 1640 in the subcontinent during the Mughal period. The other similar Eidgah can be found in Delhi.

Our investigation reveals that in 1994, when the mosque committee first tried to grab the PWD land, PWD filed a case against the perpetrators in Dhanmondi thana. The police immediately stopped the mosque committee from building a fence around the PWD plot, which was originally designated for a beautification park next to the historical sight.

3 years later, in 1997, PWD looked on helplessly as the mosque committee, with the connivance of political high ups, surrounded the PWD owned area with high boundary fences and put up a signboard claiming that the ownership of the land inside the boundary belonged to the Waqf estate.

Taslimuddin Jamaddar, executive engineer at PWD, said he had recently transferred into the area and therefore had no clue about the estate property under his custody. He then recommended this correspondent to talk with the sub-divisional engineer.

The sub-divisional engineer of PWD, Rejaul Islam, said PWD owns the land that the Waqf is claiming as their property. He also vowed to take measures immediately to evict the encroachers and

convert the area into a small park for enhancing the beauty of the historical site.

However, the general secretary of the mosque committee said they would convert the disputed land into a parking lot for the mosque goers.

At present, many illegal structures mushroomed around the Eidgah and made the Mughal archaeological structure almost invisible to the passers by.

A number of tea stalls, a hand-made packet factory, a kazi office, a madrasa, a dormitory for the madrasa students, a Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority (Desa) office and a government-run warehouse completely overshadowed the Eidgah that bears the legacy of more than 350 years.

When asked about the illegal structures on and around the historical site, the general secretary of the mosque committee said, "We have given verbal notice to the encroachers to leave the place and hope they will leave the place very soon."

Meanwhile, environmentalist organisation Bapa (Bangladesh Poribesh Andolan) in a written statement protested the felling of trees.

Roadside illegal parking is the main obstacle to the passers by, not the trees, observed Bapa.



Shops set up on land that belongs to the historical Eidgah Maidan, a protected archaeological site.



The remains of the chopped down trees waiting to be removed from the site.



STAR PHOTO

'Need a passport?'

Passport brokers in front of Passport Bhaban are as active as ever

DURDANA GHAS

As soon as you arrive at the Passport Office Bhaban at Agargaon in the capital, be prepared to see a crowd come rushing to you.

Make a guess. You are right -- they are the passport brokers.

"Apa, do you want to get a passport?" Kashem (not his real name), a broker asked this correspondent.

"If you want, I can arrange one for you in the shortest possible time. I will tell you what to do or else you will not understand the procedure. You will not have to go through the hassle of police verification and attestation from a first class government official. We have our own people to get the job done," he said trying to sell his service.

Kashem first explained the official rates for a passport -- Tk

6,000 to get it in 15 days, Tk 3,000 to get it in one and a half months and Tk 2,000 to get it in three months.

He then offered three of his "hassle-free" deals -- get a passport in only five days for Tk 11,000, in seven days for Tk 7,500 and in a month for Tk 6,500.

"If you don't have a permanent address in the city, it will be a problem because then police will have to go to two places; firstly to your present address and secondly to your hometown. This will take more time. In this case (not having a permanent address in Dhaka), you can use my address where the police verification will be done in no time," Kashem said standing on the premises of the passport office.

"After the passport is done, I can bring it for you or you can pick it up yourself (from the passport office)," he added.

It seems that nothing goes right and many citizens do not even dare to argue anymore that the public organisations are there to serve the citizens of the country and the citizens are entitled to the service after paying the posted rates without being hassled or without having to pay any extra payments in the form of "bokhshish" (tips) or conveyance.

Mahfuz (not real name), an applicant, standing in a long line to pick up his passport, told this correspondent that he did not apply for his passport through brokers, but paid Tk 500 to the police to get the verification done because he thought he was obligated to pay for the police's conveyance.

"The police went to my house at my hometown and at my rented place in the city. They have a conveyance cost and they did me a favour by going to both places. So it is my obligation to pay them," rationalised Mahfuz.

From another perspective, the brokers are helping the illiterate who are not able to fill out the forms on their own -- for a hefty price of course.

Abdur Rob Hawlader, director general of passport office, said they are doing their best to improve the situation in and outside of the office and have set up a complaint box that they check regularly.

Replying to a question about the presence of brokers on the office premises, he said, "What can I do if outsiders come here and create this situation? I was not present on the spot when you encountered the broker. So I have nothing to say."

"What they (brokers) are doing is unauthorised and illegal. They may have a good connection in the police and the administration, but often they forge signatures of high officials. So getting a passport through a broker may not be a genuine one," Hawlader said about the passport brokers.

When asked about police bribery, a helpless Hawlader said, "We are dependent on the police for the verification task. If they take bribes, then how can we control them?"



Yesterday crowds were still gathering outside Passport Bhaban.

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SHORTAGE OF SKILLED MANPOWER 3

Schools face acute shortage of trained teachers

DURDANA GHAS

Shortage of qualified, skilled and trained teachers is one of the major problems the educational institutions are facing now.

Both Bengali and English medium schools are running with teachers most of whom are not properly trained. The shortage of English language teachers is acute even in English medium schools in the city, sources said.

Tazin Ahmed, principal of Sunny Dale School, told Star City about the dearth of English language teachers in schools in the city.

"In an English medium school like ours we need English language teachers with English medium background. But most of those who pass 'A' level go abroad for higher studies. When they come back, naturally they prefer corporate offices, banks and international organisations for better remunerations," Tazin said.

She explained another reason of teacher shortage by saying: "The girls who study in English medium schools do not want to take up teaching as a career job. If she becomes a teacher, she will be stuck in a career with a salary of maximum Tk 20,000. But if she does a corporate job she will start with an amount of at least Tk 15,000."

"Fortunately, after marriage and childbirth many girls give up corporate jobs and take up teaching as it is not that demanding. I prefer these girls as they are just what we want. Besides, female teachers can handle children the best. Still there is a severe scarcity."

Tazin said most of those who come from Bengali medium and pass honours and masters in English literature cannot match the standard of English medium schools. "But sometimes these girls can adapt themselves because of their enthusiasm for the job."

Narrating her experience,

Tazin said sometimes they lose good teachers because they are overqualified. Such people switch to corporate jobs. But those who are willing to continue as teachers lack quality. "But I'm optimistic to overcome this situation," she said.

Mark Parkinson, principal and head, Oxford International School, said schools in Bangladesh lack skilled English language teachers, but it is a worldwide problem.

"Teaching is about communicative skills. It is important how much is learnt not how much is taught. Teaching is to motivate, organise and how lucidly you can explain complex concepts. So it needs the skill of language," said Parkinson.

He said there is a shortage of teachers who are above 40 years of age but this is the age when someone becomes an experienced teacher. Family pressure and status issues play roles in switching jobs for teachers in South Asian countries.

In China one million people were trained as English language teachers for a period of five years, but they could not reach international standard, he said.

"In UK there is a one-year practical course, postgraduate certificate in education, which includes teaching in a class while someone observes you and gives you feedback. This kind of training is important for teachers," Parkinson added.

"Teaching is developing the learner as a thinker so that he can be creative and pull the knowledge. But the education system in Bangladesh is not conducive to instill creativity. It is tough for teachers to change the system," he said.

Parkinson believes that training helps improve the skills of the teachers but good management and motivation are important factors to keep them in the profession.

Principal of another leading English medium school in Dhaka seeking anonymity said:

"We do have good teachers but I'm bound to say that they are not sincere at all. They are not attentive toward the students in the class."

When a child first comes to the school he is given the visiting card of the teacher to come to his private coaching centres. Even some of them intimidate the students and parents to fail them in their exams if they do not show up, she said.

"They do not complete the lessons in the classes intentionally so that students approach them at their homes. As a principal, I find it very painful but I do not know how to stop this practice," said the principal.

In Bengali medium schools and colleges the situation is a bit different.

Haspia Bashirullah, head, Department of English, Government City College, Chittagong, who has worked as a lecturer and vice principal in Teachers' Training College, puts emphasis on BED and MED degrees to train school teachers.

Required degrees, teaching qualifications and the ability to teach at a particular level like school, college and university are the qualities of a good teacher, she said.

About the reasons behind the deficiencies of a teacher, Bashirullah said: "The education system itself does not prepare a person with competency in a particular subject. The courses taught at the university level are broad and generalised. It is seldom applied or practical courses. So there is a basic weakness in the teachers' education."

She said subject-based training, internship in the final year of university courses and subject-based applied course are a few things important to improve skills of teachers.

"As a trainer I have seen that even a three-month short course was extremely useful for teachers," she said.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), in 2005 only 53.6 percent teachers

in government and non-government secondary schools were trained. Only 187 teachers passed the MED course in the same year.

Kaniz Syeda Binte Saba, assistant professor, Teachers Training College, Dhaka, said the quality of teachers is very low at the grassroots level so they cannot make the base of the students.

Abdur Rahman Mamun, associate professor of the same institute, said: "For socioeconomic reasons teachers sometimes cannot utilise his or her training. Suppose a teacher is given computer training. But when he goes back to his school in a village he cannot implement the training because the school does not have any computer."

"Less opportunity for training, lack of sincerity and dedication towards the profession, socioeconomic reasons and inadequate salary are the reasons behind the low quality of teachers," he said.



A teacher supervises a third grade class in UCEP school in Segunbagicha.

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