

Motijheel in downtown was built during the Mughal period. During the time there was a big Mahal for Mirja Mohammad which housed a large pond known as Sukku Mahal's pond. The area was later named Motijheel. A mazar called Shahjalal's mazar where fairs were organised existed. Motijheel and Dilkusha gardens were in the same place earlier. The road dividing the two places was constructed during the British rule.

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Kids' playground bulldozed for shopping centre



An NHA bulldozer razes trees at the Mirpur playground.

RAIHAN SABUTTAGIN

Block H of Mirpur Section 2 from a piece of land that had been designated as a 'green space' in the city master plan.

National Housing Authority (NHA) felled the trees to construct a shopping centre on the land under Dhaka Urban Infrastructure Improvement Project.

It has been alleged that the

Over a thousand trees were chopped down on Monday in

The National Housing Authority bulldozes hundreds of trees, children's swings, a play shed to make room for a shopping centre on an area in Mirpur-2 earmarked as a public park in the master plan

Project.

The takeover and destruction of the solitary greenery in the area took place only three days after Tapan Chowdhury, advisor to the interim government, verbally assured the locals of conserving the green space.

After hearing the news, hundreds of environmentalists and locals including women and children thronged the scene in an attempt to save their only playground, but their effort was subdued by force with the help of law enforcers. A local amateur photographer, Faruque Hossain, was assaulted by the authorities during the ordeal while he was taking photographs of tree felling.

Zahirul Islam, 50, a local resident, told Star City that people from all ages used to go to the place for outdoor activities as there is no other open space left in the area. He said after the locals found out about such move by the authorities, they had sent petitions to the housing and public works adviser and the

director of department of environment urging them to suspend the destruction of the green space.

Zahir also said "Since the decision on the matter is pending at the Supreme Court, the authorities should've waited till its verdict."

This correspondent was present during the destruction of the green space and talked to NHA officials as well as the locals over the history of the green space.

The disputed land, 17,700 square feet by area, was shown as a 'green space' in the master plan dated September 15, 1961. Surprisingly, on December 12, 1995, the housing authorities approved a layout plan showing the same space as a 'ditch'. The authorities also decided to construct 38 shops on the place under the Dhaka Urban Infrastructure Improvement Project.

As the locals resisted the decision and pursued the matter with ministries concerned, the housing and public works minis-

try conducted an investigation in 1998. The investigation report also recognised the existence of the green space on the spot.

Several newspapers at that time ran reports on ill motives of some unscrupulous housing officials who had been behind the decision of constructing a shopping centre on the spot.

In 2003, the locals lodged a writ petition with the Supreme Court requesting it to conserve the green space that serves around three lakh people living in and around Block H of Mirpur Section 2. Hearing of the petition is still going on.

Azharul Haque, deputy director of NHA, was present on the spot on Monday and told this correspondent that he was there to implement a government order and he would ensure implementation of the order amid any obstruction. "I am ordered to evict illegal structures and illegal occupations on the government land."

When asked if anyone

claimed the piece of land, he said some locals had erected iron fence around the land and he would dismantle the fence.

Firoz Ahmed, an engineer from Mirpur zone housing estate office, warned this correspondent and asked him not to ask too many questions about the revised layout plan. ".... the decision was made 12 years ago and you should not talk much about that. You are talking too much. Be careful! We are on a government land."

Ashiqur Rahman Bhutu, founder coordinator of cultural organisation Mukul Fouz at Mirpur section 6, was present on the scene and alleged that the housing authorities had taken a similar decision before when they revised the master plan and allotted the Mukul Fouz playground to developers for constructing apartment buildings.

The Mukul Fouz playground was a centre of cultural and social activities for the locals since the Pakistan era, Ashiq added. "Going against the interest of the people, a number of unscrupulous housing officials have been involved in revising the master plan indiscriminately. These open spaces play a significant role as far as communal ties and cultural activities are concerned. The present government is weeding out corrupted elements from the society. And that's why we are hopeful that this government will come forward to save the few open spaces left in the city from the unscrupulous officials."

Ronny, a 12-year-old boy, told Star City that he and his younger sister used to play on the space in Block H since it was very close to their house and his parents could watch them from the house. "Now we won't be able to play there because the swing and park benches are taken away."

FOLLOW-UP

Khilgaon Lake project put on ice

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Efforts to revive the swampy and almost 'dead' lake in Khilgaon remain buried under piles of files while the Public Works Department (PWD) awaits additional funds.

The Tk 5 crore project undertaken by the PWD, aimed to re-excavate the 14-acre 'lost' lake and beautify the adjoining areas, ground to a halt only months after it was inaugurated in February last year.

Although signs of development work are evident at remote spots that seem to have been filled up with earth alongside the lake, no prefabrication in the larger sense is apparent.

"We saw ministry workers evicting some structures alongside the lake here during the beginning of the project and later labourers filled up the lake bank. That is all we have seen them doing," said Monirul Islam, a resident of Bagicha.

The PWD had intended to resume the restoration project anticipating that the government would allocate additional fund this year, said PWD sources.

However, with the government exhibiting little interest in the given issue, PWD officials fear that the project would not catch sight of the daylight any time soon.

"We expected the government to allocate additional funds during the first quarter of this year, but under the current situation I don't think that would be likely even in the next few months," said Debashish Chandra Shaha, Sub-divisional Engineer, division 4, PWD.

According to Mizanur Rahman, Executive Engineer, PWD division 4, the initially allotted fund of 5 crore for the given project was much lower than the originally proposed budget.

"The fund that was initially allocated during last year has already been exhausted in implementing the first phase of the project," said Mizanur Rahman, Executive Engineer, PWD division 4.

The newly appointed executive engineer however failed to elaborate on the required amount of total budget for the designated project.

Tainted by years of indiscriminate dumping of household, industrial and clinical waste into its water, the lake oversaw little enthusiasm from the authorities regarding its refurbishment for over 35 years.

"Over the years, the lake has become a convenient spot for the residents to dump waste. The slums that have spawned in the lakeside areas do not help things either," said Khairuzzaman, a resident of Bagicha.

The project includes setting up two bridges across the lake linking Bagicha-North Shahjahanpur with Biswa Road, a children's park, a footbridge, and a lake sidewalk. It also involves cleansing and refreshing the waterbody, and a graveyard on 12 bighas of land on the lake's west bank.



Buses operating in the city defy all norms in the absence of a monitoring mechanism

considering the passenger demand throughout different time of the day, a BRTA official told Star City.

Violation of route permits is also playing a significant role, he added.

Morshedul Anwar, deputy commissioner south of DMP and chief of RTC sub committee, emphasised the need to introduce a bus route franchise in the city where multiple companies or vehicle owners would operate under one single operator (or franchisee) on a particular route.

He said the franchised bus route would eliminate the completion for passengers between the bus operators. Also, it would be more convenient for all.

According to a source at RTC,

multiple operators competing each other on the same route are giving a rise to aggressive, wasteful and hazardous transport service.

"Under the existing public transport system (not franchised), passenger comfort and safety is comprised. Besides, the system does not promote professionalism and improving managerial capacities in the public transport sector resulting in poor profit and time loss for the operator," he added.

Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) in November 2002 undertook a study on bus route franchise. A consulting team comprising both local and international consul-

tants conducted the study. The consultants pointed out the benefits of the bus route franchise as well as shortfalls in the legal and institutional framework.

The consultants proposed to start a pilot project of bus route franchise in a single route in the first phase. They also prepared the bidding document for competitive bidding. DTCB in early 2003 floated tender for selection of an operator under the proposed franchised route. A number of bidders participated in the tender.

As of today, the government did not take any decision on the bid, nor did the government go for fresh bidding.

Bangshal Pond: An oasis polluted



Bangshal pond continues to serve people in the congested part of old city.

MORSHED ALI KHAN

The last remaining public pond in the city, the Bangshal Pukur, where over 3,000 people bathe everyday is fast being polluted due to extensive fish farming by the pond committee.

The Bangshal pond on the Haji Abdullah Sarkar Lane was excavated over fifty years ago, when the city boasted of several hundred ponds providing ample surface water for the citizenry to cook, wash and bathe.

Over the years all the city ponds vanished without a trace. For instance, the famous Shuritolola pond near Bangshal was filled up few years ago to make room for a primary school.

Mohammad Awal Mia, a carpenter from Rangpur working at a nearby timber shop came to the pond on Saturday for a dip. He said that the pond serves thousands of workers like him to wash every day.

"The Buriganga water is toxic, there is hardly any supply water in the taps so thousands of poor people like me find this pond the only way out for washing, but its

water is becoming unusable due to use of various chemicals," Awal said.

The Bangshal pond serves over 3,000 marginalised people in the old part of the city each paying Tk 2 for a dip. On an area of 3.75 bighas the pond area is an oasis for the visitors in a concrete jungle that is believed to be one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world. One Haji Bhutto had donated the land for the pond, a mosque nearby and a graveyard.

President of the Bangshal mosque committee Hasan Reza said that they had to resort to commercial fish farming to raise funds for the re-excavation of the pond.

"I know it is causing pollution in the water but we have to raise funds for the re-excavation, which we intend to take up in January 2008. The pollution problem is temporary," Reza said.

"The money that is raised here every day is spent on salaries of thirteen maintenance workers, the mechanised water pumps and also for other social works in the area," said Reza.

"This pond is our pride and we shall protect it at any cost," Reza said.



Khilgaon Lake project area remains abandoned.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Discover some of Dhaka's finest buildings and sites in a three-part report called Dhaka's Hidden Pearls beginning from Sunday, April 22. The reports, by Durdana Ghias, explores how these ornamental buildings, representing our rich heritage, are now facing certain extinction due to lack of maintenance and government intervention.