

During the period of the Mughal rule, the first name of Dhaka elites was 'Mir'. Perhaps one of them, as many believed, possessed a large area of land in the city whereby the name Mirpur was derived. Among the many Durgahs (shrines) at that time, the one at Mirpur was most visited. Many buildings were also constructed around the shrine.

## Ashulia humming with life

Fresh fish draws city dwellers to the 'lake of joy'

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Over the past decade, the serene beauty of the Ashulia embankment has been attracting an increasing number of city dwellers seeking a break from Dhaka's smog, din, and traffic. Tired of the hustle and bustle of the concrete jungle, they take trips to Ashulia on the weekends, to relax and hang out by the river. During monsoon ripples of the swelling water and clouds in the sky attracts more crowd to the embankment.

However, in the last few years the embankment has started drawing people for a completely different reason: a fish market that supplies local fish fresh out of the river, still jumping.

Situated near the embankment sluice gate, around three kilometres away from the Gabtoli bus terminal, the market is gaining popularity everyday.

The market has two shifts, one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Shoppers cram the place during the market hours, and the roadside remains blocked with their cars. Fridays and



Visitors and fish lovers flock to Ashulia every day.

Saturdays are the busiest days at the market. The embankment remains alive with various activities. Fishermen repair fishing boat and net on the embankment, vegetable sellers join in the trade, peanut sellers add extra crisp to the environment.

Iqbal Hossain Mollah, one of the arathdars (wholesaler) at the market said, "This market started around 10 years ago, but it has become popular only recently.

People from far and wide come to this market hoping to bag fresh fish," he said.

This trend can be put down to the revelations of various toxic elements, most commonly formalin, being sprayed onto fish to preserve them while they are transported to markets. The consequent surge in demand for fresh, untreated fish has fuelled the operation of the Ashulia fish market.

Early in the morning, fishermen from villages adjacent to the embankment such as Bongao, Shadullapur, Birulia, Rostompur from Tongi, Ashuliya and Savar come with their catch. They sell their catch to the wholesalers who later sell fish to the regular sellers. Around 700 fishermen, 60 sellers and 9 arathdars are the focal point of the market said Mollah. Sellers mostly live in and around the Mirpur area.

The word kilogram has no meaning for the sellers. They have their own unique way of trading. They only sell fishes by the thalis, which is a large aluminium plate that can hold at least 5kgs of fish. Thalies always have mixed species of fish. A thali with a good catch can cost up to Tk.4000.

According to Mollah, the market sells about Tk.1.5 lakh worth of fish everyday. On Fridays and Saturdays the sell goes up to around Tk.2 lakh.

The place however, is not very suitable for members of the middle-income group, Mollah mentioned.

Syed Shahed Kabir, lecturer of IBAIS University went there with two of his friends. "I first noticed this market the last time I came to visit Ashulia. It is full of fresh fish not available in the average kitchen market," he said. Kabir bought a bag full of koi at the price of Tk.600.

Hasan Tareque from West Shewrapara went to Ashulia embankment with his wife to spend some stress-free hours. He was actually more interested in prawns than the scenic beauty.

"The reason I am interested in these prawns is because they are straight out of the river, still moving, and the best part is they are not treated with formalin," said Tareque.

"The sellers have a great collection here. These fish however, are very expensive, two times the price range of the New Market kitchen market," Tareque added.

Mrs Fatema Mannan, from Mirpur section-2, took a long rickshaw ride to the embankment market hoping to buy some fresh local fish. However, she went home disappointed. "Yes the collection is really alluring. But this place is not for the middle class. I am heading back home empty handed because the fish are too expensive for me," she said.

In the past few years some words such as formalin, fabric dye, adulterate food, carbide or the mobile court have become everyday jargon of Bangladeshi lifestyle. These words are literally shaping a new way of life. People are more conscious about their eating habit these days. The sluice gate market is a response to the Dhaka dwellers need for food without hazardous toxic elements.



The renovated building of the Ladies Club.

### FOCUS ON CLUB CULTURE

## Ladies Club gives priority to its role in wider society

Fawzia Samad, president of the club, tells The Daily Star

Fawzia Samad, President of the Ladies Club, Dhaka spoke to Fida-e-Tashfia of the Star City on the club's past, present and future.

held a series of fairs, which were a huge success, and brought us enough revenue to construct the library building in 1976.

Over the past decade, our hall has become an increasingly popular place to rent for weddings and other social functions, and the earning from there has made us totally self-sufficient. In 2003, we built a new 2-storey building on the same property using our

Star City (SC): How did the Ladies Club start?

Fawzia Samad (FS): The club was founded in 1951, by Begum Shamsiah Shahabuddin, whose husband was later governor of East Pakistan. It began in the servants' quarter of her house, and later acquired the 3 bigha land where the club buildings stand at present.

After independence, in 1971, the Ladies Club almost lost this land to the Women's Voluntary Association (WVA), because most of the members had been from elite urdu-speaking families, and they had returned to Pakistan when the war started. It was only a few of us Bangladeshi women, who fought to hold on to it.

Due to my role in convincing the then government to allow us to keep the property, I was chosen to be the president of the club in June 1973. At that time, there was a large empty hall, with neither electricity nor water supply. The staff consisted of an old man, a dog, and a 'disabled' man who worked as a sweeper. The club had only 12 members.

SC: How did you go about building it up from such a sorry state?

FS: The first hurdle was attracting new members. The Ladies Club didn't have a very good reputation then, so not many people came forward to join. The 12 of us started convincing our friends, relatives, and neighbours. Then we started a singing and dancing school, in the hope that parents bringing their children for lessons would be impressed by the club and join. Next, we launched sewing lessons, and got a lot of women to join this way.

After all our efforts, today, we have over 600 members.

SC: With so few members at the outset, the club must have struggled financially?

FS: Of course, it was a big problem. We did not receive any help from any outside sources, so we had to raise funds ourselves. We



FAWZIA SAMAD President of the club

own funds. SC: With all these changes, have the club's aims and functions evolved as well?

FS: The Ladies Club was started to provide a safe place for female recreation, and that remains our main objective. Club means recreation centre. Women come here to take a break from their hectic jobs or household chores—to eat, relax, read, chat, and to play mahjong, cards, carom or ludo. It is a haven for them, a place of rest, enjoyment, and peace.

Many women want to expand their knowledge, but may not find the time or environment to do so at home, where there are many distractions and disruptions. The library was built, because along with recreation, the club wants to provide all women with the environment and materials to study and learn, if they should so choose.

The Ladies Club also organises many cultural functions, and we celebrate all the national holidays. We are particularly known for the rich and delicious food we prepare on special occa-

sions like pohela boishakh. SC: The club's facilities and cultural programmes are reserved for members, but does it have any kind of involvement in the wider society?

FS: Of course, our social work is equally important as our recreational facilities. Since 1985, we are running our Kushum Koli schools for slum children. We have 9 schools in 6 different areas in the city, where poor children can study free of cost from Playgroup to Class 5. The textbooks are according to National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum, but there is also religious teaching in every school. Alongside reading, writing and maths, the students also learn how to pray and read the Holy Qur'an.

Till date, 49 of the children from our schools have gone on to complete high school, and the club bore their academic expenses all the way through. We have a Zakat Fund, where all members donate a small portion of their zakat givings, and we use those funds to buy school uniforms, sweaters, and schoolbags for the children. We think of them as our own kids, and want them to have a better lifestyle. Every month we give each student a soap to use. We buy them mosquito nets so they are less likely to contract disease, and in winter we give them blankets so they stay warm.

The club spends about Tk.7 lakh a year on these schools and the children. We ourselves take very little from club funds; even the food we eat here, we members pay for personally.

SC: What are your plans and expectations for the future?

FS: We hope to continue adding to our offerings here at the club, and improve our facilities further. At the same time, we want to pursue our social work in a constructive manner. Educating and establishing even one child means lifting a whole family out of poverty. It is our aspiration, that all the good work of the club and its members will stand permanent against the test of time.



Abdullah Abu Sayeed, an eminent educationist, in the club's library with some of its leading members.



Hundreds through the makeshift fish market at its peak hour.

### PARKLAND NEAR BIMAN OFFICE IN MOTIJHEEL

## DCC's 'tree-free' beautification on

TAWFIQUE ALI

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) continues its scheme to 'beautify' a parkland in the heart city's Motijheel commercial area, felling down all the existing trees.

It has decided at a recent meeting to implement the beautification design that has no room for trees. However, DCC will plant grass to make the parkland a 'green patch.'

The DCC handed over the parkland adjacent to Biman's local office in Motijheel to Dhaka Bank Ltd on a four-year contract more than a year ago for its beautification.

As per the beautification design approved by DCC, Dhaka Bank chopped down all the old trees at the site at night around three weeks back.

Dhaka Bank felled down trees of the park under the beautification scheme and built concrete

structures for an electricity generator and a sunshade for drivers at the site.

Interestingly, officials of Public Works Department said DCC even had no legal authority to hand over the piece of land to another organisation.

The DCC does not have legal right over the land as the PWD has not handed it over formally to them, said PWD's Executive Engineer Moniruzzaman.

Chief Conservancy Officer of

DCC Commander Maqsudur Rahman Chowdhury said DCC would go by the same old design with no provision for trees at Motijheel park.

"We have agreed at a recent meeting to fell down all the trees to turn it into a green lawn with grass," he said. "Replacing trees with grass will not be harmful to the environment."

Chowdhury however said Dhaka Bank has to remove the under-construction generator

room and drivers' shade at a corner of the park as it is not in the DCC-approved design.

A portion of the site will be used as parking space for five cars and will remain open to all, he added.

Chief executive officer of DCC Saifuddin Ahmed and the then chief conservancy officer Sohail Faruquee approved the park's beautification plan on September 13, 2006.

Architects Rezaul Islam, Uzhat Zereen, Mobinul Alam, Moinil Haque, Jalal Uddin M Akbar and Munzir Morshed and engineers Mojibul Haque, Ekhlas Sayeed, Joseph Jovial Haider and Rashedul Haq of 'Architects Design Centre' made the design. Following the tree felling Chief Estate Officer of DCC Kamruzzaman Chowdhury said that he would write to the Beautification Cell to cancel the contract with Dhaka Bank and call for an explanation from the bank as to why they have felled down trees.

The anomalies and fishy manner in which the DCC took possession of the park for Dhaka Bank around seven months back gave rise to speculations that the million-dollar land at the prime commercial district was going to be grabbed through a shady deal.

Biman had taken over the park more than 30 years ago for maintenance, said Hossain. "I was directly concerned with planting the trees that have been felled."

Rajuk handed over 42 public parks in the capital to DCC for maintenance by an order in 1982, many of which are untraceable today.



DCC continues beautification of park at Motijheel without any plan for planting trees.