

Postogola cremation ground fights a pack of encroachers

Set up 132 years ago, its area has shrunk to 40 kathas from around 180

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

The Hindu community is facing a severe shortage of cremation and burial grounds in the city with the biggest cremation ground at Postogola, established about 132 years ago, shrinking gradually due to encroachment.

Postogola Mohashoshan, recognised as the national cremation ground, was set up on three acres (around 180 kathas) of land. Now it has been reduced to only 40 kathas as some re-rolling mills and iron sheet cutting factories encroached on a large portion of the land.

The burial ground adjacent to the Mohashoshan (cremation ground) is in a congested state, forcing the community to take bodies out of the city for burial.

Sources at the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) said part of the

encroached area was recovered after the caretaker government took over last year. But the land grabbers came back after a few months.

There is another small DCC-run cremation ground in Kamrangirchar near Lalbagh, which is in even more appalling condition. Besides, there is a private one at Sabujbagh Kali Mandir, which is run by the temple authorities.

In Hindu religious custom, adults are usually cremated while the bodies of children under eight are buried. However, some of the scheduled caste or lower caste members of the Hindu community bury the deceased, both young and adults. Baishnobs and some high-caste adults are also buried instead of being cremated.

Babul Das, vice president, Postogola Jatiya Mahashoshan Committee, said, "The main problem is burial of children. Every single

inch is filled at the burial ground. Those who are poor suffer the most since they don't have any land."

"The designated ground is very small compared to the population growth. Even that small area has been encroached," he added.

Kajal Debnath, joint secretary, Bangladesh Hindu Boudho Christian Unity Council, said, "Entrance to the Postogola shoshanghat is another problem, which always remains blocked with iron sheets and other metal objects belonging to the re-rolling mills."

Criticising DCC's role in maintaining burial grounds, he said, "Burial grounds belonging to all the religions should receive similar treatment."

Hindus constitute around 10 per cent of the country's total population (now around 14 crore). No statistics are available on the Hindu population

in Dhaka city, but the community leaders said it would be around 20 per cent of the city's population.

The burial ground at Postogola has now the capacity to bury only 70 bodies. Due to the space constraints, graves are replaced within only three months. The authorities are no longer allowing adults to be buried there.

Sources said a total of 91 funerals were held at Postogola in February, including 30 of children.

The cremation ground is facing many other problems.

It is a custom to bathe the bodies before cremation. But there is only one tube-well at the ground for performing the ritual.

The cremation ground was established in 1876. Dhaka's elite Babu Gobinda Chandra Dutta donated the piece of land for it on the bank of the Buriganga.

Although the cremation ground

was always under the municipality (now DCC), it is run by the Mohashoshan committee with donations. The first water tap, electricity, even the sitting arrangements were established with donations.

The cremation ground has three traditional *chitas* (funeral pyres), two under the open sky and one with roof, meant for use during the rainy season.

The families of the deceased have to bear the cost of *chita*, which needs at least 6 maunds of firewood costing around Tk 700.

A small group of *dom* community living near the *shoshan* has been running the business of firewood and other funeral materials. They also work as cleaners of the ground.

These lower caste Hindu families have been living there for seven generations. However it is alleged that they raise the price of wood often without reason.

Shoshan committee members said the process of cremation is expensive for the poor. "A gas furnace is necessary, which will reduce the cost", Das said. "The cost will reduce to around Tk 200 if a gas furnace is added."

Another problem is the small tombs built by families and small temples occupying precious land of the ground. These are making the ground smaller. Families can buy a few feet of land to build these memorials at Tk 6,000.

Committee members suggested that one temple could be built for all.

Dhaka city Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka told Star City that a committee has been formed comprising leaders of the Hindu community and officials of DCC to find out the problems of the cremation ground.

Major General (ret'd) CR Dutta is the convener of the committee.

"The cremation ground was encroached gradually during the past 30 years by many groups. The committee will try to identify the land grabbers and find ways to retrieve its original land," the mayor said.

"We are also considering establishing gas burners at the facility", Khoka said.



Tin roof of a re-rolling mill overlooks the burial ground, allegedly encroaching a part of the Postogola cremation ground.



The way to the cremation ground occupied with iron-sheets used as raw materials at the re-rolling mills.



Two of the three pyres, one under the open sky and the other inside the tin-shed house, at the Postogola cremation ground.

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Modern electric incinerator lying idle for years

The electric incinerator that was installed by the DCC in 1990 with a view to modernise the Postogola crematorium is now lying idle.

The incinerator was installed at a cost of about Tk 3 crore. Sources in the DCC said only 7 bodies were cremated in the incinerator. It went out of order a few years after its installation and since saw no repair.

Around Tk 4 lakh is needed to repair the machine, which will be a burden for the crematorium, sources said.

It is also too expensive for the people who go to the cremation ground and want to use the incinerator.

"Cremating a body in the incinerator is not

at all cost effective. It takes about 4 hours to heat up, another 45 more minutes to cremate a body. The process consumes a huge amount of electricity making the entire process very expensive", said sources in the DCC.

Charge for the cremation of one body is between Tk 1500 and Tk 2000, the amount the poor families cannot afford to.

Sources pointed out that the area suffers severe load-shedding, which adds to the troubles in running the electric incinerator.

Contacted, Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka said that the incinerator was installed without proper study. He said the DCC is planning an alternative way to resolve the problem.

STAR PHOTO

Nagging waterlogging in Uttara to go

Underground drainage system being installed after about four decades

WASIM BIN HABIB

At long last, the Uttara Model Town, set up around four decades ago, is going to have an underground drainage system.

Once the drainage work is completed, waterlogging problem in Uttara will reduce significantly.

However, the residents of the area will have to wait two more years to enjoy full storm sewerage as the installation work is likely to be completed by 2010.

Although Uttara, as a model town, was supposed to be serene zone, it already has started acquiring the typical problems of a claustrophobic city and waterlogging is one of them. In the rainy season, many roads of different sectors of the town go under feet-to-knee-deep water.

"Better late than never," said Dil Afroze, a resident of Sector 7 area. "Thanks to the authorities for coming to our rescue. We have been suffering from waterlogging for years. We want completion of the drainage work as early as possible," she said.

The Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) is implementing the 25-kilometre long drainage in the area under a project named 'Removal of Waterlogging in Dhaka' (RWLP). Under the project, Wasa started digging deeper into the ground for about 7 kilometres drainage work in Uttara in January. Once completed, it will wash away the rainwater and a part of surface drain water of the area to Abdullahpur Canal, nearby the Tongi Bridge. The rest of the project will be done in the coming years, Wasa sources said.

"With completion of the drainage system, waterlogging situation in the area will improve remarkably and the pressure on the Uttara lake will also be reduced," said engineer Waliullah Sikder, project director of RWLP.

"We started the Tk 203 crore project in 2001 to improve the drainage system all over the capital and have already completed work in many areas. Drainage work is also going on in some other areas like Maghbazar, Nayatola and Khilgaon," he said.

He also said, "Since Uttara has the lion's share of the project we

started the work in Uttara giving priority to some areas. We will finish about 7 kilometre drainage work this year."

In the first phase, the main drains will be installed and it is expected to be completed by May this year since the rainy season starts usually from June, he said.

Waterlogging in the rainy season becomes a major problem for Uttara residents and on completion of the system water will fall into Abdullahpur canal through these drainage lines, he said.

Uttara is a vast area and it is becoming populated like other

areas of the city with buildings and structures mushrooming in the recent past, he said. "We are hoping to cover all the sectors within the stipulated time."

Sikder said the project was supposed to end in 2007. But they have sent a fresh proposal to the ministry concerned for extending time.

Another Wasa official said, Uttara was surrounded by low-lying lands in the past and water used to drift to these areas. But with the pace of time the residential area was extended intensifying the waterlogging problem.

He also said Wasa realised the

waterlogging problem in the model town long ago but there were many related areas in the city which needed to be addressed first. That is why Wasa started to work in Uttara this year, he added.

In the meantime, the residents of Uttara alleged they have been experiencing difficulties in moving around for the last couple of weeks as Wasa dug many roads, piled up earth on the roadside and blocked some major thoroughfares with large pipes.

Moksd Reza, an official at a private university in Uttara, said Wasa did not give us any notice before starting the work. We are suffering serious traffic congestion in many roads especially in the morning hours, he added.

"In one morning while going to my office, I saw the road I usually go by was blocked with huge pipes. When I asked my rickshaw to take another road I found it packed like sardines with school and office goers as they had no other alternative," he said.

Aked about the notice, the Wasa authorities said they hung large red banners in front of Mascot Plaza on Sonargaon Janapath and other areas before starting the work.

The residents have to consider the reasons for such difficulties till the drainage works is finished, they said.

"But this is probably the beginning of another phase of suffering. Why have they started it ahead of the rainy season instead of winter?", remarked an elderly resident of the model town.



The work of the 25-kilometre drainage goes on at Uttara town. Land digging for the project in the area is causing serious traffic congestion at some points.

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BRIDGE OVER GULSHAN-BANANI LAKE

Govt asked to say if it has environment clearance

TAWFIQUE ALI

A division bench of the High Court (HC) has ordered the government to show cause within two months why construction of the bridge over Gulshan-Banani Lake should not be declared illegal on environmental grounds.

The HC bench comprising Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain and Justice Farid Ahmed issued the rule on Monday and ordered the government to explain whether it has obtained prior environmental clearance and carried out environmental assessments for the project.

The HC has asked the government to show cause whether it has complied with all the environmental prerequisites prior to commencing construction of the bridge, said Barrister Sara Hossain who moved the petition.

The HC passed the order following a writ petition jointly filed by Gulshan Society and an environmentalist group Paribesh Bachao Andolon (PBA) on February 24.

The court in an interim order on February 25 asked the government to explain within ten days as to why construction of the bridge should not be declared illegal. The court then also restrained the government from carrying out construction work during that period.

The contractor of the project meanwhile obtained a stay from the Appellate Division on the High Court's injunction on construction work, said



The Gulshan-Banani Bridge project site.

Barrister Sara. "We are going to file a petition soon seeking to stop the construction work," she added.

The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has undertaken the Tk 12.47 crore bridge project.

The authorities in the way of the construction work, earth-filled a huge swath of the lake. The action sparked widespread criticism among the locals who expressed apprehension that land filling would virtually destroy the water body and allure the land grabbers.

The government in 2001 declared that the lake is ecologically in critical state in accordance with the Environment Conservation Act of 1995.

Gulshan Society and PBA jointly served a legal notice

(demand of justice) on whether the authorities have complied with the technical and environmental prerequisites.

According to the legal notice, the project is required to obtain environmental clearance certificate as per section 12 of the Environmental Conservation Act of 1995.

The notice also maintained that in accordance with rule 7(6) of the Environmental Conservation Rules (ECR) of 1997, the authorities are required to prepare a prior Viability Assessment Report, carry out an Initial Environmental Examination and make an Environmental Management Plan, for the project.

But the authorities did not make response to the notice, said Barrister Sara.

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