

# A senseless public hearing

DAP unlikely to serve its purpose as majority of people still unaware of it although the two-month exercise ends December 4

TAWFIQUE ALI

The way the government is holding public hearing on Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan (DAP) is a futile exercise and will not serve the purpose of making it a perfect plan for the city, said experts.

Rajuk started a two-month public hearing on October 5 with draft final reports of DAP at Rajuk central office and three zone offices in Mohakhali, Uttara and Dhanmondi inviting people through newspaper advertisements.

"Actually, nothing is happening at the ongoing public hearing," said Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, noted economist and chairman of environmentalist group Bangladesh Poribesh Abdolon (Bapa).

"In the context of our country it is not a practical idea that ordinary people will go to Rajuk offices to consult on a technical document like DAP just seeing a newspaper advertisement," said Ahmad.

The project authorities are going to endorse the DAP by December.

"Public hearing will come to an end on December 4 and we are set to finalise the plan by December," said DAP Project Director Tapan Kumar Nath.

The DAP consultants were required to hold local level public consultation at the time of field survey for a meaningful public participation to dispel incongruities and flaws in the survey reports and physical feature maps.

But they did not do it accordingly, said Prof Ahmad.

Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury, a noted education-

ist and resident of Dhanmondi, said that he too was not aware of it clearly. There are a number of civic bodies in Dhanmondi. The authorities should have involved such bodies of every locality for consultation and public hearing, he said.

"They should have taken public opinion from organised civic bodies, community leaders and public representatives like ward commissioners," he said. "An individual won't be able to do anything for public hearing on such a complex matter."

During a visit to the public hearing at Rajuk central office on November 10, this correspon-

dent found a number of people mostly from DND area pointing at irregularities in the draft proposals.

Lutfur Rahman Khoka, an inhabitant of Kutubpur Union in DND area, was saying, "You should have consulted with the ground level community leaders like Union Parishad chairmen, otherwise it will be difficult to prepare the plan properly."

The DAP project director replied, "That's not possible."

Md Mobarak Hossain from Matuail came to file a complaint that his 9-decimal plot has been engulfed in a proposed 100-foot wide road in the draft DAP.

"What is the use of a plan if it cannot bring good for the common people," he said.

Tapan Kumar Nath said they would ask the consultants to amend the proposals in the draft and accommodate locals' suggestions. "In case the consultants decline to do the job, we will do it," he said.

One reason that Rajuk now cannot recognise the flaws and anomalies in the draft final report is that it has already paid up most of the fees of the consultants, said Prof Ahmad.

Some experts alleged that the flawed DAP is likely to better serve certain coterie interests

and go in favour of the influential housing developers.

The private housing project owners are even lobbying for endorsement of dubiously proposed projects in the plan during public hearing.

According to Prof Nazrul Islam, a noted urban expert and honorary chairman of Centre for Urban Studies, public consultation and hearing on DAP must be adequate and meaningful for the sake of a liveable capital city.

Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP), popularly known as master plan of Dhaka was initiated in 1992, completed in 1995 and officially gazetted in 1997. But Rajuk took around a decade to initiate DAP in November 2004. Despite the long delayed start, Rajuk extended deadline for DAP thrice.

Delay in implementation of the DMDP, in absence of DAP, has resulted in the filling up of vast low-lying areas in and around the city exposing it to environmental hazards, flooding and waterlogging, said environmentalists.

Topographic landscape and natural environment, wetlands, flood retention basins and open spaces within and in the periphery of the city have been destroyed recklessly.

Architect Iqbal Habib, member secretary of Bapa, said the DAP is not even a fraction of what was expected out of it, as it essentially lacks in specific recommendations on what should be done and what should not be encouraged.

Bapa along with some other relevant organisations will give opinion on the draft.



Rajuk officials explaining DAP to inquisitive visitors at Rajuk Bhavan.

# 'National temple' still runs on donation

Retelling the tale of Dhakeshwari Mandir, the 'oldest' in Dhaka



SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

It was a lazy afternoon on a weekday at the Dhakeshwari Mandir (temple). The priests were preparing for the final puja (worship) of the day set to begin right after sundown. The puja thali (offerings) was garnished with fresh fruits, sweets, a little bowl of milk, fresh flowers, rice, green grass, the elements considered as the symbol of earthly life.

As darkness descends, the priest lit dhoop (incense) and five lamps to drive away the bad omen around followed by evening Arati, praising the goddess with hymns from Geeta. After

the evening Arati and offerings of the thali the devi is set to rest for the night.

Dhakeshwari, popularly known as Durga is considered the 'goddess of Dhaka' who looks after the well-being of the people residing in the neighbourhood.

The temple, established to venerate the goddess of Dhaka, is the centre of all festivities and the most important place of worship for the believers of Hinduism in Bangladesh.

On entering the temple premises through the ornate archway, anyone would feel the strong presence of spiritual serenity reigning over.

Dhakeshwari Temple is a complex of several temples. Inside the main temple stands the ten-armed goddess Durga with her four children and the

demon Mahishashur. There are two Shivalinga on a marble altar and an idol of lord Visnu.

The main temple is a three-room structure with domes and curved archways.

In front of the main temple stands the Naat Mandir for Kirtan (religious chants) and other gatherings. The Panthashala, the rest house is located beside the Naat Mandir. There is an altar of animal sacrifice (boli) there. Adjacent to it is the Bhoger Ghar (place of nourishment).

On the left side of the well-groomed courtyard is the famous pond where holy men used to meditate. Some of them are even buried here. Their tombs are still inside the main temple premises. There are four Shivalinga temples with narrow arched openings.

It is widely believed that Dhakeshwari Temple is the oldest temple in Dhaka and at present it is recognised as the 'national temple'.

The origin of the Dhakeshwari Temple is however shrouded in mystery. The exact time and date of its founding still cannot be known. According to the most popular legend, the 12-century king Ballal Sen once dreamt that the goddess Durga was left unattended buried in the ground. The king sent his men, cleared away the bush, unearthed the goddess and established the temple for her veneration.

According to another popular story, King Bijoy Sen once went to Langalbandh for a bath. On his way back home, his wife gave birth to their son Ballal Sen. After becoming the king, Ballal Sen

established the Dhakeshwari Temple to mark his birthplace.

However, researchers argue that the style of architecture of the temple cannot be dated to that period. Nevertheless, the temple is considered an essential part of Dhaka's heritage.

Pradip Kumar Chakrabarty, Shebait (chief custodian) of the temple said, "A festive mood always persists in the temple as all the 13 main pujas of the Hindus are celebrated here and the temple welcomes people belonging to every religion, caste or creed."

The custodian explains the daily events at the temple. Goddess Durga receives three puja offerings every day, one in the morning, one at noon and finally in the evening.

On weekdays the temple receives a thin crowd. But on Fridays and Saturdays the temple ground bustles with devotees. During big puja festivals the temple sees a huge crowd.

Devotees are allowed to perform various ceremonies at the temple ground, including weddings and Sraddho or the ritual for the dead.

Another major event celebrated here is Janmashomi, the birthday of lord Krishna with a grand rally starting from the temple.

Pradip Kumar said though it is considered as the national temple the government does not provide any monetary support for it. The temple runs with donations from the devotees.

The temple is located on around 3 acres of land, which was originally more than 7 acres. "Majority of its land was gradually encroached by many parties. The temple lost many of its glory due to vandalism during the Liberation War and during the incident of Babri Mosque demolition in 1992," he lamented.

"The temple also lost many of its original architectural characteristics as it has undergone repairs, renovation and rebuilding in its long years of existence," Pradip said.



The notorious jagged piece of metal sticking out of a rickshaw wheel.

# When rickshaw becomes threat to shiny saloon

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Rickshaw, maybe a favourite form of transport, but has a few notoriety.

The lack of any suspension in its tires makes sure that every pothole, bump or speed breaker in the streets will be felt.

The foldable hood placed at the back of its seat for bad weather conditions can barely protect the passengers from rain. The puller, upon request, will hand over a small waterproof piece of rexine sheet that can be used to keep one's feet dry.

Passengers need to know exactly where they are heading and how far they would have to go, because the pullers can and will overcharge. The pullers believe that road rules do not apply to them and swerve to any direction whenever the fancy takes them, without concern for safety.

However, out of all, the most notorious feature of this environment-friendly tricycle, made of beaten tin, is the jagged metal protruding from the axle of its rear two wheels.

Any motorist's worst nightmare would be to look down and see a rickshaw's iron mudguard digging itself into the door of his shiny saloon, leaving a long, nasty gash in the car's paintwork.

"Rickshaws are probably the biggest threat to any car on Dhaka's streets," said Moazzem Hossain, a chauffeur from Jhigatola. "As drivers, we have to be mindful about rickshaws, or more clearly, that piece of jagged metal sticking out their axles."

Rickshaws' antiquated, inconvenient structure also makes them prime cause of traffic jams.

"Most of the unwarranted tailbacks are caused by rickshaws. They bump into cars, or other rickshaws and create commotions in the middle of the street," said Kashem, a traffic sergeant at Karwan Bazar.

"They [rickshaws] often bump into each other by putting that metal tip coming out of their wheels into the wheels of other rickshaws. Sometimes it takes a long while before they can untangle the mess stopping a long traffic behind," he said.

"This kind of nuisance in the middle of a busy street can make annoying tailbacks especially during the traffic rush hours," he said.

"Rickshaws are a part and parcel of Dhaka streets and its culture," said Robert Louis, a visitor from London.

"So I doubt it would be possible to completely remove them from operating in city

streets. But it would be beneficial to modify their designs in a such a way that they would pose less threats to other vehicles around them," he said.

Over the years, different authorities have come up with fresh, innovative ideas to make the city's traditional tricycle into a more street friendly and convenient mode of transport.

One of the most notable of the ideas was the plan to modify the design of city rickshaws to prevent them from scratching other vehicles on the streets.

In 2003, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) went for implementing the decision to remove illegal bumpers from private cars. Rickshaws at that time were widely cited as the prime reason for compelling vehicle owners to fit the illegal additional bumpers in order to prevent damage to their cars.

"The idea was to attach rubber fixtures to the areas of the rickshaws which are usually responsible for scratching and damaging other vehicles," said an official at the traffic department of DMP.

According to the DMP, the jagged metal protruding from the axle of the rear two wheels of the rickshaws are mainly to blame for damage to the surface of cars and other small vehicles.

"In fact, we started to fit 'rubber-sockets' over these jagged bits of metal hoping the new fittings will reduce the chance of scratches on the vehicles," said the official.

"We used a number of different variations of rubber-sockets, but finally decided to use the most cost effective ones for the rickshaw owners," he said.

According to him, the authorities decided to fix a rubber-socket that cost around Tk 22. Therefore, a rickshaw-owner would have to spend Tk 44 for the pair of wheels.

However, the scheme never saw implementation due to difference in opinions among the rickshaw owners' associations and the police authorities, sources said.

"Before finalising the decision, we consulted with the Rickshaw Owners Associations. And most of the owners did not accept the idea," said a DMP official.

Apparently, most rickshaw owners opposed the idea saying that it would be 'loss-making' to spend money on an 'useless' piece of accessory.

"Overall, although the concept was novel and seemed quite convenient, it would not have been easy to execute. So, the scheme was discontinued later," the official added.



A large number of devotees visit the Dhakeshwari Mandir everyday.



MUSHROOM BUSINESS MUSHROOMING: Mushroom farming is gaining popularity in the city as a lucrative source of income for many. A large number of households are now growing mushrooms as a secondary means of income. The picture was taken from a rooftop farm in Mirpur.