

# Accessibility to riverfront

## Improving quality of Dhaka city life

*At last we have turned our vision towards the lifeline of Dhaka. But any kind of piecemeal steps will not suffice in the long run and cannot bring the desired result.*



Picturesque Buriganga riverfront with Ruplal House (late 19th century photo)

MD. MASHRUR RAHMAN MISHU

FROM time immemorial rivers have had a powerful hold over mankind and humans have always been drawn towards rivers. Especially in the urban context, rivers are important to us not only for they can facilitate trade and transportation, but they can also provide a much needed breathing space. An attractive riverfront is a quality natural space where people can relax, slow down, unwind and come to close contact with the nature. Besides, it can be a place of social gathering as well. People coming here get the chance to be acquainted with each other and mutual interaction. This interaction can foster a sense of community and enhance social cohesion. In fact, psychological and social well being of inhabitants is an important determinant of the quality of urban life and rivers can play a crucial role in this context.

Like many great cities, the historic core of Dhaka is inextricably related with rivers. The city is virtually like an island framed

by four rivers and it will not be an exaggeration to say that it is located amidst of the most dynamic hydrological system of the world. Our glorious past had a strong association with the river Buriganga, the dominant lifeline of Dhaka. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even during the beginning decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Buckland Bund was an attractive place for recreation and social gathering. People used to come here to enjoy the enchanting view of the river and relaxed ambience of the place. It was the most favorite venue for hundreds of morning walkers. Steel benches were placed at regular interval where one could sit and enjoy the cool breeze from the river. In fact, the riverfront with clean water enhanced the image of our past glorious city. The Nawab Bari (Ahsan Manjil), Ruplal House, red bricked Northbrook Hall -- all these elegant structures added pride to the riverfront scenario.

But it goes without saying that once the mighty Buriganga today has lost its entire splendour. Illegal encroachments in the shape of industries, shops and markets have

choked up the precious riverfront. River water has become polluted, stinky and filthy spreading obnoxious odor. The most unfortunate thing is that the riverfront has become completely inaccessible. No more people come here to breathe fresh air and spend some delightful hours in the late afternoon.

Rapid urbanization of Dhaka has seen the demise of open spaces. Scarcity of recreational facilities, ever increasing haphazard economic activities, chronic urban problems like traffic congestion have made the life here more and more hard and hectic day by day. Isolation of inhabitants from nature has limited the desire and capability to take care of their mental and social development as well. In this circumstance, when Dhaka is desperately seeking natural environment, revival of riverfronts can bring an array of benefits for us to improve the quality of urban life. People always feel strong ties to rivers. Besides the Buriganga one can find the riverfront of Turag as a place of delightful festivity during the rainy season especially in Ashulia and its adjacent areas.

Rivers span around 110 km of our capital city. But most the places are presently inaccessible. Riverfront should be physically, visually, conceptually made accessible. Initiatives have to be taken to create pedestrian and bi-cycle friendly communities and to develop the places as outdoor recreation destinations. We have opportunities to create social and cultural attraction along the riverfront. There are still some dominant historic buildings along the riverfront of the Buriganga. Most of them are dilapidated and in poor physical state. But not gone forever. Still today, these edifices bear the sign of the identity and heritage of our city. Conservation of these buildings can be a way how we can create both attractive and historic community spaces along the riverfront.

For the last few years restoration of rivers of Dhaka city has got much priority among us in response to media and some praiseworthy campaigns like "save rivers, save Dhaka". BIWTA which is the main authority responsible in this context has taken some initiatives at different times to clean up the riverbank. Recently the government has taken a mega project of



Bank of Buriganga now made inaccessible by dumping rubbish PHOTO: MASHRUR RAHMAN

Tk 945-crore to bring in fresh water by connecting the Buriganga with the Jamuna River. Of course these are some good initiatives in the sense that at last, we have turned our vision towards the lifeline of Dhaka. But at the same time it is also true that such kind of piecemeal steps will not suffice in the long run and cannot bring the desired result. At this juncture, perhaps everybody will agree with the famous quote "When the last tree is cut, when the last river has been

poisoned, when the last fish has been caught, then we will find out that we can't eat money." In fact, this is very much true for the livability of Dhaka City. The time is therefore here and now that we go through a holistic, multi-disciplinary and planned approach to save our rivers.

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The river gets its festive mood as Ashulia people hire boats and organize river cruise. PHOTO: MASHRUR RAHMAN

# Climate change impact and health issues

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CLIMATE Change is 'increasingly recognized as a public health priority' according to WHO (2009) and Lancet (2011). Lancet, mentioned that climate change will have its greatest impact on those who already are the

poorest in the world, and it will deepen inequities, and the effects of global warming will shape the future of health among all peoples. Nevertheless this message has failed to penetrate most public discussions on about the climate change. According to the International Panel for Climate Change (2007), an

increase in the average global temperature will lead to changes in precipitation, and atmospheric moisture due to the changes in atmospheric circulation, and increases in evaporation, and water vapor. These changes are believed to link to diseases as well.

### The problem

According to Lancet, firstly, there is a massive gap in information, an astonishing lack of knowledge about how we should respond to the negative health effects of climate change. Secondly, since the effects of climate change will hit the poor hardest, an immense task before us is to address the inadequacies of health systems to protect people in countries at most risk. Thirdly, technologies do have the potential to help us adapt to changes in climate. But these technologies have to be developed out of greater research investments into climate change science, better understanding about how to deliver those technologies in the field and more complete appreciation of the social and cultural dimensions into which those technologies might be implanted. Fourthly, challenge is political the creating the conditions for low carbon living.

### Bangladesh is set to be most affected

Bangladesh is one of the top 10 nations mostly vulnerable to climate change, said German watch Global Climate Risk Index (CRI), 2011 report. By the end of the century, part of Bangladesh is set to disappear under the waves as mentioned by US government's NASA space agency. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicted that by 2050, Bangladesh would be on course to lose 17 % of its land and 30 % of its food production and as a result poverty will increase. The Healthy Center for Climate



Growing health hazards are predicted.

Prediction and Research (HCCPR) estimates that sea level in Bangladesh will rise by about 40cm (15 inches) by 2080 .

### People in Bangladesh are vulnerable to diseases

ICDDR,B, (2011) forecasts that climate change would also make people in Bangladesh vulnerable to increased prevalence of diseases, such as cholera, dengue, respiratory diseases, and malnutrition due to food scarcity and reduction in food production. Climate change will also lead to poorer nutrition, putting people with perilous immune systems at more risk of dying of HIV.

Surveillance and primary information  
Climate change needs top-down

flow of information and communications. The people, in general, and the communities in the rural areas (including farmers, mountain enterprisers) in particular, need to be given the information and knowledge about the impacts of climate change and matters concerning the mitigation of the problem, adaptation of knowledge, and how successful practices can be replicated, so that they develop resilience to combat it and adapt themselves. International cooperation is also essential to face the challenges of global warming. Various development players in Bangladesh need to aid people in communicating successfully.

Journalists have an important role in spreading the right message on climate change issues, among others. A new advocacy and public health movement is needed urgently to bring together governments, international agencies, non-governmental organization (NGOs), communities, and academics from all disciplines to adapt to the effects of climate change on health. Bangladesh government has reportedly started taking measures to dredge major rivers, increase green belts in coastal areas and fortify embankments to cope with the rising sea level. However, health issue has not received the priority it deserves.

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Shoals are being submerged under climate change impact.

PHOTO: EMDADUL ISLAM BITU