

Historic Ashkar Dighi shrinking by the day

PRANABESH CHAKRABORTY, Ctg

The historic Ashkar Dighi is three centuries old and presently covers an area of no less than five acres (about 15 bighas), and so must be protected by law.

The Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) also requires that any water body exceeding 0.5 acre should be preserved.

The authorities concerned, however, seem to be uncaring when the dighi's existence is threatened in encroachment, earth filling, and pollution.

The age-old water body, with which the history of Chittagong city is entwined, was originally 8.49 acres (about 25.5 bighas) back in 1898. It has shrunk to five acres now. The rest was earth-filled and grabbed by influential locals.

Second Mughal Commandant of Chittagong Nawab Abdullah Beg alias Ashkar Khan Bajme Sani dug the dighi to supply water to soldiers in 1669-1671.

Just a decade ago or so, people living around it drank from it and washed clothes and bathed in it. Today it is too polluted for any use. Locals say a hundred slums alongside illegal houses, shops and other structures have sprung up on the four banks. The garbage and filth generated in those slums and houses have been a major source for pollution of Ashkar Dighi.

Ruman Barua, a resident of Jamalkhan area, where the pond is located, said the dighi had turned into a fertile breeding ground of mosquitoes.

"Just 15 years ago, Hindus immersed their idols in the dighi and angling competitions were held regularly," he said.

The once-beautiful Ashkar Dighi is 7-10 feet deep, but now it looks far from a water body. With water hyacinths thickly covering the entire surface, one would easily mistake it for a huge playground.

A 2010-2011 study shows the concentration of dissolved oxygen (DO), which indicates the purity of water and favourable level of oxygen for survival of aquatic life, is 0-1.1 milligram per litre (mg/L) in the pond water, while its optimum concentration should be 4.5-8 mg/L.

Prof Mohammad Idris Ali, a Chittagong College professor who conducted the study, said they located some 80-90 toilets and sewerage lines of houses, which were discharging waste into the water body.

Councillor of Jamal Khan area Bijoy Kishan Chowdhury said the city corporation removed the water hyacinths in 2009 but they returned within two years. "As it is owned by an individual, it will not clean it in future." Bijoy, however, admitted that if the pond was filled up, a heritage would be lost.

According to Bangladesh Survey (BS), published in 1987, the government owns one fourth of Ashkar Dighi, and the rest belongs to 28 individuals.

Locals said different parts of the four banks had already been taken up by different people, and many of them built slums, shops and houses. The slum people said they heard that Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) was the owner of the dighi.

Runa Begum, a slum dweller, however, said they paid Tk 1,700 to 2,000 for each shanty to Md Hanif and Md Karim as the "owners".

MA Rahim, manager of Madina Furniture shop on the dighi's north bank, said they heard that Ship Breakers' Association's former vice president Shawkat Ali Chowdhury "owned" the dighi. "Shawkat also owns the slums and manages those by some caretakers."

This correspondent called Shawkat by phone several times and sent him SMSs for comments but he did not respond.

Eminent prosecution lawyer Rana Dasgupta said it was a long-time public demand to free its banks and turn the "dighi" into an open space.

"If any legal owner exists, the state can acquire the land and reservoir for the greater interest of the masses under the acquisition law," he said. "If no real owner exists, the government should go for eviction."

At least four government offices--CCC, CDA, District Administration, and the Department of Environment (DoE)--have roles to play in preserving the dighi.

Town planner Engineer Ali Ashraf suggested CDA or CCC should place a total plan, measuring the estimated cost and preparing a design, before their line ministry to develop it into a recreational centre.

"I think, CDA is the perfect organisation to do that," said Ashraf, an expert involved in formulating Detailed Area Plan (DAP) and the CDA master plan. The master plan stressed turning the dighi into a recreational park and open space.

DoE (Chittagong) Director Jafor Alam said the local administration could acquire the dighi under the Tank Preservation Act, 1939.

Asked why the DoE is resisting its encroachment, he said if they got any proof, they would take legal action against the offenders.

CDA deputy chief town planner Sarwar Uddin Ahmed said, "CDA will not permit any construction on the dighi. If anyone builds any structure, CDA will remove it under Building Construction Act 1952."

Mayor Manjur Alam said, "If the government acquires the dighi and hands it over to CCC, we will develop it into a recreational park."



The once-beautiful historic Ashkar Dighi in Chittagong city barely seems to be a water body due to thickly grown water hyacinths and illegal slums and structures which fence it.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Strengthen Indo-Bangla ties for wellbeing

Says Subhas Chandra Bose's grandnephew

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dr Sugata Bose, grandnephew of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, yesterday underscored the need to build an intensive relationship between Bangladesh and India in the educational, economic and cultural sectors for the wellbeing of the region's people.

A union like European Union or Association of Southeast Asian Nations can be established among countries of the Indian subcontinent to strengthen relationships, he said.

The Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University was replying to queries from the audience after his lecture, "Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Hindu-Muslim relations".

Asiatic Society of Bangladesh organised the event in the capital's Bangladesh National Museum marking Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed Memorial Lecture 2012.

Most Bangladeshis and Indians are very devoted to their religions but are not

religious bigots, said Prof Sugata.

Narrating Subhas Chandra Bose's political career and philosophy, the eminent educationist said Subhas united Indians, irrespective of their political ideologies, caste and creed, against British imperialism.

Prof Sugata said Subhas had not come to a compromise with the British in any manner and passed away in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan at present, on August 18, 1945 with the dream, ideology and spirit of unity.

Prof Akmal Hussain, chairperson of Trust Management Committee for Law and Human Rights of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, and the committee Convener Prof AKM Golam Rabbani also spoke at the programme.

Dr Kamal Hossain, Prof Rehman Sobhan, Barrister M Amir-Ul Islam, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam and some High Court judges were also present.

Limbless amphibian dating back 140m years found



A Chikila Fuller, a limbless amphibian, believed to have appeared some 140 million years ago, recently found in Lawachhara Forest.

PHOTO: COURTESY

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Two Chikila Fulleri, a limbless amphibian believed to have appeared some 140 million years ago, was found by a team of Bangladeshi wildlife researchers in Lawachhara Forest in Moulvibazar on December 26.

Wildlife biologist Dr Reza Khan and wildlife expert Tania Khan came upon the two worm-like animals, measuring 19 and 17 centimetres in length, while digging the forest floor. In September, Tania had found a skeleton.

One was released while the other was brought back to Dhaka for DNA confirmation, said the researchers.

The researchers said the animal, locally known as "snake with two faces/mouths" and present in Africa, Assam of India, and South America, had not evolved and its existence in Bangladesh proves that the subcontinent was connected to Africa.

The animal performs its life cycle 10 inches under the ground and cannot survive long above ground without moisture, they said.

An Indian biologist named Alcock first wrote about the animal in 1904 and last February, some Indian researchers published an article based on their five-year research on it in a journal of The Royal Society.

The Daily Star
Star Campus
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COMING OUT TOMORROW
LINKING YOUNG MINDS

This week's Star Campus, a weekly publication of The Daily Star, has some interesting articles for the readers. The Spotlight focuses on the issue, how the evil forces are running deep within our society but still there are flickers of hope that inspires us to march together as a nation. This week's Extra Credit will be on how political turmoil making the common people's life miserable. The Campus Edibles will be on OFF, a restaurant that offers a range of delicacies absolutely free from oil. The Star Chat this week is with Young Achiever Tasneem Tayeb Kabir, where she shares her memories from school and future plans. Do not forget to grab this week's Star Campus as it hits the country tomorrow. And, as always, have a great read!



Dhaka University Vice-Chancellor AAMS Arefin Siddique places a bouquet on the coffin of Sohrab Hossain at Central Shaheed Minar in the capital yesterday. The 91-year-old pioneer Nazrul Sangeet singer passed away on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

10 die in road accidents

METRO DESK

Ten people were killed and 51 others injured in road accidents in Munshiganj, Dinajpur, Chittagong, Thakurgaon and Kushtia yesterday.

Our Munshiganj correspondent reports, four people were killed and 30 others injured as two buses collided head-on on Dhaka-Mawa highway at Chaltipara in Sirajdikan upazila of Munshiganj around 7:00am yesterday.

The deceased were Anisur Rahman, Israfil Fakir, Rafiqul Islam, and Jamal Uddin Hawlader.

Vehicular movements on the road remained suspended for about two hours due to the damaged vehicles on the road.

Our Dinajpur correspondent reports, two people were killed and 20 others injured as a bus rammed a motorcycle on Dinajpur-Bogra highway in Dewor-Bottoli area under Birampur upazila of Dinajpur yesterday.

Police said Md Abdul Latif and Meherunnessa were killed on the spot as the bus hit their motorcycle. Later, the bus

fell into a roadside ditch and turned upside down injuring its 20 passengers.

Our Chittagong correspondent reports, Radhika Rani Das was killed on spot as a truck ran her over in Firingi Bazar area of Chittagong city yesterday.

Our Thakurgaon correspondent reports, Apel Khan was critically injured as a bus hit his motorcycle on Thakurgaon-Panchagarh highway at Munshirhat Bazar Thakurgaon sadar upazila around 5:30pm yesterday.

Agitating locals blockaded the road after the incident. Vehicular movement on the road remained suspended till filing of this report at 8:00pm.

UNB reports from Kushtia, three people were killed in road accidents in Doulatpur and Kumarkhali upazilas yesterday.

Saidul Islam and his son Alif were killed on the spot as a truck hit them on Kushtia-Pragpur road in Doulatpur upazila. Agitating locals blockaded the road for three hours.

Meanwhile, schoolboy Shafiqul Islam was killed on the spot as truck hit him in Kumarkhali upazila.

Safe transport routes demanded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a human chain urged the government to construct a safer transport system placing emphasis on rail and water routes.

They also said the government was not prioritising the repair of road transportation system which was causing the increasing number of road accidents every year, said a press release.

The human chain was formed in front of the Jatiya Press Club in the capital in remembrance of the road accident involving Nikhil Bhadra, a senior reporter of Bangla daily Kaler Kantha, on December 28 last year.

He lost his leg in the accident, in which a Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation bus ran him over in front of Jatiya Press Club.

Rashed Khan Menon, Workers' Party of Bangladesh president, said it was urgent to develop the whole transportation system including rail and river.

Mujahidul Islam Selim, president of Communist Party of Bangladesh, said public transportation must be restructured for the advantage of the city's pedestrians and use of private cars should be discouraged.

Journalist Ashish Kumar Dey moderated the human chain where Ilias Kanchan and Nikhil Bhadra also spoke.

Arrest of Adivasi girl's killers sought

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An organisation of Adivasi women yesterday demanded arrest of and punishment to the culprits who gang-raped and killed a 14-year-old indigenous girl in Rangamati recently.

Bangladesh Adivasi Nari Network made the demand at a human chain near the capital's Bangladesh National Museum.

The class VIII student was raped and killed near her Baddulul village in Kawkhali upazila on December 21.

The organisation demanded a fair investigation into the killing and protection for Adivasi women. At the event, people from different organisations expressed solidarity with the demands.

Sohrab Hossain, joint editor of Bangla daily Prothom Alo, said the killing was not an issue of Adivasis or Bangalees; rather it was an insult to humanity.

Adivasi leader Dipayan Khisa said the girl's killing reminded him of the Pakistanis' brutalities on Bangalees during the Liberation War.

Meanwhile, three organisations staged a protest rally in front of Chittagong Press Club yesterday, demanding arrest of and exemplary punishment to the killers.

They alleged that the criminals were threatening the victim's family. Hill Women's Federation, Pahari Chhatra Parishad and Gonotantrik Chhatra Parishad arranged the rally.



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