

Once upon a time people used to come from the corners of Dhaka to see a place called Gulshan which means garden. It was famous for its elegance and quiet beauty. The houses were like mini resorts with lawns and fragrant flowered trees, there were lakes – yes *real lakes* surrounding Gulshan. The afternoons were tranquil with not a soul in sight in the clean little alleys where the only sounds to be heard were the random hawkers yodeling their wares. The houses on Gulshan Avenue were especially pretty – adorned with terracotta roofs, ivy covered walls and luscious bougainvillea in riotous fuchsia and orange, draping the gates. Privacy and beauty were the key elements of this residential area – a cause of pride for its inhabitants and envy of non-residents.

Then came the Monster – Unplanned Urbanisation and its accomplice – Corruption – an evil duo that has destroyed every part of our once-beautiful city. Gulshan, too, became their prey.

In a few decades they have made Gulshan unrecognisable from the peaceful sanctuary it once was. The elegant one or two-storied houses have been replaced by high rise apartments, the gardens have disappeared, the trees cut and in every alleyway there is construction, construction that seems, will never end. Every few steps someone is building a multi-storied, cash-churning structure, leaving mounds of sand and bricks on the pavement. There are too many people in every crevice and corner and too little public utilities to cater to them.

The lakes have all but disappeared – Corruption has made sure of that. Those names that were given because of the place's proximity to the lake sound ludicrous in the present scenario – Lake View, Waterfront etc. Shouldn't they be renamed 'Once Upon a Lake View' or 'Slum View Front'?

Then there's Gulshan Avenue, now a commercial area with every kind of establishment imaginable – restaurants, banks, shopping malls, hospitals, electronic stores, even furniture shops. The inside roads are cramped with schools, more clinics, auto sales shops and offices of every kind of establishment imaginable.

Endless gridlocks are part of every Gulshan dweller's daily life. Going from Gulshan 1 to Gulshan 2 is worse than a trip to Karwan Bazar.

Remember those romantic rickshaw rides through virtually empty roads, the cool evening breeze in your hair, the faint fragrance of *beli* and *gondhoraj* in your nostrils? A rickshaw ride in present day Dhaka is an ordeal of inhaling dust, smoke and stink from open garbage pits turned toilets for the



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

The Tale of a lost Garden

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shameless passersby. The roads, moreover, are pockmarked with craters – no repairing for years on end – thanks to Mr Corruption. A ride on a rickshaw on this road is a bone shaking, intestine-twisting experience.

And there is ugliness everywhere.

The bizarre spaghetti of cables may bring in a hundred satellite channels and broadband Internet but do little for the aesthetics of this once-pretty neighbourhood. The DIT markets – one and two are pathetic looking – nobody has bothered to renovate them in the last four decades or so. They are still dusty, unkempt and dark making shopping an experience you just want to get over as quickly as possible. If you venture to the back – the kitchen market – don't be shocked to see the wet floors, the clogged drains and stink from badly managed sewerage lines.

The sight pollution continues- gigantic billboards commanding you to be more connected, more beautiful, more smart and more educated, will attack your senses and sensibilities like a horde of angry locusts.

Present day Gulshan also provides stark images of contradictions. It is where shiny, menacingly huge SUVs wait in traffic while beggars parading deformities and scrawny hawkers – many of them children- incessantly knock on the car windows harassing the sun-glassed passengers for alms or to buy their assorted ware. It is where the view from a luxury hotel maybe one of the biggest slum dwellings in the city where toilets, electricity and water are uncertain facilities controlled by thugs.

Gulshan is now as indistinctive, unattractive and