

SPOTLIGHT

Asadul, a bus driver of the Dhaka-Comilla route, just reached Sayedabad after a five-hour drive from Comilla.

The first thing he does after getting out of his bus is make a beeline for the newly built public toilet at the Syedabad bus terminal for a refreshing shower.

“Even a year ago, we never used that public toilet. It was so dirty that even the transport workers could not use it, let alone passengers. But the new toilet is really amazing. Its shiny furniture, clean, tiled floors, well-mannered staff and 24 hour cleaning service have made the facility awesome.”

“I never thought I could take shower in such a gorgeous bathroom in my lifetime only for 10 taka,” said a beaming Asadul. Passengers – males, females and children – also regularly use this toilet with modern amenities. And, immediately after every use, the standby cleaners get to work. The Dhaka South and North City Corporations have established a few public toilets in Dhaka which have changed the Dhakaites' long-standing perceptions regarding the dirty and unhygienic nature of public restrooms.

These public toilets – for example the

one at the Syedabad bus terminal and another adjacent to the Tejgaon Truck Terminal – are some of these exemplary works.

In these places, customised showers, lavatories and drinking water facilities have been ensured for males, females and children only for 10, 5 and 1 taka per use respectively. There are also lockers where users can put their belongings safely.

However, a few of these exemplary initiatives do not represent the scenario prevalent throughout Dhaka. So far, the Dhaka North and South City Corporations have installed six new public toilets in different places of Dhaka, a city with 15 million residents.

According to a 2011 study conducted by Water Aid Bangladesh and Centre for Urban Studies, 5.5 million people in the city feel the necessity of using a public toilet every day. Due to huge amount of walkers and floating people in the city, the need for public toilets is undoubtedly significant.

The study revealed that there were half a million homeless people in Dhaka, one million rickshaw pullers and one million people from other professions who have to work on the streets, while the number of regular walkers was 3 million.

However, at that time the number of public toilets for this huge number of users was forty seven, most of which were

BEYOND FLUSH AND FORGET

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

in very bad condition.

Five years later, the population of Dhaka has rocketed causing a spike in the number of potential public toilet users. However, the number of public toilets in the entire city is still only around 68. But the number of usable toilets is not more than fifty as many of these toilets have been closed for renovations and some of them have been destroyed for road construction works.

Officials from the city corporations have said that building public toilets is on their priority list but the scarcity of space in the city is their main barrier. Owing to this reason, the officials have taken up the lengthy and time consuming task of destroying the old toilets and building

new ones in their place. Meanwhile, the suffering of the citizens all over the city has already reached its limit.

In Abdullahpur bus terminal, there is a public toilet where some lavatory units have no doors at all. And some of its users objected that most of the time they find no water supply in the toilet. However, to use this awful facility they have to pay 5 to 10 taka for every use. To take a shower, they have to pay fifty taka.

In the Kamlapur Railway Station, the only public toilet remains occupied by the floating people, beggars and junkies all the time.

“And, the facility is located in such an isolated place from the station building that it is quite difficult to find it when you



“When long hours of traffic congestion confine us to the same place for two or three hours, we have faced situations when we find no other way except running to the nearest toilet during emergency. In one such situation, after entering a public toilet, it was so filthy that I exited the place hurriedly and vomited,” a lady, who has to travel from Banani to Azimpur regularly for her education, said on the condition of anonymity.

Even toilets in most of the shopping malls are in deplorable shape. A scarcity of lighting, lack of security, absence of cleaning equipment such as soap, toilet paper and poor cleaning and maintenance have made these repulsive to the users. Another lady says, “When I go out, I usually drink very little water and I try not to drink any liquids to avoid using such horrible restrooms. I often feel dehydrated but I have no other option.”

There is a group of female traffic sergeants that work under Nusrat Jahan Mukta, the Assistant Police Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Gulshan Traffic Zone. She says, “I usually station my female traffic sergeants near a police station or a well-furnished shopping complex. One of the main reasons for this step is that I have to consider where these female sergeants can use toilets when they need it.

“However, many times I cannot help them and they have to do their duty at any

cost,” adds Mukta. According to Dr Aurangzeb, urologist and renal transplantation specialist, “long time accumulation of urine in the bladder leads to urinary tract infections and long time infection can lead to fatal sepsis. Urinary tract infection is more prevalent among women than men.

“Dehydration is also the root cause of many diseases including renal problems and even renal failure,” he adds. Syed Khokon, mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation said, “We have taken the initiative of establishing a public toilet in every refuelling station such as petrol pumps and CNG stations considering the problem of women citizens.”

However, even in the few newly-built, well-furnished public toilets, issues of physically challenged people have not been addressed at all. Not a single public toilet exists in Dhaka that is friendly to people with special needs.

In many developed cities, public restrooms have been decorated with the most advanced technologies so that people of all ages, needs and sex can use them with ease. Even in Kolkata, the municipality has added special lavatory units to public toilets for third gender people. Unisex toilets are also available all over the world.

However in Dhaka, which we claim is the 11th largest megacity of the world, not

even 24 hours electricity and water supply can be ensured in public toilets, let alone the hygiene and cleanliness.

For a city as densely populated as Dhaka, sanitation is a gigantic challenge. It is very difficult for the government alone to manage public sanitation for such a huge number of people. Non Government organisations have come forward sporadically to tackle this problem by establishing mobile toilets and sometimes by partnering with the government in renovating public toilets. However, sustainability has always been an issue. For example; the mobile toilets which were installed in 2013 can hardly be seen at present.

However, city corporations' initiatives to ensure proper sanitation by renovating public toilet are praiseworthy. But, the authority should work fast realising the intensity of the crisis which has been created by the meagre number of public restrooms for a population of 15 million.

And, drive should also be taken so that the restrooms become useable for all irrespective of their age, sex and physical challenges. If Dhaka's current scarce and dilapidated public sanitation facilities can be restructured in an inclusive way, sanitation facilities can also be improved in all other metropolitan cities and districts of Bangladesh.